New Ground Realities in Syria

As it has become obvious from events unfolding in Syria, one would be right to bet on the destruction of militant terrorist groups instead of any sort of negotiations. After all, the talks in Astana, just like the Geneva talks before them, failed to create preconditions for the peaceful settlement of the Syrian conflict, effectively delaying the reconstruction of the country. Additionally, anti-Assad forces, including the Kurdish SDF forces supported by Washington, have managed to seize Syria’s oil and gas fields. As the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rages on, it’s still impossible to accurately predict when the war in Syria is going to end.

Spokesperson for the Turkish President, İbrahim Kalın, recently announced the start of the Congress of the National Dialogue of Syria that was to be held in Sochi, Russia on November 18 would be delayed. It was assumed that the Congress would bring together a total of 33 different organizations operating in Syria, including the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). However, Ankara opposed the participation of this group rather vocally, while stressing that the PYD is a terrorist organization linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). This protest resulted in Russia withdrawing the invitation sent to the PYD altogether, while rescheduling the entire event.

However, the idea of holding a similar Congress doesn’t appear relevant any longer. Syria has been divided into several occupation zones which can be roughly divided into two sides – the American-backed side stretching across
eastern and southern parts of the country, and the Russian-Turkish-Iranian zone, that is far more fragmented than the latter, making it increasingly more difficult to resolve disputes between the countries that support them and their respective allies. The north of Syria is by far the most troubled area, as consultations on the situation in this zone are being held around the clock in Astana, where the Russian Federation, Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran are negotiating the rules of engagement for their respective allies on the ground. However, that’s where a dispute arose between Turkey and Russia over the issue of Kurdish participation. Bringing Turkish and Kurdish representatives to the same negotiating table has become too difficult a task. Without every single group being represented at the table, the agreements reached lose relevance. It is no accident that Tayyip Erdogan is planning to visit Russia on November 13 to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, where resolving this matter may see some progress.

In the south of Syria, in Deir ez-Zor, an extremely complex situation is developing. There remains a fundamental question of control over the transport routes in Abu Kamal. There’s an extremely important intersection of roads located near oil and gas pipelines. The small town itself is of little value, but the intersection near it, along with the road stretching from Abu Kamal to At-Tanf, are of utmost importance. Washington agreed that this area can be taken over by Iraqi forces supported by pro-Iranian Shia militias, but it’s way more complicated than that. The Iraq offensive is led by Shia pro-Iranian fighters of the paramilitary group Hashd al-Shaabi, followed by the military police, with Iraqi army troops following at the rear. The complexity lies in the fact that Hashd al-Shaabi may hand over the crossroads to the forces of Bashar-al Assad, a scenario that Americans oppose. However, should those Shia forces be replaced by Iraqi military units, the crossroads will most certainly be transferred to the Kurdish SDF units.

In order to control the situation around Abu Kamal, Washington dispatched a margin of its 3,000-strong force stationed in the territory controlled by the SDF. The task force is already influencing events on the ground, capturing the Tishrin dam on the Euphrates only to hand it over to SDF forces. Apparently, the same scenario is repeating now in Abu Kamal, but the forces used for this operation are much more numerous due to the presence of an invasion force from Iraq.

At the same time it remains unclear who is going to establish control over the border crossing from At-Tanf to Abu Kamal. Washington wanted the crossing to be occupied by the so-called Free Syrian Army located in the “de-escalation zone” in the south. Initially, it was these forces who were going to try to capture Abu Kamal, but was impeded by Syrian government forces, leaving Washington and its proxies to focus on the defeat of ISIS. With neither side taking the intersection, Free Syrian Army forces may try again. The US is seeking ways to complicate zones of control as much as possible in the south, trying to deprive the Syrian government from access to both its oilfields and this crucial transit route to Iraq. If the Pentagon is to achieve this goal, it may allow Syrian forces to take Abu Kemal due to its relative insignificance.

Everything points to the conflict descalating for a period of time as parties begin preparing for negotiations regarding the division of territory, although few agree with the way it’s distributed now. Damascus and the Iranians have already announced their readiness to liberate Raqqa from the Kurds. It goes without saying that Ankara would support not only that, but insist on Russia supporting such an operation, thus trying to solve its own problems at another’s expense. However, Moscow is likely to avoid conflict with Kurdish groups.

In southern Syria, Syrian troops supported by Hezbollah managed to enter Abu Kemal. Iraqi troops are holding positions to the south of Abu Kemal, while Shia forces remain in the T-2 area. This latest advancement has forced American advisers to leave the city urgently.

ISIS still has a number of small towns under its control along the Euphrates River and the support of Sunni tribal militias. It’s difficult to describe those as a part of ISIS since they have their own, separate objectives and enemies. It is these tribes that are now making it difficult for the Kurds to advance, as there’s few ISIS militants left to hold the line. According to various reports, ISIS has completely withdrawn its elite units from Syria. In total, there is no more than a thousand ISIS militants left in Syria supported by local militias that have no more than 4,000 fighters. And those fighters can hardly be described as ISIS members, since for the most part they’ve been members of local self-defense units focused on controlling their own towns.

As a whole, ISIS has managed to conduct a massive evacuation, with at least 15,000 militants and about 25,000 civilian support personnel leaving Syria in the last 6-9 months. Those forces are forming sleeping cells across the region. Such cells represent a persistent danger as exemplified in their combat operations in Palmyra where only around 200 militants held out for up to three weeks.

Apparently, the terrorist war will be conducted along the tried and tested lines of skirmish attacks from the desert
and routine terrorist attacks within cities. Just the other day in Deir ez-Zor just such an attack left dozens dead or wounded. This whole layout is quite familiar for ISIS, with the group going underground for the third time in its short history, capable of waging a protracted terrorist war.

The situation in Syria, meanwhile, is developing in such a way that ISIS becomes the lesser of the existing problems. The ongoing conflicts between the “winners” are now gradually becoming the problem at hand, and the more these develop, the more difficult they become. Damascus has already declared a major assault to begin against Raqqa, which will result in a major escalation between Damascus and Washington, with the outcome dependent on Iran’s position. If Tehran decides to support Damascus' actions, then the US is unlikely to risk a conflict with both the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, leaving the Kurds once again on their own. In addition, Erdogan will be pushing Moscow toward confrontation with the Kurds.

Much depends also on Iran’s actions in the Abu Kemal area, where Shia forces face a fierce battle against the remnants of ISIS and the Free Syrian Army.

There is also the possibility of the Free Syrian Amry leaving Jordan to take the entire Jordan-Syrian border under its control, making it a direct route for militants of all kinds into Syria. Therefore, one can only hope that Iran will continue providing support to prevent this.

Clearly, it is too early to even speak about the end of the Syrian conflict. It will continue, but in a different form and between different forces. Russia has already announced its intention to withdraw its military forces from Syria, leaving just enough soldiers to maintain two of its military bases. It’s clear that sooner or later armed clashes will lead to a situation where it will be necessary to solve the issue politically. And it will be up to Iran, Turkey and the United States to come to an agreement.

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