



Russia in Syria, Year Five – Things Just Got Complicated

[Marek Czajkowski](#)

In September 2019, the Russian intervention in Syria has entered its fifth year. Usually, it is portrayed as a successful military-political operation which gave the Kremlin a position of the main Middle Eastern power. It has also, as it is commonly believed, augmented Moscow's international position as an influential world power. All of this is true to a certain degree; however, the situation is not as bright as it would seem, and far from being perpetuated. Of course, Russians are in Syria to stay, but their situation may not be as favourable as it appears.

This commentary is supposed to explore consequences of the latest developments in Syria for the Russian Federation in order to explain the limits of the Kremlin's influence there. The main argument is that irrespective of how Moscow has managed to shore up the Bashar al-Assad regime in military terms, it does not possess viable instruments to address the issues that emerge while the bloodiest chapter of the Syrian drama is, most probably, drawing to an end.

1. Introduction

Since at least 2014, but in fact even earlier, the Russian Federation has been deliberately fuelling conflict with the West in general, and with the United States in particular. As of now it amounts to what some call a [confrontation](#), and we tend to agree with this notion. Not surprisingly, this strategy is quite defensive, because the Russian authorities see it as the single remaining instrument to legitimize themselves, as [we used to argue](#). One of many facets of this activist, even if defensive in nature, policy is the help given by Moscow to Damascus. However, we reiterate our belief, [expressed](#) in the previous commentaries on that topic, that Russia's general goal has never been to quickly win this conflict for the sake of the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad or anyone else, but rather to prolong it as long as possible for its own purpose. The reasoning behind such an assessment stems from the following general observations.

1. Obviously, the economy of war-torn Syria will have to be rebuilt - this process is already underway in some forms. We agree that al-Assad's regime [will most probably](#) use it to tighten its grip on the country, the needs of the nation will not be the priority. Nevertheless, whatever the authorities' motives are, they will, first of all, require cash for immediate needs, such as rebuilding the basic infrastructure or addressing the most daunting calamities of the society – it has to be done quickly, otherwise the popular dissent will return. Furthermore, Syria needs large, long-term investments for the resurrection of its economy necessary to effectively sustain society in the coming future. As we have noted, the government will not try to build a modern sustainable economy but will rather seek to conserve a parochial model, so the [estimates](#) of the cost of reconstruction that range between 250 and 400 bln USD might be above its real needs. Meanwhile, with a [budget](#) of some 8.9 bln in 2018, Damascus will surely be desperately seeking money abroad. In this context, it is rather obvious that Russia does not have the capability to substantially aid post-war Syria the way it would be required. Firstly, because in the short-term perspective Moscow badly needs cash for itself because of bold development programmes which were advertised by President Putin in 2018 and are of the highest political priority. Secondly, Moscow does not have sufficient investment funds for a long-term activity in Syria as its banking sector is rather weak and the companies are entangled in internal economic woes. Of course, some Russian capital will flow into Syria, especially to the energy or construction sectors. But it will rather be intended to extract quick benefits and secure some strategic positions for the Kremlin and its cronies, not to help the Syrian government carry the burden of overall post-war reconstruction. Let us note that the Russian federal budget total expenditures are [planned](#) at a rather modest level of some 543 bln USD in 2020 (exchange rate as of mid-November 2019).

2. A unified and stabilized Syria, if it ever emerges, will, therefore, need Russia much less than the current one, fractured and in the state of war. Sheer firepower of aviation and artillery units, sophisticated means of intelligence gathering, highly capable commandos of mercenaries, and even military police units will be less important for the stabilization efforts than money for reconstruction purposes and large quantities of foot soldiers to execute control over probably still a rather restive country. Furthermore, and very importantly, should peace or peace-like times come to Syria, Russia would no longer be an indispensable powerbroker valued for its good relations with all sides of the hostilities.

3. To sum up, it is quite obvious that in case the Syrian conflict is permanently resolved or at least the country stabilizes more or less under the Damascus rule, the Russian influence there is poised to diminish. The Russians will not go away, of course, but their military backing and political value as a powerbroker will be of much less significance. In such a situation, other countries will become more important as partners for the Syrian government. Iran with its presumably permanent military presence with thousands of personnel on the ground, massive logistics infrastructure and a political sway among local militias will be more important partner in a process of striking the internal bargain. It may also be expected that China will throw some of its economic weight around – it would be a perfect opportunity to invest for the sake of enlarging Beijing's influence. Even the Persian Gulf states may, to some extent, reconcile with al-Assad for pragmatic reasons, and provide him with investment capitals to offset at least partially the Iranian influence. The United States and other Western states or institutions may also be back in some form with financial help in exchange for political or economic concessions from Al-Assad. All of this would give the Syrian government a much larger room for manoeuvre

and will help it distance itself from Russia. Moscow will, of course, remain an ultimate guarantor of peace and order in Syria but will be less valuable in practical terms.

