

Global Security Briefing – September 2016

Syria after the Ceasefire

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Summary

One year after Russia launched its aerial bombing campaign in Syria the civil war is entering one of its most bloody phases, with Aleppo bearing the brunt of violence. With Russia, Iran, the US, Turkey and Gulf Arab states united only in opposition to the so-called Islamic State (IS), the country is no closer to a peaceful settlement but the Assad regime is increasingly secure. Similarly in Iraq, where the battle for Mosul looms, victory against IS may be pyrrhic as the conflict for sectarian and foreign influence intensifies.

Introduction

The [July](#) and [August](#) briefings examined the current state of the coalition war against IS. Three elements were seen as particularly significant:

- the manner in which IS, under considerable pressure from coalition air strikes, was developing a capability to take the war to the “far enemy” of Western states,
- the need to recognise the underlying issue of long-term Saudi/Iranian suspicion and the resultant involvement in a complex proxy conflict, and
- the long-term problem of economic and political marginalisation across the region that would make likely the development of further extreme movements should IS be suppressed.

This briefing brings in the other major issue in the current conflict, the state of the bitter and hugely violent civil war in Syria, brought to the fore during the latter part of September by a partial ceasefire which subsequently collapsed.

Origins and Development of the Syrian Civil War

The war started early in 2011 following nonviolent protests against the autocracy of the Assad regime. Following the sudden fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the even more traumatic collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the Assad regime came under heavy pressure for reform, especially from younger people. In the light of what had happened across the region it responded with considerable force and within months was opposed by a number of armed groups. More force was used to maintain power but this had the main effect of increasing opposition which evolved into a complex set of factions ranging from local and regional groups in which religious identity was not to the fore, to groups linked to more extreme Islamist perspectives.

The presence of these latter groups enabled the regime to claim that all forms of opposition were rooted in terrorism and that by suppressing dissent it was actually “protecting the civilised world”. The methods it used were frequently brutal and many Western states opposed the regime, which, by late 2011, appeared close to collapse. Even then, though, a double proxy element of the war was evident. At the regional level the regime was supported by Hezbollah and Iran while many of the opposition groups got support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. More broadly the regime was backed by Russia and some but not all of the opposition groups were supported by Western states, especially France, the United States and Britain.

For three years from late 2011 the war was mainly centred on the regime’s attempt to regain control but failing to do so, with many tens of thousands of people killed and millions displaced. Within this violent environment one development was the growth in power and significance of extreme Islamist groups, especially IS, although from 2014 onwards that was focused as much on Iraq as Syria. From July 2014 IS controlled territory across much of northern Iraq and Syria, including Iraq’s second city of Mosul. It was seen as such a significant threat to regional security that the United States assembled a coalition of states for a major air assault which commenced in Iraq in August 2014 and was later extended to Syria.

That air war has been supplemented by the extensive use of Special Forces and also a steady increase in the deployment of regular combat troops in which a “training function” has actually been extended to encompass fire support and target acquisition. Over the past two years the coalition war against IS has been of an intensity that is almost entirely ignored in the Western media. As of 29 September, [Airwars](#) was reporting that there had been at least 15,338 airstrikes, almost two-thirds in Iraq and the rest in Syria, with 54,611 bombs and missiles dropped. Airwars put the minimum estimate of civilian loss of life at 1,612 and Pentagon estimates put the total loss of IS supporters, paramilitaries and others, at over 30,000 deaths.

Political Trends

Within Syria there have been three important trends in the past year, the entry of Russia into the war in support of the Assad regime, the increasing Western emphasis on defeating IS rather than opposing Assad, and, latterly, the direct Turkish Army push into Syria, at the expense of Syrian Kurdish factions as much as IS. All three trends put the squeeze onto IS and tend to relieve pressure on the Assad regime. However, given that Russia, the US/West and Turkey are only united in opposition to IS and support quite different anti-IS armed groups, these trends all serve to exacerbate the larger and more deadly war for control of Syria.

Russia has long had a connection with Assad and the Putin government sees the continuance of the regime to be in its regional security interests. It has had less interest in opposing IS or the formerly al-Qaida linked Jabhat al-Nusrah (JAN, now renamed Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) than in increasing the confidence of the Assad regime, which now appears to feel that it cannot be ousted.

Russian air support has been blunt in the extreme, and Airwars estimates the civilian casualties due to Russian air strikes have been proportionally much higher than those of the US-led coalition, even if the number of strikes is lower and more localised to Syria. [Data](#) from the first four months of Russia’s intervention in Syria (October 2015 to January 2016) suggest that Russian air strikes in Syria killed more than seven times as

many civilians (1,734) as coalition airstrikes (237). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [estimates](#) that Russian airstrikes killed 8,139 people in Syria over the nine months to June 2016, including 3,089 civilians, 2,574 IS fighters and 2,476 fighters from JAN and other rebel group.

Meanwhile the US-led war against IS is at the centre of US policy in Iraq and Syria, with a current emphasis on preparing to support an assault on Mosul while maintaining heavy pressure on IS control of Raqqa and other parts of northern Syria. Concern with the Assad regime is minimal, even when there is evidence of sustained assaults on civilian localities, attacks on hospitals and other health facilities, the use of barrel bombs and the possible use of chlorine gas. Few Western politicians will even discuss the Assad regime – it is simply not done in polite circles.

