

Syria in 2021: A Transition Conflict with no Lasting Resolution

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The Syrian War reflects all the weaknesses of our modern society, affecting neighbouring countries, the region and the overall international scene. After ten years of bloodshed, there is no resolution to the crisis. The current ceasefire in Idlib is a fragile step towards peace and stability, but a long way from a long-term solution.

It's your turn next, doctor!" was the line that ignited the "Syrian Spring" in March 2011. Written on a school wall by a group of students - a reference to the previous career of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad - the graffiti triggered a domino of events that echoed dangerously in a war on real and virtual grounds, with mixing actors of power politics, changing interests and, thus far, no real winner - only thousands of defeats.

The Syrian crisis evolved as a transition conflict, bridging the post-1989 national or regional crisis to current international confrontations such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Taiwan Strait. Syria became a battleground not only for Syrian internal unrest, but for an overlapping of power competition and terrorism issues with regional and international reach. Therefore, the Syrian War should never be seen or analysed purely as a national/regional crisis, but rather as a physical intersection of global issues. As a result, ten years of conflict have not only destroyed a country, but the consequences have been felt at the wider regional level by all neighbouring countries, and also on an international scale, by the whole world.

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Two destroyed tanks in front of a mosque in Azaz to the north of Aleppo in Syria

The Syrian Struggle and the Terrorist Nexus

As the Arab Spring spread throughout the region, protests were also triggered in Syria by the arrest, torture and eventual death of some of the teenagers who painted the school-wall graffiti denouncing country's long-time president, in the city of Deraa. What started out as peaceful protests, slowly turned into violence, bloodshed and, eventually, civil war. The response of the Assad regime led to the creation of the Free Syrian Army in July 2011, a rebel group formed by defectors from the military, aiming to overthrow the government, turning the revolt into a civil war. While the internal struggle intensified, various rebel groups of different ideological affiliations, mostly Salafi-jihadi, have emerged across the country, seizing the opportunity represented by the security and stability vacuum

in both Iraq and Syria. Later on, in 2013, Daesh formally emerged in northern and eastern Syria after overrunning large portions of Iraq. From that moment on, the Syrian struggle for peace and democracy turned into repression, bloodshed and a fake "Islamic Caliphate".

As the peaceful Syrian protests turned into a perfect opportunity for the terrorist Salafi-jihadi groups, the evolution of the war has been the result of disastrous internal/national decisions, external/international mismanagement of the crisis and lack of a long-term vision. The channels for foreign fighters to join extremist groups in the region were created back in 2003, facilitating the movement of not only Syrians, but also foreign fighters—primarily from the Arab world—into Iraq. Although the Salafi-jihadi groups were weakened in Iraq after Zarqawi's death in 2006, the Arab unrest, the protests in Syria, the American

troop withdrawal in 2011, and some of Assad's poor decisions helped the "global neo-jihad" reorganise and reach its highest achievement – an Islamic Caliphate in the region of Iraq and Syria.

When the "Syrian Spring" first ignited in early 2011, the Assad regime took two decisions that tipped the balance in favour of Salafi-jihadi groups. At first, the regime's forces responded to the protest movement with extreme violence, imprisoning and torturing the key persons responsible for mobilising the masses. Then, by the end of 2011, as part of its amnesty programme, the Assad regime released from prison former Syrian Islamists and jihadists who had fought against the United States in Iraq. Just as a parallel, the operation "Breaking the Walls" undertaken by AQI in 2012-2013 helped release Iraqi individuals with extreme views who further join the ranks of the fake Caliphate. While the Saidnaya detainees in Syria suppressed the original protests, their message, and their internal calls for peace and democracy, providing a platform for militant extremism, the Abu Ghraib detainees in Iraq restored its ranks with hundreds of previously detained, skilled operatives, setting the stage for its resurgence and the transition into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Daesh was officially defeated in Syria in 2019, but related cells and underground networks have survived ever since, waiting for the right moment to make a comeback. While the war itself is paused, but not over, reconstruction efforts are needed at both infrastructure and society level. In other words, it is not just the roads and buildings of Syria that are in ruins as the result of 10 years of clashes, but a whole nation is displaced internally and externally, wrecked by trauma, fear and loss. The Syrian refugees are now spread among several countries: 6 million internally displaced, 1.5 million in Lebanon, 3.6 million in Turkey, 700,000 in Jordan, 250,000 in Iraq and lower numbers in Europe and other regions. Unlike any other conflict before, rebuilding Syria represents, in fact, the rebuilding of our common future for peace, security and stability at the global level.