All in all, we reiterate in our assessment that a complete pacification and stabilization of Syria is not in the Kremlin's interest. It is because under such condition military help and political backing will be of much less importance than other instruments of influence which Russia does not wield.

That is why a sort of a frozen conflict in the divided country is the only choice for Moscow if it wants to keep maximum influence in Syria without sending billions of dollars in cash and investment there. We have explained the logic of this kind of conflict in one of our recent publications, here we will present only one of the newest examples of how it is being executed.

The offensive of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in the southern part of the Idlib province, which started at the beginning of May 2019, has shown limits of these forces' capabilities. The offensive underwent very slowly with the absence of Iranian-backed forces and a very limited Russian support. The rebels even managed to stage counteroffensives, sometimes breaking into the territories that were under government control prior to the start of the al-Damascus offensive. Finally, the Russians beefed up their support and the operation was concluded by September with modest gains of some 500 square kilometres, mere few percent of the rebel-held areas. Let us note that Russians were quite reluctant to render assistance for several months; obviously, Moscow did not want the Syrian government to score a swift and decisive victory in Idlib, for an existing balance of the conflict was the desired state of affairs. The Kremlin simply did not want to strengthen al-Assad by eliminating the last frontline of the staunch anti-Assad opposition in the country. Furthermore, Russians did not want to anger Turks who were about to receive the S-400 air defence systems purchased from Russia and who consider Idlib province their sphere of influence. Moscow finally decided to assist the SAA in a more resolute way, but it happened when the Syrian troops were already exhausted, unable to continue the offensive which ultimately came to a halt. Since then the Russian forces have continued to bomb Idlib, but it is aimed rather not to let the forces deployed there strengthen than to prepare for a decisive offensive to retake the province of Idlib – we believe that Moscow would prefer to postpone it indefinitely.

This example shows how Russians try to manage the conflict by balancing it. But it also shows how difficult it is. Moscow does not assert full control over either of the sides to the conflict. That is why the Kremlin cannot prevent some of the participants to try to break the stalemate. It is obvious especially with regard to al-Assad, who is naturally trying to restore full control over the territory of Syria, even if he understands well that this is something his Russian allies do not want. For example, the Syrian army still probes the defences of rebel forces in the Idlib enclave and Russians are in fact compelled to assist with it, at least to some extent. We predict that it will be continued, even more vigorously now, and the last breakaway part of Syria will fall under the Damascus rule within several months.

That is why the conflict is far from being frozen the way Russians managed to freeze conflicts in the Caucasus or in Ukraine. They simply do not have enough authority over the participants to force them to accept the *status quo* desired by Moscow.

2. The Reversal of the U.S. Strategy in Syria and its Consequences

Donald Trump's decision to abandon some of the U.S. positions in Syria which was followed by the Turkish incursion into the Kurdish-held Rojava changed a lot in the equation so carefully maintained by Russians. The lasting outcome of these events is yet to be determined, but there are several important developments which will strongly affect the balance in Syria and, in turn, the Russians' posture there:

1. **The relative weakening of the American position.** Taking some [tweets](#) as face value, we could come to the conclusion that Donald Trump actually shares his predecessor's general view at the Middle Eastern conundrum as an unsolvable problem. It has resulted in the usually impulsive decision of the embattled president to instantly withdraw from Syria. The decision started to be executed, and the U.S. forces left the most important positions close to the northern border, paving the way for the Turkish invasion. Subsequently, Trump backpedaled on this issue, ordering some of the American units to remain in locations within the Syrian territory which encompass oil fields. Currently, the U.S. forces resumed some of the anti-IS duties in the southern oil-rich part of the Rojava, they are also [present](#) in the north-eastern areas of the country. It is, however, unclear if this pattern of engagement endures for some time, but anyway, the profound change of the balance has occurred and will persist.