Finally, the Turkish government remains resolutely opposed to the Assad regime but far more committed to restricting Kurdish or IS influence along its long border with Syria than to the increasingly distant prospect of regime change in Damascus. This puts Turkey at odds with its ostensible ally - the US, increasingly working through Kurdish armed groups – and only loosely in synch with Gulf Arab states which resolutely, but increasingly ineffectively, oppose the Assad regime's staunch ties to Iran.

The Ceasefire and its collapse

A partial ceasefire was negotiated between Russia and Assad on the one hand and the Western coalition and some armed opposition groups on the other, commencing on 12 September with a 7-day cessation of air and ground strikes. The hope was that emergency supplies of humanitarian aid would be delivered to the worst affected areas, especially in and around Aleppo, that local ceasefires might be strengthened and that substantial negotiations on ending the civil war might ensue. The agreement did not involve any ending of air assaults on IS or JAN, and these and some smaller Islamist militias were certainly not willing to engage in any kind of negotiation.

The agreement held intermittently for five days but on 17 September there was a major air assault on a supposed IS camp near Deir Ezzor in Syria. This was undertaken principally by US aircraft but with Australian F/A-18 strike aircraft and British armed Reaper drones reportedly taking part as well. The twenty-minute attack involved repeated strikes on the target and on those fleeing the area in order to kill as many of those on the ground as possible. It rapidly became clear that the target area was actually under the control of the Syrian Army not IS, and 62 Syrians were reported killed and over a hundred wounded. This was reported in Washington as having been due to a major intelligence failure but it was immediately and bitterly criticised by Russia who saw it as an attack on its close allies.

Two days later there was an attack on a Syrian Arab Red Crescent aid convoy and a UN-aided warehouse that killed 20 civilians and one aid worker. The convoy had just arrived in a rebel-held town, Urum al-Kubra, about 12 km west of Aleppo and US sources immediately blamed Russia for the attack. In the days that followed there were further attacks on health facilities in the Aleppo area which were blamed on the Assad regime. A subsequent stormy meeting of the UN Security Council led to accusations against Russia of barbarity and war crimes and a walk-out of some Western delegations including Britain. The ceasefire had collapsed.

Aftermath and Prospects

At the time of writing (29 September), the situation is confused and uncertain, but with continuing Western airstrikes on IS in Syria and Iraq and Russian and Syrian airstrikes against anti-Assad rebel groups, especially in Aleppo. The two largest hospitals in Aleppo have both been hit and badly damaged. The ceasefire is essentially ended with little prospect of new negotiations amidst a climate of blame and counter-blame. What is becoming apparent, though, is that both wars, against anti-Assad militias in Syria and IS in both countries are intensifying. In Iraq the preparations for a full scale assault on IS in Mosul are well under way involving a remarkable and not necessarily stable mix of Kurdish militias, Iraqi Army units, Shi'a militias and Iranian elements together with coalition air assets and several hundred US troops on the ground.

In Syria it appears increasingly likely that Russia and the Assad regime see the prospect of achieving a victory in Aleppo by a systematic process of intensive air assault on the rebel areas of the city which are reported still to have 250,000 people within them. The tactics now appear to be targeting facilities in a manner designed to make life difficult if not impossible, driving out most civilians and then using intensive air assaults either to kill or force the surrender of the rebel paramilitaries. This would ultimately involve street-by-street fighting over some months with devastating humanitarian consequences even within the context of the huge losses in the five years of war so far.

Meanwhile, if Mosul falls to Iraqi and Western military force in the next six months it will be hailed as a major success but there are severe doubts as to the long-term consequences given that the Abadi government in Baghdad has been singularly unsuccessful in bringing stability to those towns and cities in Iraq that have already been cleared of IS elements.

There is an added element which is almost entirely missed in Western thinking. This is that the heavy involvement of Russian and Western forces in Syria and Iraq, with many tens of thousands of people killed, is seen across much of the Middle East as a further example of external interference. Furthermore it is paralleled by anger at the manner in which hundreds of thousands of refugees trying to get into Europe are met with antagonism and violence. Television pictures of refugees facing razor wire, water cannon and police batons add to this anger.

Conclusion

If Russia and the Assad regime succeed in gaining control of Aleppo and if Iraq and its Western supporters suppress IS in Mosul, all the parties will hail these as victories in spite of the human costs. Given that such advances will bolster the influence of Iran and Kurdish factions in both countries, the narrative of success will be harder to swallow for Gulf Arab states and Turkey, the key Sunni regional powers. Similarly, many Sunni Arab citizens of Iraq, Syria and the wider region will see such advances as yet another divisive foreign wedge driven into the Arab heartland.

These, then, are likely to prove pyrrhic victories, leading to further violence in a region in which there is already intense bitterness over external interventions. In such circumstances there is an urgent need for those external parties to draw back from their current paths and to seek a resumption of peace negotiations in Syria and extreme caution over the path against IS in Iraq.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [‘Monthly Global Security Briefings’](#) are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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