

No.20

September 2021

Syria: What's Next?

SAM Papers



stratejik arařtırmalar merkezi
center for strategic research

Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dıřıřleri Bakanlıęı
Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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No.20

September 2021

SAM Papers

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Syria: What's Next?

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There has been a critical decrease in the number of conflicts in Syria since the beginning of 2020. The main reason for this is that the internal and external actors involved in the civil war have reached their natural borders within the country. After this stage, any new military step in Syria will go beyond being a struggle between local actors, entailing the risk of interstate conflicts. Such a scenario would increase the costs of war and force the parties into large-scale military operations. As a result, Syria now seems to be divided into spheres of influence. Regions held by the Syria regime are under Russian and Iranian protection, opposition-held areas are under Turkish influence and SDF/YPG-held regions are under U.S. protection.

Although a balance has been reached in Syria, a political solution still seems distant. The main reason for this is that some of the internal and external actors, especially the Syria regime, do not want to accept the current distribution of power and ceasefire borders. Therefore, the parties cannot take steps toward changing the status quo on the field and are moving away from a political solution, which is the most crucial reason behind the military and political blockage in Syria. The most critical question in predicting how the deadlock in Syria will be overcome is which actor has the capacity to maintain the current situation and which actor will be exhausted. In light of this situation, projections about prominent issues regarding Syria's future in the near- and medium-term are as follows:

The future and status of the regions outside the authority of Damascus

There are two main areas outside the authority of the Syria regime; these are the areas under the control of the Syrian opposition in the country's northwest and the areas under the SDF/YPG in the northeast. Military and political actors influential in both regions are attempting to play a role in Syria's future through the areas under their control. For its part, the Syria regime wants to end the crisis by making small concessions in the political solution process, and is resorting to diplomatic or military means to regain control of these regions. Therefore, one of the most critical issues in Syria's future is the status of the areas outside the regime's authority.

It is necessary to look at the regions under the control of the Syrian opposition individually. The first of these is Idlib, which is the stronghold of the opposition. The other consists of the zones established by Turkish cross-border military operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring. Several key features distinguish these two regions from each other. Turkey established the operation areas by fighting with terrorist groups ISIS and the YPG/PKK, whereas in Idlib, Turkey entered the regions controlled mainly by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its local ally the Syria National Army (SNA). Although the Turkey-HTS relationship is based on distrust and HTS perceives Turkey's increasing role in Idlib as a threat, it did not attack the Turkish army, as it perceived Turkey's role as a balancing factor against Russia and the Syria regime. As a result, the Turkish army entered Idlib peacefully. This situation had two main consequences. First, Turkey supported the Syrian opposition's establishment of new structures by eliminating the existing political, administrative and security structures in the operation areas. On the other hand, structures created by

Syrian actors in the Idlib region continue to exist, even after Turkey's Spring Shield operation. The second most important difference is that while Turkey strives to limit/eliminate the YPG/PKK threat in the operation areas, it mainly aims to deter the Syria regime, Russia and Iran from Idlib. This difference in aim affects the source and types of threats to these areas. The third most important difference is related to the local dynamics in the two regions. Local armed groups in the operation areas are allied with Turkey, while a considerable number of the military groups in Idlib are affiliated with the SNA, which is close to Turkey. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups are also active in Idlib, albeit few in number.

These differences make it necessary to make separate evaluations regarding the future of Idlib and Turkey's zones of operation. The most likely scenario for Idlib's short and medium-term future is to preserve the status quo. Although the Syria regime and Iran continue their efforts in hopes of taking control of Idlib through military means, the most critical factors that will determine the future of Idlib will be the course of Turkey-Russia relations and Turkey's determination to protect Idlib against the regime. The military capacity that Turkey has built up in Idlib under the current conditions is deterrent enough to maintain the ceasefire borders. Many different factors will shape the future of the Turkey-Russia relationship. However, both actors seem to prefer to strike a certain balance in their relationship in general terms; otherwise, both would face risks in various areas. Accordingly, Russia is not likely to adopt an approach that would threaten Turkey's vital interests in Idlib. On the other hand, attempts by the regime, Iran-backed groups and radical groups in Idlib to break the ceasefire and draw Russia into the conflict will continue. As a result, the existing lines will likely remain in Idlib in the short- and medium-term. Another noteworthy trend in Idlib is the attitude of groups originating from al-Qaeda. These groups are making efforts to disrupt the ceasefire in Idlib, as is the Syria regime. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups

no longer view the regime and Russia and Iran-backed groups as the main threat, but instead focus on Turkey, which they think is challenging their own authority. Therefore, the attacks of these groups against the Turkish Armed Forces in Idlib are expected to continue and increase.

