

The Long War in Syria: The Trees, the Forest, and All the King's Men

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Clichés are clichés, but sometimes it really is hard to see the forest for the trees. In the case of Syria, the “trees” include the UN debate between Obama and Putin over Syria and the fight against Islamic extremism, Russia’s sudden military intervention in Syria, the failure of the U.S. training and assist missions in both Syria and Iraq, and the developing scandal in USCENTCOM over exaggerated claims of success for the U.S.-led air campaign in Syria and Iraq.

The most important “tree,” however, is trying to negotiate an end to the fighting from the outside, as if Assad was the key issue and as if it would be possible for some diplomatic elite or mix of power brokers to bring Syria back to some state of stability if only Assad would agree to leave and the United States and Russia could agree on how to approach the negotiations.

Focusing on the Trees When the Forest is Burning

The problem is that the “forest” is dying, burning, and occupied by four broad sets of fighters that have little reason to cooperate with any UN-led negotiating effort, outside agreement over Assad – with or without U.S. and Russian cooperation.

To shift from one cliché to another, Syria presents far more problems than Humpty Dumpty. “All the king's horses and all the king's men” couldn't put Syria back together by negotiating a solution from the outside even if there was one King instead of a divided mix of the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, the other states surrounding Syria, the Arabian Gulf states, Egypt, and France and the other interested European powers.

It shouldn't take a child's nursery rhyme to point out the obvious –although it is one whose origins may date back to England's civil wars and first appeared in print shortly after it became fully clear that there was no way English could ever bring the 13 colonies back under its control. To begin with, there is no equivalent of Humpty.

Putting Four Humptys Together with No King and No Unity Among the King's Men

The problem is not simply ISIS or Assad. ISIS is one of the four “Humptys” in a shattered Syria, but ISIS controls only a limited part of Syria's population even in the east. ISIS occupies both parts of Syria and Iraq. It continues to systematically purge any religious and ideological dissent while neither government in Damascus or the government in Baghdad have shown any clear ability to gain support from a major portion of the Sunnis in the area that ISIS controls.

So far, neither the forces of the Syrian or Iraqi government have had much military success against ISIS, and U.S. claims that Iraq has regained some 35% of the territory it lost to ISIS are little more than dishonest spin. They are based on the maximum line of ISIS advance before any fighting took place and before ISIS established any level of governance or control. They include vast areas of unpopulated desert: areas where no one controls anything because no one is there.

The Kurds

The second Humpty consists of the Syrian Kurds—who have gone from a partially disenfranchised minority to the equivalent of a mini-state in the north and east of Syria, and have been the only real U.S. military train and assist success. They have no reason to support Assad or any of those who support Assad. They too are divided, and some have ties to Turkish Kurds, some to Iraqi Kurds, some to both, and some are independent.

At the same time, they have no clear economic viability as a state, face growing water problems, and would need to grab a significant part of Syria's limited oil and gas resources in the East to be viable unless they somehow united in a broader Kurdish entity—one that included Turkish and/or Iraqi Kurds and would be likely to create a new set of regional conflicts.

Furthermore, these Administration claims and maps that talk about liberating 35% of the area that ISIS occupied ignore the fact that control of much of the disputed populated areas in Anbar remains undecided, and that it was the Iraqi Kurds which not only recovered much of the lost populated areas that did matter, but grabbed a large additional part of Iraq—including Kirkuk and its oil fields—and created a whole new dimension of the Kurdish problem and its tensions with Iraq's Arab and the Turks while the corrupt government in the Kurdish zone of Iraq has divided and threatened to create a new round of internal power struggles.

The Other Sunni Fighters

The third Humpty consists of an uncertain coalition of other Sunni fighters. They control—or are fighting for control – in many of the most populated areas in Syria. There are no reliable unclassified estimates of the number, strength, and ideological character of these factions but there are well over 20 groups—and some estimates go well over 30.

Some, like the Al Nusra Front—one of the most successful in military terms—are linked to Al Qaeda. Others are less radical Islamist factions, but are scarcely secular or moderate, also have no ties to the hollow outside efforts to create moderate governments in exile, and are being backed by Arab states like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The small groups being given limited support with U.S. weapons and Special Forces assistance are at best petty and uncertain players.

