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Changing Dynamics in the Syrian Crisis

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The dynamics of the Syrian conflict have been substantially altered in recent months. The December 30, 2016 Syrian ceasefire and the subsequent talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, which renewed the political track, created a new reality, one in which the U.S. and the EU now have taken a back seat to Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

The new Trump administration, which is currently busy forming its foreign policy team and coping with domestic issues, has not yet had an opportunity to focus on foreign policy issues, particularly the Middle East. This means that Washington is losing precious time, while Russia, Turkey, and Iran are taking the lead in Syria, leaving less room for the U.S. This creates a dilemma for Trump: either he moves quickly to assert his vision for handling the Syrian civil war, or leaves the “mess” to Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Neither of the two options is ideal: The first because it is not clear that his foreign policy team has settled on a Syria strategy; and, second, Trump can’t afford to be outmaneuvered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Syria because the U.S. will appear weak, something that Trump abhors. Trump needs a quick victory against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq to silence his many critics at home and abroad.

Recent U.S. Moves

In an attempt to re-energize the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition and counter the impression that the Russia-Turkey-Iran bloc had seized the initiative in Syria, the Trump administration [invited](#) more than 60 countries and international organizations to Washington on March 22-23 for a strategy session focusing on how to destroy the Islamic State. Pointedly, Russia and Iran, both of which have forces on the ground that are fighting the IS, were not invited to Washington. Also, it is likely that Washington wanted to discuss the impending offensive on Raqqa, the capital of the IS caliphate in Syria.

Earlier in March, the [U.S. deployed 200 more Marines](#) to northern Syria (the outskirts of Manbij), bringing the number of U.S. boots on the ground to more than 700. In addition, [Trump is considering](#) sending 1,000 soldiers to Kuwait as a

reserve force in the fight against the IS, and in order to demonstrate the U.S.'s continued commitment to maintaining regional security.

Changing Dynamics

A very important meeting between the Russian, Turkish, and the U.S. Chiefs of Staff took place on March 7 in Antalya, Turkey. It was particularly noteworthy that after the meeting, the Syrian Arab Army and Russian servicemen were allowed into western areas of Kurdish-held Manbij, while the U.S. military entered the northern areas of the city. Taking into account Turkish plans to retake Manbij from the Syrian Kurds (whom Ankara views as terrorists because of their connections to the PKK), these developments limit Turkey's ability to attack the Kurdish forces. Essentially, one may conclude from these developments that Ankara, Moscow and Washington are trying to divide northern Syria into the zones of influence, and that Ankara is not on the same page with the latter two.

Moreover, recent reports say that Russia [deployed](#) its military near Kurdish controlled town of Afrin where it [established](#) a branch of the "Center for Reconciliation of the Warring Sides." According to the Russian Defense Ministry, their presence aims at observing the ceasefire and preventing its violations. In fact, Russia has placed its forces in between the Syrian Kurds and Turkey-supported Syrian Arab rebels to prevent Ankara from crushing the Kurdish forces.

These developments appear to confirm that the Kurds have become the force that unites Russian and the U.S. interests in Syria. Both Moscow and Washington understand that if the Syrian Kurds are preoccupied with defending themselves from Turkey, an offensive on the IS capital in Raqqa is impossible. Neither Russia nor the U.S. want deeper involvement in the Syrian conflict and intend to limit the number of their forces on the ground, leaving the fighting to the Kurds, Syrian Arab Army, and the Sunni and Shi'i militias. Therefore, it is clear that Moscow and Washington would prefer the Syrian Kurds to the Turkish Army in the offensive to retake Raqqa — at least for now.

At the same time, the guarantees that were reportedly given to the Syrian Kurds by Russia and U.S. – that they won't let Turkey attack them – might be used by Moscow and Washington to rein in the Kurds' ambitions. The Kurdish issue will be one of the central topics of contention as the Syrian civil war winds down and efforts are made to reconstruct the Syrian polity. Having already paid a high price fighting the IS, the Kurds are seeking greater autonomy in Syria, which irritates both the Asad regime and Turkish president Erdoğan. By supporting the Kurds in Syria, Russia and the U.S. can exert influence over the Kurds, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, use their influence with the Kurds as political leverage on the Turkish and Syrian regimes.

As a result, the current situation in northern Syria is becoming very unpredictable. It is hard to say what, if any, restraint Ankara is willing to show

with regard to the Kurds in Syria. Obviously, Turkey does not want a confrontation with Russia or the U.S., but at the same time it is likely to pursue its interests and maintain its red lines regarding the Kurds. If it doesn't, Erdoğan stands to pay a high political price and his prestige may suffer.

This also raises the question of how committed Turkey is to the ceasefire in Syria and to the political process launched in Astana. It possesses the ability to disrupt the talks by influencing the Syrian armed opposition groups that are parties to the Astana political process. The fact that representatives of these groups refused to attend the recent gathering in Astana on March 14-15 is telling in this regard.

Thus, while there are certain risks and challenges ahead for the parties to the Syrian conflict, there does, however, appear to be an emerging system of checks and balances that provides some modicum of hope for progress towards a settlement to the horrific blood-letting in Syria, now six years old.

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