Looking at Turkey's operation areas, there are several challenges. Security in these areas has not yet been fully ensured. The sources of this insecurity are the terrorist acts of the YPG and ISIS and the occasional Russian airstrikes. Both trends are expected to continue in the upcoming period. Turkey's operation areas are surrounded by settlements controlled by the YPG, and by some areas where the regime and Iranian-backed militia groups have a significant presence; thus, these security threats will continue until the YPG presence in Tal Rifat, Manbij and the areas east of the Euphrates ends. On the other hand, Russia can send a message to Turkey through the operation areas regarding the problems it has with Turkey in Idlib or outside Syria. Turkey and Russia have developed a relationship in which cooperation and competition are intertwined, as is the case in Syria, Libya, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. Therefore, possible conflicts between them will be reflected in Russian airstrikes on the operation areas in Syria.

The second area outside the authority of Damascus consists of the U.S.-protected SDF/YPG regions in northeastern Syria. One of the top priorities of the U.S. in Syria is to ensure that these regions east of the Euphrates be given political status. To achieve this goal, the U.S. will maintain its limited but deterrent military presence in the east of the Euphrates, increase its economic pressure on Damascus, continue its efforts to isolate the YPG from the PKK and unite the "Syrian Kurds" under one banner and lastly, US will seek a way to deal with Russia and Iran. One of the most critical aspects of the U.S. efforts is establishing unity between the YPG/PYD and the "Syrian Kurdish National Council" (SNC), the un-

rella organization of the Syrian Kurdish parties. In this way, the U.S. wants to legitimize the YPG/PYD under the umbrella of the “Syrian Kurds” and eliminate Turkey’s objections about YPG. Although the U.S. tries to give legitimacy to the YPG/PYD through the SNC, it is more likely that the SNC will lose legitimacy in Turkey’s eyes.

The future of efforts to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis

Efforts to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis continue on different platforms. These are the Geneva process, the Astana process and the Constitutional Committee meetings held in connection with the two processes. The Geneva and Astana processes are distinguished from each other by some basic features. While the Geneva process is a platform with broader participation, the Astana process was initiated under the auspices of Turkey, Russia and Iran. The second significant difference is that the Geneva process is oriented toward a diplomatic solution, while the Astana process focuses on military developments on the ground. Although many decisions have been taken in the Geneva process, they could not be implemented, while the decisions taken in Astana would critically affect the course of the Syrian crisis, having concrete results on the ground. Today, we can say that the spheres of influence and ceasefire lines formed in Syria were mainly established thanks to the decisions taken in Astana. Astana was not limited to the military field, as these decisions would lay the groundwork for a political solution. The foundations of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which is responsible for writing the new Constitution that will shape the future of Syria, were laid in the Astana process. Although the Astana process has had a critical impact on the reso-

lution of the Syrian crisis, however, the final political solution will fall within the scope of the more inclusive Geneva process. In this framework, the Constitutional Committee holds its meetings under the auspices of the Geneva process. The Committee, consisting of representatives from the Syria regime, the opposition and civil society, had held five rounds of meetings as of the last quarter of 2021, but the meetings remained inconclusive. The Syria regime delegation is trying to block the negotiations through methods such as not attending the meetings on time, leaving the meeting room, presenting the main agenda items as a threat to national values and escalating the military tension on the field. Therefore, no consensus has been reached, even on the preliminary principles that will serve as the framework for the new Constitution, let alone its contents.

The main reason for the lack of progress in the efforts to achieve a political solution to the crisis is the Syria regime's unwillingness to reach a political solution based on the current distribution of power. For this reason, the regime is likely to prioritize moves aimed at changing the balance on the field in the coming period. Accordingly, the Syria regime will continue to try to stall the political solution processes. Another obstacle to a political solution is the efforts of the U.S. and some European countries to include the PYD in the political solution under the umbrella of the "Syrian Kurds." While Russia will be closer to the U.S. on this issue, Turkey will undoubtedly object to such efforts.

Problems in the regime-held regions

The regime-controlled areas are witnessing dire economic and living conditions never-before-seen in Syria, even at the height of the battles against the opposition forces. The reasons behind this calamity is the financial crisis in Lebanon and the inability of Syrian companies to access their balances in Lebanese banks, which amount to about 20–30 billion dollars, according to Bashar al-Assad. Syria's funds were frozen due to the restrictions imposed by banks, low levels of local production and currency depreciation. One of the most critical aspects of this crisis is the oil and gas shortage, which has led to long queues in front of gas stations. At the roots of the crisis lies the regime's loss of control over the oil fields to the SDF/YPG in northeastern Syria. While the production in the areas under the regime's control is about 120 thousand barrels per day, the daily need is about 350 thousand barrels. The regime has thus had to buy oil from the SDF through an intermediary, al-Qatirji—a U.S. and EU-sanctioned company. The regime also relies on 2-3 million barrels sent by Iran to the regime every 3 months to meet its daily oil demand. The shipments are transported via oil tankers that are often confiscated, as was the case in Gibraltar in 2019 or when Israel attacked tankers in the Red Sea. The shortage has been exacerbated by increased demand, frequent power cuts and the low production rates of old oil refineries. This crisis has forced the regime to legalize the sale of fuel to citizens through the smart card, which is run by the Takamul Company owned by Asma al-Assad's cousin. This has fostered the black market and smuggling activities from Lebanon, mainly due to citizens' need for diesel to generate electricity.