This is also a group of fighters that is fighting the pro-Assad forces in what is increasingly becoming a wasteland. The fighting on the ground, Assad's barrel bombs and the threat of poison gas, deliberate isolation and efforts to starve out rebel held areas have created one of them most serious humanitarian disasters in any one country in modern history.

Many of the more than 4 million Syrian refugees that had left Syria lived in the area where this fight takes place. The same is true of the well over 7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) that no longer have a real home, job, business, or access to key services like health and education.

Many of the more than 250,000 Syrian civilian dead, and at least 500,000 seriously wounded are the product of this fighting—although it is important to note that the UN ceased to be able to make meaningful casualty estimates well over half a year ago, and the estimates of refugees and IDPs have ceased to increase because (a) there no longer is a basis for guesstimating the increase, and (b) many of the remainder are simply too poor to leave.

To go back to cliché number one, this is the area where the forest has now been burning for some four years. This *was* one of the most populated and developed parts of Syria. It is an area where Syria's already poor economy probably now has a GDP around 20% of what it was in 2011 and has no clear basis for recovery. It is an area where no top down negotiation between Assad or his backers and any outside faction can begin to put even one Humpty back together again.

The Assad Faction(s)

The fourth version of Humpty is the group of factions and fighters supporting Assad. It is important to note that this is not a unified group. No one has given most of those in the area Assad control a choice as to who controls them. The majority of the population is Sunni and other non-Alawites. The Alawites are not Shi'ite, and are a gnostic religious group that may have political ties to Iran and the Hezbollah, but Alawites are not Muslims in the normal sense of the term.

There are no reliable data on Syria's population. The CIA estimates, however, that some 17-18 million people remain in Syria, it estimates that 87% are Muslim (official; includes 74% Sunni 74% and 13% that are a mix of Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia). Some 10% are Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian), and the final 3% are Druze and some small number of Jews who remain in Damascus and Aleppo).

If one looks at the maps of Syria's sectarian and ethnic divisions before the fighting, they are also distributed into a series of small enclaves, many near the coast. They have no clear "region," and it is far from clear how

many of the Sunnis in the regular Syrian forces, the real Shi'ites and other minorities in Syria, or the more secular Sunni businesspersons and civilians would support either Assad or any mix of Assad supporters if they had a choice.

It is also important to note that the World Bank rated the Assad regime as having some of the worst governance in the world before the uprising began in 2011. It was also rated as deeply corrupt. Transparency International rated it as the 159th most corrupt country in the world – out of 175 – in 2014. The Arab and UN development reports warned that the younger Assad was no better in moving the country towards real economic development than his father, and that the massive population increase in Syria had created a “youth bulge” for which there were often no real jobs.

The Syrian GDP per capita was at best around \$5,100 even in Purchasing Power Parity P terms in 2011 before the upheavals began – and ranked a dismal 165th in the world. It now may average half that level. Some 33% of the population is 0-14 years of age; 14% is 15-24, and over 500,000 young Syrian men and women now reach job age each year in a country where direct (ignoring disguised) unemployment is estimated to be 33-35%, and the poverty level was well over 12% before the fighting started.

A Time for Honesty, Transparency, and Realism

One cannot ignore trees, anymore than one can ignore the forest. The failure of U.S. policy and military efforts, Russian and Iranian support of Assad and major Russian military intervention, and the conflicting ways in which other states intervene will all make things worse. The impact of religious warfare and extremism, and failed Syrian secularism, are even more serious problems.

It is time, however, to stop focusing on either ISIS or Assad, to pretend that Syrian “moderates” are strong enough to either affect the security situation or negotiate for Syria’s real fighters, and act as if a shattered nation could be united by some top down negotiation between groups that hate each other and have no competence in dealing with the economic, social, and governance challenges Syria now faces.

The first step in solving a problem is to honestly assess it. No negotiation can work that does not deal with grim realities and divisions created by years of fighting. No amount of U.S. and Russian intervention and argument can bring security or stability. No UN effort at conventional negotiation can survive encounter with reality, and no effort of any kind that does not address the sheer scale of Syrian recovery and reconstruction.

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