



Syria in Six Years Causes and Consequences



جسور للدراسات
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Introduction

The outbreak of popular protests in Syria in March 2011 was a turning point in the country's modern political history. It has also transformed the entire region after Syria turned into the scene for a proxy war involving approximately 40 countries and non-state actors in addition to a multiplicity of fighters from 90 countries.

These events have had an impact on both the Syrian state and society. Hundreds of new Syrian actors have emerged to take many new roles, whose size and influence have changed dramatically. The Syrian regime, which used to control all aspects of life in Syria through extreme forms of oppression in March 2011 had lost control of two thirds of Syrian territory by the end of 2012. The state of fear it had constructed has collapsed. Police officers who used to spread terror among citizens as they passed in the street were now seen making statements in videos, appearing as hostages or after having deserted their posts.

Meanwhile, opposition factions experienced an even faster transition from having no presence in 2011 to taking control over the majority of Syrian territory by 2012. However, these groups have faced internal fragmentation and corrosion as members have left to join other groups such as ISIL.

Similarly, Kurdish militias have also seen their position transformed from having almost no presence in 2011 to having influence at the regional and international levels. These militias have succeeded in establishing a semi-independent entity and winning the support of international actors, including disputing countries that are seldom in agreement on any point.

On the sixth anniversary of the outbreak of popular protests in Syria, this report analyzes the situation of emerging Syrian actors throughout the past six years and their likely prospects for 2017. The report is essentially about internal actors and will not discuss foreign actors, whether state or non-state actors.

A. An Overview of Wins and Losses

1-The Regime

The Syrian regime has faced the popular protests against it using all available methods. It resorted to extreme violence from the first days of protests and continues to do so till today. The regime also confronted its opponents through political and legal means and the media.

When the peaceful revolution was transformed into an armed movement at the beginning of 2012, the Syrian regime began to gradually lose control over Syrian territory. By the end of 2012, the Syrian authorities controlled only 30% of Syria,¹ whereas it had controlled 100% in March 2011 and exercised near-total control over all aspects of life. Despite the direct intervention by Russia and Iran, the regime has managed to gain control of only 40% of the country.

Driven by the swift erosion of the Syrian regime's influence, Iran intervened directly. The undeclared intervention of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Lebanese Hezbollah militias in 2012 became open by the end of 2012 when Iran brought in foreign fighters, most of them Afghan and Pakistani.

Hence, Iran's role was transformed gradually from aiding the regime behind the scenes to taking the lead in the conflict. Iran's forces and its foreign militias are now leading military operations while the regime is only playing an assisting role.

During the last quarter of 2015, Russia intervened militarily, after having provided the regime with logistical and technical support throughout the past few years, alongside political and diplomatic support. At the end of 2016, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the Russian intervention came as an attempt to prevent the fall of the Syrian regime, which could have occurred in a matter of weeks if Russia had not intervened.

With Russia's intervention, the scale of violence peaked to unprecedented levels. The Russian air force employed a scorched-earth policy using all available types of missiles. Just as the regime and Iranian forces had done

¹Morris, Loveday, "Assad regime 'controls less than a third of Syria', claims former premier", The Independent, 14/8/2012: <https://goo.gl/oqUiqa>

before, Russian forces targeted opposition-held territories and spared areas held by ISIL and Kurdish forces.

Russia's intervention delivered immediate tangible results, as the regime succeeded in taking over not only vast parts of the Kurdish and Turkmen mountains in the countryside of Latakia but had also taken over the city of Aleppo by the end of 2016. It also regained control over the city of Palmyra for the second time, after it had been mysteriously taken over by ISIL during the Russian intervention.

The Syrian regime has made advances through two main weapons - bombardment and siege. Since 2015, the regime has managed to steadily conclude agreements with locals in besieged areas. The agreements require the evacuation of fighters from these areas and any residents who wish to leave, usually heading to Idlib in the past two years. The city of Daraya was emptied of all its residents, while the vast majority of the residents of Aleppo were also evacuated.

However, the regime's steady advances since 2015 is not an indicator that it is strong, in political terms. In fact, the Syrian regime has become only one of many political actors on the ground and no longer has control over political and military decisions. Iranian and Russian forces and even Hezbollah's militias are now in control of the Syrian army's military operations and even interfere in the affairs of communities in the areas that are declared "under regime control". The army has been transformed into various militias taking orders from semi-independent military officers.

2-The Political and Civilian Opposition

For more than a century, Syrian society was denied freedom of association. Thus, the popular protests that broke out in 2011, which was entirely peaceful, had no organizational structure or framework from the outset.

