

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Re-Ordering of the Middle East

The seven-year civil war in Syria is now an international conflict with proxies of the major powers fighting in a confused mix of alliances with often contradictory goals. It is a re-ordering of the Middle East. Consider this summary from *Wall Street Journal* columnist Yaroslav Trofimov: “The Russia-backed Syrian regime gave free passage through its territory to America-backed Kurdish militias so they could fight against America’s NATO ally Turkey. The Syrian regime at the same time attacked these America-backed Kurdish militias in another part of the country, triggering US strikes that killed more than 100 Syrian troops and a significant number of Russian military contractors. In yet another part of Syria, Turkey threatened to attack American troops embedded with the Kurdish forces, prompting a counter warning of an American military response. Russia, meanwhile, stood by and didn’t use the vaunted S-400 air-defense system it had deployed to Syria as Israeli bombing raids wiped out as much as half of Syria’s own air-defense capabilities. Moscow also remained determinedly silent over the Russian deaths in US strikes . . .” What is occurring in Syria today is a multidimensional conflict that is a fully regional one with all of the Syrian parties acting as a proxy for someone else. It is a volatile and dangerous mess with no clear end in sight. Let’s examine most of the constituent parts of this mess and how it is in effect re-ordering the Middle East.

- First of all, consider the situation from the point of Israel. Israel is trying to navigate a battlefield with a rival state’s army (Syria), “a rival regional superpower (Iran), a global superpower (Russia), super-powered mercenaries and maniacs (Hezbollah and ISIS) and local tribes and sects (Druse and Christians).” As columnist Thomas Friedman argues, “for the last two years 1,500 to 2,000 Iranian advisers operating out of Beirut and Damascus have been directing thousands of Lebanese pro-Iranian Shiite Hezbollah mercenaries, Syrian Army forces funded by Iran and some 10,000 pro-Iranian Shiite mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan—to defeat Sunni Syrian rebels and ISIS in the Syrian civil war.” Israel, Iran and Hezbollah are all stronger than they were in 2006 (the last time Israel and Hezbollah fought a war). But they all know that they have a lot to lose were another such war to occur. But Hezbollah and Iran now basically control the governments of Lebanon and Syria, and, even though they all would avoid war for now, a conflict between these three powers would seem inevitable.
- Second, Iran has been exploiting the Syrian civil war to establish a Shiite crescent that extends from Tehran to the Mediterranean coast. Iran has built up its military assets in Syria that are able to target Israel, all the while sending advanced weaponry to Lebanon by way of Damascus. Consequently, through a series of airstrikes, Israel has sought

successfully for the most part to destroy some of the Iranian hardware in Syria. An “axis of resistance” (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah) is now developing against Israel—an “axis” it has not faced since 1967. Thus, an escalation of this conflict is slowly becoming evident. For example, a few weeks ago, an Iranian reconnaissance drone breached Israeli airspace and was promptly shot down. Then Israel launched a retaliatory strike aimed at the T-4 air base from which the drone was controlled. One of Israel’s attacking jets was hit by a Syrian anti-aircraft missile and crashed in Israel. Israel then further retaliated with a wave of attacks destroying a third of Syrian air-defense batteries and Iranian military targets on Syrian soil. Hence, the war in Syria is now entering a new and possibly more dangerous phase.

