



Sidelining Asad: Questioning the Future of Russian-Iranian-Turkish Convergence in Syria

Imad K. Harb

December 27, 2016

The battle of Aleppo has finally been decided in favor of the Syrian regime and its Russian, Iranian, and militia cohorts. But for all intents and purposes, the Syrian war and its attendant political, economic, and social repercussions have barely ended. Indeed, it will be long before the barbaric bombardment of Aleppo and the displacement of its people are forgotten and a semblance of a peaceful Syria emerges, let alone thrives, as a democratic entity that repatriates its internally displaced and externally expelled population. Furthermore, what the post-Aleppo interregnum appears to augur is Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's ceding much sovereignty and decision-making for his country to the competing Russian, Iranian, and Turkish agendas now that his personal survival and rule have been assured.

Following the fall of eastern Aleppo, President Asad vowed to restore his writ to every corner of the country after he declared his intent, a few months ago and under less auspicious circumstances, to hold on to what he deemed a "useful Syria." Whether his pledge to reestablish his ruthless regime control over the entire Syrian landscape is possible, or probable, depends on a set of conditions and calculations regarding balances of forces and capabilities. But what will likely have a decisive impact is the degree of potential convergence between what Russia seeks to accomplish in the Middle East, Iran attempts to secure for its regional hegemonic design, and Turkey needs to preserve in northern Syria.

The Period Ahead

The regime's and its allies' jubilation and self-congratulation over conquering the eastern part of Aleppo portend renewed efforts to reclaim such areas as Idlib province to the west, the environs of Hama, Homs, and Damascus, and the southern province of Deraa where the last military action in 2015 saw some rebel victories that hardly changed the face of the war, in a strategic sense. However, Asad will conduct no serious operations against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the northwest since, first, his regime is interested solely in defeating its presently disorganized and disoriented political opposition and, second, it sees that the local, regional, and international forces are doing that job anyway.

But the purported start of the new push against the rebel areas may require overcoming a set of conditions hobbling the tripartite Syrian-Iranian-Russian relationship. Importantly and essentially, the Syrian regime may not be able to escape the structural and real defects of its armed forces such as force depletion, exhaustion, bad leadership and tactics, and sapped morale, to name a few.

Having so far relied on Iranian soldiers and advisors, Hezbollah and other Shiite militias from Iraq and South Asia, and Russian air power, the regime will have no choice but to double down on them, further mortgaging Syria's future to the wills of outside actors. It is no wonder that President Asad obsequiously declared a few days ago that the success in Aleppo was as much his government's victory as it was Russia's and Iran's.

Doubts about Convergence

Indeed, the coming period—whether and whenever operations against the rebel enclaves commence—is likely to witness some post-celebration qualms about strategic Russian and Iranian benefits from the joint conquest of Syria's decision-making, as well as deep Turkish involvement. And while Asad pretends to be an equal partner in charting the future of his own country, conditions on the ground and diplomatic maneuverings indicate that the train has already left Damascus on its way to Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara. Last week, the Russian, Iranian, and Turkish foreign ministers met in the Russian capital to announce the beginning of a new phase for Syria, including peace discussions on the future of the country. Russian President Vladimir Putin then announced that serious negotiations will commence in the Kazakh capital Astana in January, and these are in addition to talks the Special United Nations Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura had announced he would hold in Geneva in February.

But aside from serious questions on the conditions under which these talks might or will be held and skepticism from the Syrian opposition and its regional supporters, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council, it is necessary to point to the difficult convergence extant between Russia, Iran, and Turkey on what constitutes a peace process. Further, how will each country achieve its own strategic goals?

For the Russian president, this doubtless is his finest hour since the start of the Syrian civil war. Putin no longer fears being denied his Syrian prize. As he looks out on Russia's strategic landscape, bright spots adorn his view. After his masterful move, the Syrian flatlands have become fully hospitable to his chessboard at the heart of the Middle East; he wasted no time exploiting these gains by announcing the expansion of his naval base at Tartous on the eastern Mediterranean. Putin has just been presented with a new American administration that may not even look his way as he makes his moves from Syria to the Black Sea. His government also just gave a boost to Libyan General Khalifa Haftar, who is angling to supplant the UN-supported Government of National Unity in Tripoli, Libya—and that is after he secured the friendship and allegiance of Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. In Europe, Putin is looking at what many consider to be uncertain developments regarding NATO's strength and unity vis-à-vis his ambitions from the Ukraine to the Baltic region.