In the few months following the first sparks of protest, local civilian groups resorted to self-organization along the lines of structures called "Coordination Groups". These groups were locally led in each neighborhood then expanded to reach the cities. Afterwards, the groups began to unite and create liaison groups between cities.

In parallel with this popular mobilization inside Syria, Syrian political activists outside Syria began working to form political structures. In 2011,

many meetings, events and conferences were held to discuss various proposals and ideas. The most prominent idea that managed to see the light was the “Syrian National Council”. The council is the only opposition structure that managed to gain broad international recognition.

However, the Syrian National Council soon encountered a series of challenges, both domestic and regional, as well as constant pressure to expand the council or establish an alternative institution. In November 2012, two consecutive meetings were held in Doha, the first to expand the council and the second to discuss the formation of another body to be called the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces”.

Accordingly, a few weeks after it was launched, the coalition gained political representation at the conference held in Marrakesh, Morocco by the Group of Friends of Syria. However, the disagreements and objections of various countries on the regional and an international level persisted, despite the fact that these countries had directly participated in creating the coalition. Less than six months after it was formed, the coalition was pressurized to include other members and a meeting was called for this purpose, with the participation of the majority of the ambassadors of the supporting countries and some of the heads of their security forces. On May 31, 2013, an expansion in the coalitions’ membership was announced.

The Geneva II Conference on Syria is considered one of the major milestones in the evolution of the Syrian opposition. For the first time, the opposition was able to negotiate with the Syrian regime as an equal. The conference was widely attended and received a huge level of global attention.

At the end of 2015, the Syrian opposition was again subject to new demands under regional and international pressure. The Riyadh conference was held, attended by the entire spectrum of the Syrian opposition, resulting in the creation of the Supreme Negotiations Commission. Thus, the coalition became a part of this new political body, which was given responsibility for all negotiations on behalf of the opposition. The commission was also given joint responsibility for political representation and communication with the coalition.

In 2013, the National Coalition formed the Syrian interim government as an administrative alternative to the official institutions of the regime and to act

as the liaison between the opposition, inside and outside Syria. However, it has proven unable to propose effective projects or make any significant contribution to the provision of services. Consequently, the focus of the government and its supporters became ensuring its own survival.

3-The Armed Opposition

Since the early days of the popular mobilization in Syria, the regime resorted to excessive use of force against the peaceful protesters who stood up against it. The regime pushed the army, together with other security forces, to use live ammunition against demonstrators, which led to a growing number of defections from the army and security forces.

At the beginning of the second half of 2011, the establishment of the Free Syrian Army was announced, followed by the formation of many factions in all areas of Syria. By 2012, there were more than 1000 factions, while other estimates put the number at 2000!

The Free Syrian Army never adopted a clear organizational structure, although many have adopted its name or use. It has become a general label used for every faction that does not belong to the Islamist factions that emerged later.

Free Syrian Army factions have been widely targeted by Islamist factions, ISIL and the Syrian regime, and later by the Russian air force. The first Russian air raids in Syria targeted the Jaysh al-Izza (the Army of Glory) opposition camp in rural Hama. This transformed these factions from being the dominant player on the majority of Syrian territory in 2012 to the least influential actor by 2017.

4-Armed Islamist Groups

Islamist factions first emerged in late 2011 and beginning of 2012. However, these groups chose to hide their extreme religious tendencies throughout 2012, trying to blend in as much as possible with Free Syrian Army factions. Even al-Qaeda, which appeared under the name “al-Nusra Front”, chose to keep a low profile in the media and in terms of its ideological views. At the time, it presented itself as a well-behaved faction entirely respectful of Syrian society’s rules and in line with popular aspirations, without trying to impose any imported aspirations or vision.

However, this image began to gradually change in the last few months of 2012, becoming clearer in 2013. Al-Qaeda started spreading its literature that glorifies Osama bin Laden and Islamist groups began refusing the “Free Army” label. The Syrian opposition entered into debates over the issue of an Islamic state, Sharia law, the rule of God and other similar matters.

April 2013 was a turning point in the situation of armed groups as well as in contemporary Syrian and regional political history. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the separation from al-Nusra Front and the formation of the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (Daesh).

Throughout the remainder of 2013, the group entered a phase of covert war with all other military and civilian groups in the areas controlled by the opposition. This period was characterized by a series of abductions and assassinations that targeted media, civic and military activists. At that time, it was not clear who was responsible for these acts.

