



Syria: Hints of an endgame

Repairing and reuniting the imploded Syrian state will perhaps be impossible

THERE IS still no end in sight to the horrific tragedy that has beset Syria during the last four and a half years, whose human costs include an estimated 250,000 deaths, countless more maimed and injured, and the displacement and uprooting of nearly half of its 23 million people – some seven million internally and four million who have fled the country, many of whom are now desperately knocking on Europe’s doors.

What is new is the acceleration of diplomatic contacts in recent weeks along with the intensification of fighting, as all of the protagonists try to position themselves for what may be the beginning of the endgame phase of the conflict.

The list of recent bilateral and multilateral meetings is considerable. They include, *inter alia*, a visit to Moscow by Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir and another three-way meeting in Qatar between Jubeir, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov; Iranian Foreign Minister Java Zarif’s meetings with Syria’s president Bashar Assad in Damascus and Hezbollah head Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut; a Russian-brokered unannounced discussion in Riyadh between the head of Syria’s National Security Office, General Ali Mamlouk, and Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem’s trip to Moscow for further consultations. Oman’s efforts to play a bridging role between Iran and the other Gulf Arab states, and the Syrian regime, as well, continued apace.

The centrality of Russia and Iran in these contacts stands out and requires explanation. Without the material and political support of Moscow and Tehran, the Assad regime would have been overthrown long ago, and efforts to exclude them from diplomatic efforts to stabilize Syria have proven unsuccessful.

Russia is keen on maintaining its naval facility in Tartus, renewing its traditional great power status in the region, enhancing ties with Iran, and combating the scourge of radical Sunni Islamist terror, particularly the Islamic State. Iran is no less keen on insuring its continued power projection into the Levant and Mediterranean littoral, through Shi’ite dominated Iraq, Syria and its Lebanese client-ally Hezbollah.

Doing so also improves Iran’s posture vis-à-vis Israel. Moreover, Iran’s standing as a legitimate regional actor has been boosted considerably by the JCPOA agreement on Iran’s nuclear program. To that end, Iran is now calling for a regional dialogue to address the multitude of crises, including those in Syria and Yemen, to combat “terrorism, extremism and sectarianism.”

At the same time, both Tehran and Moscow are anxious about the course of the fighting in Syria, which has tilted in the rebels’ favor. A recent analysis by Tel Aviv University’s Eyal Zisser points to the fact that Assad’s army is bleeding, with morale low, increasingly unable to fill its ranks, and forced to rely more and more on Assad’s own community, the minority Alawi sect, for reinforcements. Meanwhile, the heterogeneous rebel groups have prolifer-



MARKO DIURICA / REUTERS

Syrian refugees walk along a road in Serbia, August 24, in an increasingly desperate journey to western Europe

ated, backed by supportive Sunni villagers and townspeople, and are characterized by a high degree of motivation, determination, persistence, and the capacity to survive.

Although the regime is bent on maintaining control of Damascus and the narrow strip stretching north to the cities of Homs and Hama, extending to the traditional Alawi heartland on the northwest coast, and northwards to Aleppo, the rebels are knocking at the gates of Syria’s cities and extending their hold in the countryside.

No clear path toward a diplomatic outcome currently exists. The latest attempt to create one is that of UN special representative Staffan de Mistura, backed by a unanimous Security Council resolution. The plan seeks to promote political negotiations and a political transition by establishing working groups to hold consultations and discussions focused on four areas: “safety and protection for all; political and legal issues; military, security and counterterrorism issues; and continuity of public services and reconstruction and development.”

The sticking point, as it has been throughout, is the question of Assad’s survival in power. Syrian opposition forces, the Saudis and Turkey have always insisted that he could not be part of any solution, while Iran and Russia have been just as firm in insisting on his inclusion in whatever transitional arrangement might be arranged. Whether or not Assad’s status can be separated from that of Syrian ruling institutions, particularly the army, remains to be seen.

In any case, the task of repairing and reuniting the imploded Syrian state will be Herculean, and perhaps a case of mission impossible. ■

The author is a Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University