But what may now worry him most is the millennial mission of the Iranian zealots conducting the Islamic Republic's policy in Syria. As guns were falling silent in Aleppo, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force Commander, General Qassem Suleimani, was parading

among his soldiers and allied militiamen to mark a territory that his country had just helped “liberate” from fighters and civilians. What actually was remarkable, as Aleppo was seeking respite from bombs and killing, was that Iran aborted at least two ceasefires arranged by Russian forces in order to secure the lifting of similarly sinister sieges on two Shiite villages, Foua and Kefraya. That Iran’s powerful influence can halt Russian plans to alleviate the suffering of Syrian civilians is testament to the degree to which Asad and his regime have become beholden to the Islamic Republic’s strategic thinkers and its reach into—and influence over—Arab Syria. It thus is natural to question whether the battle for Syria and what remains of rebel enclaves has become an Iranian decision or continues to be a Russian or Syrian one. Only time will tell.

But for the time being, many questions arise about how the two equally hegemonic powers will guide their relationship in Syria. To wit, how can Russia’s strategic positioning in Syria and across the Arab world be reconciled with Iran’s push for a condominium from Tehran to the eastern Mediterranean? How can Russia avoid being identified with a sectarian agenda and actor while it is courting the predominantly Sunni Arab states, especially those of the Gulf Cooperation Council? Will Russia truly accept an Iranian-inspired-cum-directed decision-making process in Damascus akin to the Iranian influence in Baghdad? What will happen if Iran and its Hezbollah creation and ally decide to erect a military front against Israel in the Syrian Golan Heights? Concomitantly, what would Russia’s reaction be if Hezbollah shoots down an Israeli aircraft over Syria? These and other questions cast, at a minimum, an unhealthy shadow of a doubt on the convergence of long-term Russian and Iranian coordination and interests in Syria.

Finally, no look at future developments in Syria can be complete without examining Turkish interests and designs in and for the country. As it becomes clearer that the assassination of Russia’s Ambassador to Ankara, Andrey Karlov, will not have a detrimental impact on Russian-Turkish relations, it is increasingly obvious that the Turkish government is playing a key role of mediation with Syrian opposition groups that are acceptable to Russia. It is arguably equally true that Turkey is attempting to represent the general sentiments and strategic calculations of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the main supporters of crucial fighting formations among the opposition. Moreover, and central to its own national security interests, Turkey’s activism seeks to prevent both the spillover of ISIS-inspired terrorism onto its cities and countryside and the success of Kurdish unification in northern Syria. All these attributes have made Turkey not only the pivotal actor in Syria it has always aspired to be, but also a potential check on Iranian freedom of action in the country.

A new set of questions about this convergence of interests is thus warranted. How can an overarching Russian policy in Syria consolidate Moscow’s plan to make Syria its base of action in the Middle East, while Tehran tries to make decisions in and for Damascus, and Ankara continues to further its myriad interests? How can Russia convince Turkey to accept Iran as a partner when the latter is actively seeking to separate Syria from Ankara’s Sunni alignments? Both the Syrian regime and Iran have objected to direct Turkish intervention in northern Syria, and Iran is simply not comfortable with the Russian-Turkish rapprochement. How thus can Turkey continue to assure its interests in preventing Kurdish independence or self-rule as the Syrian regime and Iran hobble its efforts in northern Syria?

Conclusion

The post-Aleppo Syrian landscape is still evolving and unstable. Given the current circumstances, so far the Russian-Iranian cooperation has been able to assure a necessary lifeline for Bashar al-Asad's brutal rule over a devastated Syria. But beyond that, there are no guarantees that different ambitions and agendas will not erode whatever temporary convergence there exists between Moscow and Tehran. That Turkey is playing a pivotal role in arranging future Syrian developments only adds to the ambiguity of a possible final deal. In the meantime, millions of Syrians wait as other countries debate their future and fate.