2. **The Turkish forces in Syria.** They have entered other parts of the Syrian territory, in addition to Afrin and Al-Bab areas that Ankara already controlled. The regular army units were accompanied by numerous and well-armed militias. These proxy forces consist mainly of Arabs and many of them are [allegedly](#) radicals sympathizing with ISIS. They [reportedly](#) conducted acts of violence which amounted to ethnic cleansing. This and indiscriminate attacks by the Turkish forces weakened Ankara's international position, even if the invasion did bring some benefit for the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at home.

3. **Kurdish decision to deter Turks.** It has been the most important development of recent weeks, as prompt as [obvious](#). Kurdish decision to invite the Syrian government and the Russians to the Rojava sought to block advancing Turks. It happened very quickly, but unsurprisingly – we [foresaw](#) such a move. It was facilitated by the fact that Kurds did not fight extensively against the government as their enemies were ISIS groupings located east of Euphrates. They have also never expressed any wish to dismember Syria, advocating for strong autonomy rather than for independence. All of this allowed the Kurdish administration to take a quick decision to seek protection from the Syrian government, and it brought Kurdish forces and SAA to fight side by side against the common enemy. For both, the Syrian government and the Kurds, Turkey is a more hated enemy than one for another.

4. **Prospects for the elimination of the Kurdish quasi-state.** Taking the decision to invade Syria, the Turkish government wished to get rid of the Kurdish quasi-state from its border. From the short-term perspective, it may be considered a success, and it may be televised as such at home. But Kurds will [unlikely](#) vanish as a separate fighting force; first of all, because nobody in the area has enough strength to disarm them by force. Moreover, al-Assad will need the Kurdish highly motivated, well-trained and well-armed units as a counterbalance to both: the dreaded Turks and the resurrecting ISIS. The former is the natural enemy of Kurds, with the latter they have a blood feud as they were the main ground force that executed the destruction of the Caliphate. The Kurdish entity will, therefore, remain in Syria in some form and will not cease to be a threat to Turkey. Quite the contrary, when the Kurdish forces were

allied with, and effectively controlled by the Americans, they posed no direct military threat to Turkey, now it changed.

5. **The fate of the peace process.** The Geneva talks are still underway, the Constitutional Committee, proposed by Russia in January 2018, has been convened for the first time on the 30th of October this year. However, it [seems](#) that none of the main sides to this process is serious about a negotiated solution, especially the Syrian government, which simply waits until its position strengthens.

3. Bleak Prospects.

The current (as of the end of November 2019) state of developments in Syria may be characterized as follows. The Turkish offensive has been confined to the limited territory under the [agreement](#) with Russia providing that YPG withdraws from northern Syria and Russians with Turks will jointly monitor the area. The Kurdish fighters did withdraw from some parts of the borderland but remained in the others, along with government forces which started gradually taking control over the vast swaths of the territory in northern Syria. This way the Turkish conflict with Kurds turned into a fight with the Syrian government. On the 29th of October, fierce clashes erupted between the Turkish army and affiliated militias, the SAA with its affiliated militias and the Kurdish units. The fight continued on Tell Tamer front until around the 20th of November, then another round of fierce clashes erupted on the Ain Issa front where the SAA forces were also present. In both places, the invasion forces have tried to control strategic intersections on the M4 highway which runs parallel to the Turkish border. It looks like Ankara tries to gain ground within the confines delimited with the agreement with Russians, despite it meant direct clash with the Syrian government. The rest of the Turkish-Syrian border is watched by joint Russian-Turkish patrols, with some presence of SAA, the American units in easternmost part of the border and the Kurdish forces. ([Here](#) is the map of the Syrian civil war, as of the 25th November 2019.)

It is of course very difficult to predict the future developments in Syria, but it is very likely that at least some of the following will happen:

1. The United States will maintain a limited presence in some parts of Syria, which will be tolerated for a time being. But it will bear much less significance than before, due to the reduced size of the American forces, and general uncertainty of the foreign policy of the United States as a whole.

2. The Syrian government will strike the deal with Kurds which will provide them with some autonomy, even in the military sphere, in exchange for co-operation against Turkey. This agreement will last for some time, as it is convenient for both sides.

3. The government in Damascus will gain control, at least in military terms, over vast swaths of territory until now uncontrolled by it. The SAA will entrench against the Turkish forces with some co-operation of the Kurdish forces.

4. In a medium-term perspective, only small enclaves held by the Americans and Turkey-occupied positions in northern Syria will remain out of Damascus's rule, as Idlib will be slowly but surely overtaken by emboldened SAA with reluctant help from Russians.