Hunger, Enclaves and Incendiary Terrorist Ashes

The total cost of the war to the Syrian economy is estimated at around €1trillion. According to the World Bank, the Syrian economy has shrunk by more than 60 per cent since 2010, and the Syrian pound has crashed. Pre-war, the Syrian pound traded near SYP50 to the US dollar. As of January 2021, it was formally trading at over



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SYP1,250 and informally at over SYP3,000. This equates to a 300 per cent inflation rate increase on consumer goods. Beyond the war and the internal corruption of the Assad regime, the 2020 Lebanese cash crisis has also accelerated Syria's economic collapse. Unemployment was high before the war and only worsened throughout the conflict. Additionally, the Syrian middle class, which comprised 60 per cent of Syria's population in pre-war years, has now been reduced to 10 to 15 per cent.

In the first quarter of 2021, the World Food Programme reported that, in Syria, 12.4M people are food insecure and 1.3M people are facing severe food shortages. A total of 13.4M people, out of a total population of 17.5 million, is in need of humanitarian assistance. Based on several official reports of organisations involved in the region, if no action is taken, another 1.8M Syrians could become food insecure, reinforcing the urgency of the WFP's US\$375.3M funding appeal for the summer of 2021. The vast majority of the 8M locals and refugees living in Damascus now rely on food boxes and lack basic needs such as electricity which is only available four hours daily. Moreover, half of the children growing up in Syria are out of education according to a UNICEF statement issued on 24 January 2021: "Inside Syria, there are over 2.4 million children out of school, nearly 40 per cent are girls."

While the whole world is facing the pandemic, over 12M Syrians were in need of healthcare support at the beginning of 2020; this number is estimated to be higher in light of Covid-19. The pandemic situation is particularly bad in a country lacking medical infrastructure and funding required to combat a pandemic. Official government numbers currently stand at roughly 16,000

cases and 1,045 deaths, but real statistics are expected to be much higher due to weak testing capacity.

Among poverty, hunger, unemployment, shortage of basic needs, lack of medical infrastructure in the time of a deadly virus, terrorist groups are still a threat to the fragile ceasefire. Since 2019, Daesh has remained underground in Syria, preserving itself in the mountains and caves of the Badia. While many of its frontline foreign fighters coming from North Africa and post-Soviet republics have battleground experience against both the regime and SDF, they have now gained valuable experience as insurgents as well. As a pattern repeating itself, the group has never been completely defeated, and found an opportunity to further develop in the form of an insurgency. There are, in fact, several indicators that point to the increasing threat represented by the group: the capability to launch attacks of small, medium and big scale on Syrian territory, the weakening of local/regional adversaries, and an increasing influence over the local population.

Daesh's offensive activity in Syria has been on the rise since 2019, and the number of attacks reached the highest level in January 2021. The numbers and quality of the attacks prove that the group's offensive capability remains quite strong, forcing the regime's military units and their allies to stay alert. While Daesh militants and supporters prove highly committed to their cause, the security forces in the area have proved unable to protect the towns. Attacks are just the reflection of Daesh's increasing power that is also infiltrating once again among the local population. According to several international reports, in rural areas of the Badia, the group often imposes mafia-like governance by extorting businesses, shep-



The Syrian Spring began in 2011 with large demonstrations against the regime of President Bashar Al Assad.