By the end of 2013, tensions between ISIL and all other groups had heightened, resulting in military confrontations at the beginning of 2014. These military confrontations ended in driving ISIL out of Aleppo and all other groups from Raqqa. Since then, ISIL has managed to continually expand its influence until it gained control of half of Syrian territory at the end of 2014 and until today.

In March 2015, “Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya” (the Islamic Movement of the Free People of the Levant) and al-Nusra Front created a military alliance called “Jaish al-Fatah” (the Army of Conquest) together with other factions. This alliance managed to gain control of the city of Idlib in 2015, making it the second city center outside regime control and the first one under opposition control. Since then, no opposition faction or Islamist faction has managed to achieve any significant military gains.

In 2016, al-Nusra Front announced that it was changing its name and splitting from al-Qaeda, focusing its efforts on expanding its control and influence over Idlib province. It targeted other groups and factions using a variety of methods, thus succeeding in weakening all other armed groups in northern Syria. The new entity it formed in 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, has thus become the main group in Idlib and surrounding areas including areas of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia that are outside regime control.

5-Kurdish Forces

Generally, the Kurdish community suffered from persecution under Ba'ath rule, which adopted a policy of discrimination against ethnic minorities. Hence, Kurdish political activists were subject to double oppression prior to 2011.

However, the outbreak of popular demonstrations in 2011 pushed the Syrian regime to adopt a policy of positive discrimination in favor of Kurds. Accordingly, it granted nationality to those who were deprived of Syrian nationality in the al-Hasakah referendum of 1962. It also allowed Kurds to celebrate “Nowruz Day”, and allowed members of the banned Democratic Union Party to return to and operate in Kurdish areas, both in a military and civilian capacity.

Since 2012, the People's Protection Units Kurdish (YPG), the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union party, officially announced its presence in the region. The regime handed over control of several cities to the YPG including Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), Afrin in rural Aleppo and large parts of al-Hasakah province. In 2013, the Democratic Union Party announced the establishment of an autonomous administration in the areas of al-Hasakah, Afrin and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani).

Since 2014, Kurdish militias have become a key partner of the US, alongside maintaining excellent relations with Moscow, Damascus and Tehran.

Thanks to extensive support from the international counter-terrorism coalition, these militias were able to take control over Ayn al-Arab, Kobani in 2015 in a battle that received huge media coverage around the world. They also took control of Tell Abyad, a city on the border with Turkey, after fierce battles against ISIL.

At the end of 2015, the formation of a new group, the “Syrian Democratic Forces”, was announced. The group is nearly entirely composed of the People's Protection Units of the Union Party, as well as a small number of other components with little influence.

In 2016, Syrian Democratic Forces targeted the Syrian opposition in the countryside of northern Aleppo, launching their attacks from Kurdish-controlled areas in Afrin. They also managed to make significant advances,

taking control of the strategic city of Tell Rifaat and trying to reach the towns of Azaz and Marea.

In the course of these battles, the Syrian regime was able to launch an attack from the other axis and break the siege imposed by the opposition on the towns of Nobl and Zahraa, which have a Shiite majority. These battles led to the separation of opposition-controlled areas in the northern city of Aleppo and its countryside. A federal system was then announced in the Syrian areas controlled by Kurdish forces.

Syrian Democratic Forces continued their attacks, taking control of the city of Manbij, west of the Euphrates, which was entirely under the control of ISIL. The main goal of the move towards the western bank of the Euphrates was to create directly connect Kurdish areas located east of the Euphrates in al-Hasakah province with those Manbij, Ayn al-Arab Kobani, and Afrin on the western bank of the river. Turkey strongly opposed this plan and put its support behind Operation “Euphrates Shield” to prevent Kurdish forces from realizing their ambition of connecting their areas.

Syrian Democratic Forces are still advancing against ISIL in various battlefronts in the countryside of Raqqa. The SDF was estimated to control approximately 16.5 % of Syrian territory by the end of 2016.²

Overall, the Democratic Union Party was able to transform itself into a major player on the Syrian scene and in the region, as well as creating a unique alliance between Washington, Moscow and Tehran.

B. What is the most likely future for Syria?

Six years after the outbreak of the popular mobilization, the Syrian scene appears to have become more complicated than ever before. The interests of the various actors intersect in unprecedented ways and none of them has the power to determine how the conflict will end. All of them have reached a stage from which there is no going back.