5. The Turkish forces will remain in northern Syria for the foreseeable future, but Ankara will be weakened as a player on the Syrian stage. The truce with Kurds, until now facilitated by the Americans, will be over, and we will probably witness ongoing skirmishes along the border which will have a potential to spill over into Turkey. The expected relocation of the Syrian refugees from Turkey to the occupied territories will be a humanitarian disaster what will further diminish Ankara's international position and will not solve any of the internal problems. All in all, the 2019 Turkish invasion of Syria will turn completely fruitless and in fact counterproductive for this country.

6. The Islamic State had been [expected](#) to grow back again even before the Turkish operation kicked off. Now it is obvious that it will resurrect, as the current fight against it [was jeopardized](#) by the Turkish invasion. Even if the ISIS is not going to pose as a great threat as before its activities will be highly destabilizing and will consume a lot of attention of the Syrian government, the Kurdish forces, and probably Russians and Americans, too.

A new balance that will emerge and will probably last for some time will be characterized first and foremost by the strengthening of the Syrian government. It will soon control more than 90 per cent of the Syrian territory, and so the civil war in the country will subside as the last parts of uncontrolled territories will be the American-held enclaves and the Turkish-controlled part of the northern borderland. This way, the main axis of the conflict will shift from the internal struggle for unity between the central government and insurgent forces to the international stage: unified Syria vs. external occupiers, most notably Turks who, by the way, still refuse to recognize the Syrian government run by Bashar Al-Assad.

4. Consequences for Russia – a Brief Assessment

The abovementioned developments in Syria represent a very demanding challenge for the Russian Federation. If our assessment is correct and our predictions turn reality, we will be watching a lot of complications the Russian strategy of perpetuating the frozen conflict will be confronted with. They may be summarized as follows.

1. The changing nature of the conflict from internal power struggle to international row over territories of the sovereign state occupied by other nation-states will stabilize by itself. The Syrian government's legitimization will be much stronger vis-à-vis external aggression than when it was fighting its own populace. It would give Damascus much wider room to manoeuvre on the international political stage, while on the military front the conflict will go to trenches, as neither Damascus nor Moscow would intend to openly confront the U.S. or NATO-member Turkey, at least for a time being.

2. Let us note a very important aspect: the aforementioned stabilization and a kind of “freezing” of the conflict will be achieved largely without Russia. Of course, Moscow will try to facilitate negotiations and will try to play the role of a still relevant intermediary. But if the balance eventually holds for a time being, this will happen by its own characteristic, not thanks to the Russians' activities. Therefore, even if still visible, Russians will not be indispensable to keep up the new balance in Syria, if it emerges.

3. As the hostilities subside to the level of local skirmishes with Turkish-backed militias, ISIS or some other die-hard insurgents, the Russian firepower will no longer be significant. Russians will certainly try to exploit their connection with Turkey to stage some peacekeeping effort

on the Syrian-Turkish border, but the peace will hold anyway because Syrian government will have to accept that it cannot push Turks away. So, the conflict will “freeze”, but without the Russian help.

4. Bashar Al-Assad will never forget Putin that he allowed hated Turks to conquer another part of their country’s territory. The Iranians may also feel side-lined by the “separatist” Russian-Turkish deal. For both countries, it may seem that the Russians have taken the Turkish side at the expense of them – here the value of Russia as a talking-to-all-sides broker diminishes.

All the above-mentioned consequences, along with the more general observations outlined in the introduction to this commentary mean that it will be much more difficult for Russians to retain the level of control over the Syrian government they have had until now. Damascus will gain much more political and military manoeuvre of its own, and Russians will not be able to assist the Syrian government with the problems it is facing now. Assuming that Al-Assad’s main goal is to exert as much power as possible, restore full control over the Syrian territory and reap personal benefit from this for himself and its entourage, the check-list of things-to-do is long:

1. **Economic rebuilding.** This issue is obvious, it has already been mentioned. Above all the Syrian president very badly needs to ease at least some of the grievances of the population, and he has to do it fast.

2. **The Iranian presence.** Although helpful against the insurgency, and possibly with stabilization effort, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps’ heavy presence in Syria is clearly against the basic interest of Damascus. The existence of effectively independent Iranian enclaves in Syria is unbearable for the long-term, as it prevents the government from controlling its own territory. Furthermore, even more important, the Iranian presence in Syria is established in order to create a convenient beachhead against Israel. It means that the clashes of some kind between the Jewish State and Iran are inevitable. This will draw Syria into an unwanted fight with the superior and relentless enemy, who has already undertaken more than [200 airstrikes](#) on the Syrian soil. These attacks not only inflicted a heavy toll on the Iranian contingent but resulted also in significant losses in the Syrian infrastructure and destruction of numerous air defence assets. As long as the Iranians are in Syria, Israel will continue to attack targets there and Syria has no firepower to address this problem. Thus, a possible Iranian-Israeli confrontation on the Syrian territory is a very dangerous prospect. Let us note that the first [reportedly](#) Iranian attacks against the Israeli targets from Syria already occurred in November 2019.