herds, and other locals. In response to not obeying the rules imposed by the group, locals face death, abduction, or confiscation of their property. Unfortunately, neither the regime nor the SDF has done much to prevent these abuses. Among the many tribal and community leaders who have been targeted for working with the SDF, an elder of the Ougaidat tribe was killed in January. And on 13 March, Daesh released a list of inhabitants in the Deir al-Zour village of Jadid Ougaidat, threatening to kill them and destroy their homes if they did not comply with their requests. Bearing in mind the Salafi-jihadi interest in prisons, detainees and camps that can provide human infrastructure to serve their goals, Syria still represents an obvious target due to the high concentration of Daesh supporters in both al-Hawl camp and Haska Central Prison. Based on information obtained by international humanitarian organisations, beheadings, point-blank executions with silenced pistols, and other killings have become increasingly common in al-Hawl camp. In the first quarter of 2021, 41 murders have been confirmed, while 33 incidents were registered in 2020. Nevertheless, connections to the outside are growing as well, facilitating camp residents' access to weapons and cell phones.

According to the latest reports from the Institute for the Study of War, Daesh faces pressure along multiple fronts as it begins its annual Ramadan surge of attacks in Syria. Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) mounted counter-Daesh operations targeting leadership cells in Idlib, likely in order to both depress Daesh's attack capability and to distance HTS from other "hard-line" Salafi-jihadi organisations. The British Royal Air Force and the Russian military similarly conducted precision operations, possibly intended to target high-value Daesh leadership figures in eastern Syria. The US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), meanwhile, secured camps and detention centres housing former Daesh affiliates in order to prevent it from staging a prison break during the coming months. Still, Daesh is expected to continue to conduct large-scale but disparate attacks on oil and gas facilities in the Central Syrian Desert and attacks targeting civil society leaders, exploiting existing Arab-Kurdish divisions, in SDF-held northeast Syria.

The Premises for Coming Years

In the first months of 2011, I was a resident of Damascus, following the developments

of the Arab Spring and never expecting a ten-year conflict to unleash the chaos that followed. I left Syria in the summer of that year but dedicated my academic career to the struggle against the terrorist groups that were born out of the "Syrian Spring". As I write these lines weighing up the past ten years, I must emphasise that there is no possible way to reconstruct all that was lost in the Syrian War since 2011. The personal, cultural, social, economic, historical, psychological, humanitarian, political, diplomatic, military and, nevertheless, egocentric dimensions of the crisis are a burden that is felt globally today. In respect to all the things that may never be recovered from the lost "Syrian Spring", the global community should put aside the old and new games of power politics and join hands to rebuild a secure and stable Syria. The international struggle that Syria needs is, in fact, a struggle for ourselves and for global peace. Otherwise, future current and future conflicts that will emerge will be even harder to manage. To conclude, there are three elements central to rebuilding Syria. Firstly, there is no Syrian future that can include the current regime. As the Arab League is currently building momentum to reintegrate Syria (suspended in November 2011), such a step should never be taken with Bashar al-Assad as president. This will only turn a blind eye to the regime's actions against the Syrian people. A regime that is not able to defend its people should never be left in place. Nevertheless, once a regime change has been achieved, the new political figures need to gain, from the very beginning, the trust and support of the Syrian nation to start the long and rocky road towards security and stability. Secondly, international actors need to come together to eradicate all terrorist groups on the ground, disregard their affiliations and affinities. The underground persistence of those groups should also be tackled. The camps and prisons are in urgent need of reorganisation, and their security infrastructure has to be rebuilt in order to prevent any infiltrations or attacks. Thirdly, as the first two goals are achieved, a new and stronger Syria can flourish from within, through its own people. The international community needs to ensure that the Syrian people who are now displaced around many nations will be able to return to a safe home. None of these three elements is achievable unless all the actors involved are determined to support the interests of the Syrian people. To continue gambling with Syria's future would only mean threatening the peace, security and stability of our modern world. ■



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