²“Map of military control, November 2016”. Jusoor Center for Studies, 1-12-2016.
<https://goo.gl/P631zM>

The possible short term scenarios that may occur in 2017 can be summarized as follows:

1-The Political Level

It is likely that the international community will continue trying to push the political process forward in Syria and holding more Geneva talks. However, it is unlikely that Bashar al-Assad will be removed from power. Instead, the main focus will be put on trying to reach an agreement over the form that the transition process will take in Syria. Also, the Syrian opposition and the regime will enter into discussions over a new constitution.

It is also likely that the major state actors in the Syrian conflict, especially Turkey and Russia, will work on strengthening the cease-fire in order to create a suitable environment for a political solution.

It is also expected that other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan will contribute to and support the political process in Syria, while also pursuing the fight against terrorism in the country. It is unlikely that negotiations will lead to the dividing up of Syria as a solution to the conflict.

When it comes to the Syrian political opposition, it is likely that the role played by the Supreme Negotiations Commission and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces will continue to decline. Meanwhile, the Cairo and Moscow peace talks will play a bigger, more effective role, especially if these capitals manage to put together a unified delegation to represent the Syrian opposition in any negotiations with the Syrian regime while preserving the role of the representatives of opposition factions in any peace talks regarding the Syrian issue.

2-Military Level

The Syrian regime is likely to try to expand its control over the Syrian Desert, possibly reaching the western and southern countryside of Raqqa and controlling the southern part of al-Tabqah city in the course of its battles against ISIL.

In other areas of Syria, the regime may seek to tighten its grip on the opposition in eastern al-Ghouta in order to force them to leave for Idlib under a settlement or to other opposition-controlled areas under the Euphrates Shield military operation. If it succeeds in doing so, it would be

able to impose further settlements in Deraa province without launching any military operations against opposition factions in the province.

In the short term, it is unlikely that the Syrian regime would launch a military operation targeting opposition strongholds in Idlib province.

It is likely that Operation Euphrates Shield will continue to face obstacles in the face of expanding operations by the US and its Kurdish allies. This may lead to two main scenarios. First, it may lead to direct confrontation with Syrian Democratic Forces in Manbij or with the regime in areas that have recently fallen under regime control in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. The aim would be to pave the way for the Euphrates Shield forces to advance towards the city of Raqqa to achieve the operation's declared goal of creating a safe zone covering an area of 5,000 square kilometers.³

The second possible scenario is for Turkey, Russia and the US to reach an agreement to open a route towards Raqqa province through the areas controlled by the SDF without engaging in any military hostilities. This would open the door to the participation of opposition factions backed by Ankara and the Syrian Democratic Forces backed by Washington in the battle for Raqqa and against ISIL.

Many believe that the influence of ISIL in Syria will continue to decline. The group will try to take over the city of Deir ez-Zor and drive the remaining regime forces out of the besieged neighborhoods. ISIL may be able to make use of fighters retreating from Mosul toward Syria to reinforce its ranks and protect its main stronghold in Syria, Raqqa. Thus, it is unlikely that ISIL would lose Raqqa in the coming year but it may be increasingly trapped there. On the other hand, ISIL may conduct more successful operations in southern Syria, particularly in enclaves controlled by the Syrian regime in the countryside of Damascus and Deraa to relieve the pressure on its forces in northern Syria.

It is likely that Syrian Democratic forces will continue conducting their military operations in the countryside of Raqqa to tighten their grip on ISIL. It is also likely that the international coalition will continue to support the SDF, whether logistically or with air strikes. However, it is unlikely that Kurdish forces will be able to connect their areas located to the west of the

³“Erdoğan wants to set up 5000 sq km ‘safe zone’ in Syria”, Russia Today, 3-10-2016. <https://goo.gl/9ldCYk>

Euphrates River. They will therefore try to avoid entering into a confrontation with the opposition factions in Operation Euphrates Shield as much as possible, taking into consideration their close relationship with the United States. In the northern areas controlled by the SDF, opposition factions may try to launch limited confrontations on the outskirts of the city of Tall Rifaat and the surrounding areas in an attempt to regain control of the city.

As for Islamist factions centered in Idlib province, the western countryside of Aleppo and the northern countryside of Hama, it is likely that a state of cautious anticipation will prevail between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Levant Liberation Committee) and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (Islamic Movement of the Free People of the Levant). However, this will probably not last long and one of them may eliminate the other entirely or in practical terms. The remaining factions in northern Syria will find themselves faced with the same limited options.

Idlib will be the scene for the next battle, in which the international coalition and Russia may be involved, together with the Syrian regime. However, it is unlikely that the battle for Idlib will start before the battles of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor have finished.

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