- Third is the curious role Russia is playing. An escalating conflict between Israel and Iran will force Putin to choose sides, something he does not want to do. With America somewhat disengaged from direct activity, Putin enjoys the role as an arbiter of Syria’s fate and the overseer of the peace process. But Putin has little control over the actors in this increasingly complex war. Russian sponsored peace talks have failed miserably. There is growing tension between Turkey and Iran, both of whom are basically ignoring Putin’s efforts. Russia achieved a great deal in the Syrian civil war, with just a small commitment of its military forces. It has preserved the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad and gained a coveted military presence in the Middle East—a naval base in the eastern Mediterranean and airbases within Syria. But it now finds itself too weak to effect any reasonable settlement with the major players. Unless it is willing to commit a significant amount of military force and spend large amounts of money, it has little leverage!
- Fourth, each player in this complex war has a different agenda:
 1. Bashar al-Assad seeks to consolidate his control over the country he has destroyed to maintain power.
 2. Iran wants to consolidate its Shiite crescent mentioned above. It now has an enduring military presence just north of Israel and will be able to pose serious existential threats to Israel in the very near future.
 3. Israel has made it quite clear that it is intent on keeping Iran from digging in and also it seeks to limit the ongoing transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.
 4. Russia, to establish a beachhead of influence in the eastern Mediterranean, has been playing off Israel and Iran by allowing each to intervene in Syria. But as mentioned above, it soon may need to choose sides.
 5. Turkey seeks to pursue its own campaign against the Kurds, whom it regards as terrorist tribes seeking to take Turkish territory.
 6. The United States, which, since President Obama, has taken a decidedly back seat in the Syrian civil war, has little influence in this conflict. The current strategy seeks to deny Assad, Russia and Iran the strategic victory of controlling all of Syria. In seeking to deny a solid, definitive military victory to any one of the players, the end goal of the US is a negotiated peace that allows self-governing enclaves in Syria. Can this be accomplished without further military intervention? At the present, the US goal seems overly ambitious and doubtful at best.

- Finally, as David Halbfinger suggests, there are several important preliminary conclusions we can draw from the Syrian civil war as it stands early in 2018:
 1. It seems reasonable to conclude that the civil war may be winding down, but the conflict is far from over. In fact, this may be the beginning of a much broader and far-reaching conflict for a position of dominance in the Middle East.
 2. Israel on its own may not be able to stop Iran. The issue is the apparent goal of Iran to build a sizable conventional military force in Syria. For Iran to realize and consolidate its goal of a Shiite crescent, they will not be happy with a mere Assad victory in Syria. It is obvious they want much more than that—and that is not in the best interests of Israel.
 3. The United States is disengaged from this larger conflict and all of its ramifications detailed in this *Perspective*. Its focus has been on defeating ISIS, which it has done with the strategic help of the Kurds. Although the US continues to offer verbal support for the integrity of Israel, it has offered absolutely no help with Iran, its proxies or the Syrian regime. Since the presidency of Barack Obama, the US has completely disengaged from the Middle East. It has shown no real interest in stopping the expansion of Iran or Russia into this part of the region. It will be Israel that will potentially suffer the most because of this disengagement.
 4. The role of Russia remains an enigma. Russia has succeeded in preserving the Assad regime and it has paid very little for this in military loss or in loss of its image. In fact, the case could be made that Russia's image has been enhanced by what it has done in Syria. But is it in Putin's interests to have Iran increasingly dominate more and more of Syria and play a more strategic role in shaping the future of this part of the Middle East? Putin will need to choose whether he will continue to remain neutral in the conflict between Israel and Iran. But this does not seem realistic—and choosing to side with Iran seems more logical than choosing to support Israel.
 5. Israel's image of being invincible—an image it has cultivated since 1967—is going to be tested like it has not been tested in decades. That it lost an F-16 to an anti-aircraft missile is troubling. Its dominance of airspace is now being challenged.

The Syrian civil war has resulted in a re-ordering of the Middle East. Because of US disengagement, Iran and Russia have moved in to fill that vacuum. These two developments alone are of momentous importance for the future. And it would seem reasonable that over the next few years (or even less) Israel's seeming invincibility will be tested. As with so many developments in history, the unintended consequences are often far more consequential than the immediate results of a conflict. For those of us who know the Lord and know of His promises, our faith, trust and confidence must be centered in Him. He is the Sovereign Lord of history and He is in control of the future (see Daniel 4:17, 25).

See *The Economist* (17 February 2018), pp. 14 and 42; Tony Badran and Jonathan Schanzer in the *New York Times* (12 February 2018); Tom Friedman in the *New York Times* (31 January 2018); Yaroslav Trofimov in the *Wall Street Journal* (16 February 2018); David M. Halbfinger in the *New York Times* (12 February 2018).