4. **The continued presence of the United States.** Even if diminished, the U.S. presence is important. It must be underlined, among other obvious reasons, that the Americans will probably continue to hold the Syrian oil fields. This deprives Damascus of badly needed resources, which could also be traded abroad for so desperately needed cash.

5. **Terrorist activities of ISIS and other organizations,** matched with the general unstable internal situation of the war-torn country. Even if the main hotspots of civil war, the rebel-held enclaves, are overtaken, the unrest in Syria will surely persist. A full pacification, if possible at all, will require a lot of multifaceted efforts, starting from cash infusions into restive regions, to the use of dominant force of dedicated soldiers to sweep and control areas prone to insurgencies.

6. Last but not least, **the Turkish occupation of northern Syria** is not going to end anytime soon because it is important for Ankara for many [internal reasons](#), of which the issue of Syrian

[refugees](#) is of particularly great importance for the Turkish public. Therefore, the Syrian government will voice its desire to reclaim these territories and will require its allies to help with this process.

None of these problems can Russians help to resolve. Mostly because doing so would need taking sides and this is what the Russians simply cannot do. As we have argued, their position is based on the premise that they can influence all the sides because they have good relations with all of them. But when they, for example, take steps to expel the Iranians from Syria or start shooting at the Israeli aircrafts they will lose the ability to influence these actors. What is more, the task, in both exemplary cases, is too difficult for Russians, they have the power to overcome neither Iranians nor Israelis. The same applies to all the problems that stand before the Syrian government in a relatively new situation at the threshold of 2020.

In summary, as we have already predicted in some of the previous commentaries, Moscow's position in Syria is [poised to diminish](#). Until now, with a very complex setting encompassing many contradicting actors, during extensive fights and in overall unstable environment Russian help has been indispensable, even if limited. Now, the situation has changed quite profoundly, the balance is somewhat simpler and encompasses only the strong actors, who are much less susceptible to the Russian influence and have their own, very important, existential goals which they are not going to trade for anything Moscow can provide them with. Certainly, Russians will remain in Syria as significant actors, but their days of glory as the most important power-broker are over.

It is also worth to notice that the Russian presence in Syria is [increasingly unpopular](#) in Russia. It seems that the legitimization factor of this adventure is running its course, or it has already done just that. For four years we have [argued](#) that, among the other goals, the Russian intervention in Syria was extremely important from the internal point of view. It was supposed to prove that even if the Russian Federation was encircled by enemies staging fierce attacks against the country, the authorities were able to push back and stage spectacular overseas operations. And so, while it is far too early to assess the overall benefits of the Syrian gambit for Russia, it seems that the most important pay-off is waning.

Of course, all of the abovementioned predictions may be invalidated in the coming months, as it is very difficult to assess such complex developments. We would also like to underline, that the perspective of our forecast remains in the timeframe of several months – what will come later on, we dare not to predict.

As a final conclusion, we will, unusually, [quote](#) some brilliant observations of a very experienced and well-informed American expert.

“By reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and saving an old client, Moscow sent a message to other Middle Eastern regimes that it is a reliable partner. Hardly anyone would question that Moscow has positioned itself as an important geopolitical and military actor at the proverbial crossroads of the world following decades of undisputed U.S. military superiority. Russia has positioned itself as a valuable interlocutor to all parties to the region's conflicts.

That said, one of Russia's key accomplishments is also symbolic of the limits of its power and influence in the Middle East. In a region torn by fierce rivalries, the ability to talk to everyone without taking sides has limited utility. Absent major capabilities for power

projection and economic resources, and with its diplomatic capital confined largely to a well-advertised willingness to talk to all parties, Russia's clout is not sufficient to resolve any of the region's myriad problems.

For the United States, Russia's return to the Middle East is important, but hardly a seismic shift. Much of what Russia has accomplished is owed to the United States reconsidering its commitments in the region.”¹

¹ Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 October 2019, p. vi, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/WP-Rumer-MiddleEast.pdf> [accessed 25 November 2019].