The bread and wheat crisis poses another significant challenge and is considered a red line for Syria's citizens. This situation has been made worse by the increase in food prices and the devaluation of the Syrian pound. The Syrian family's daily bread consump-

tion has increased, as long bread queues emerged following the introduction of the smart card. The crisis was caused by a continuous decline in overall wheat production in Syria, mainly due to drought and the regime's loss of control over governorates such as Deir ez-Zor, Hasaka, Raqqa and Aleppo, where most of the country's wheat is produced, to the SDF/YPG and the Syrian National Army. The SDF/YPG also prevents farmers from selling wheat outside their areas of control. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's decision first to stop selling wheat and then to add an export tax led to a global rise in the price of wheat, which put significant pressure on the crumbling government budget. Therefore, the regime resorted to raising the price of bread and linking it to the smart card to reduce consumption, which exacerbated the bread crisis and the problem of long queues. It also contributed significantly to increasing the activity of the black market, as the price of bread reached double the official price. The regime is unable to address these crises in the way the population wants; its only recourse is to raise prices and increase dependence on the smart card and bread distributors linked to war merchants and militias. Its incapacity to provide a working solution will undoubtedly cause more disturbance among the Syrian people, especially in rural areas where obtaining bread is getting more difficult every day.

The sanctions imposed by the U.S. as per Caesar's Law and the economic crisis in Lebanon have also contributed to deepening the country's financial crisis, which can otherwise be explained mainly by internal dynamics. The U.S. wants to force the regime to find a political solution by imposing economic pressure on Damascus. Financial pressure is unlikely to be effective unless it poses a direct security problem for Damascus; however, due to the economic crisis, security problems and civilian demonstrations have begun to take place in the provinces in the south of Syria, especially in Daraa. If this trend continues and becomes widespread, it could break the Syria regime's resistance to a political solution.

Another trend related to the economic crisis in the regime-held regions is the instability in the country's southern provinces, especially Daraa. Since 2021, south Syria has witnessed several important events with local and regional implications. At the beginning of 2021, the Iran-backed Fourth Division began expanding toward southern Syria in violation of the reconciliation agreements, forcing some residents to leave their settlements in rural Daraa. More regime forces entered into towns in the area, and military points belonging to the Fourth Division were established. The most prominent example of this expansion is the regime forces' attempt to enter the Daraa al-Balad area. Daraa al-Balad is one of the largest neighborhoods in the city of Daraa, and is still under the control of the former opposition forces in accordance with the reconciliation agreement reached in the summer of 2018. The presence of the regime forces is limited to a military checkpoint and police forces. However, people refused to hold presidential elections in the entire Daraa governorate and the Daraa Al-Balad region in particular, with demonstrations taking place against the regime. Iran-backed forces aimed to enter the area to set up military points near the border with Jordan and the Nassib border crossing; these events prompted regime forces to close all entrances and exits to Daraa al-Balad, similar to what had occurred at the beginning of the popular uprising against the regime in 2011. The siege continued for more than a month before the forces of the Fourth Division attempted to storm the area with bombing attacks. The people responded by attacking the regime forces in more than 40 sites across the province and capturing about 80 soldiers.

Russia tried to deescalate the tensions and find a consensus within the Central Committee of Daraa Governorate, which includes notables from the province and leaders of the former opposition factions. The military operations in Daraa may herald the complete collapse of the settlement agreement in the governorate,

which has witnessed about 1,000 assassinations since the summer of 2018. The majority of the victims were former fighters in the armed opposition who later joined the regime forces. On the other hand, the regime forces worked jointly with the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps, formed by former opposition fighters who fought against ISIS in the Syrian Badia. However, the Brigade fighters later withdrew, protesting the regime forces' lack of confidence. ISIS cell terror attacks and Israeli attacks against Iran-backed militias in southern Syria through raids and bombings also contribute to the insecurity in south Syria.

The most important result of the developments in Daraa is that the regime has shown it will be unable to provide security, stability or prosperity in these regions, even if it takes the opposition-held regions under control. The process has revealed that the Syria regime cannot provide stability in a densely populated and militarized region like Idlib, in an environment where even Daraa cannot be taken under full control. This will weaken the possibility of a large-scale operation against Idlib. The second implication of the Daraa events is that the military forces of the Syria regime are extremely weak without Russian support, meaning that the Syria regime has almost no chance of winning against the Syrian opposition in Idlib with only the help of Iran.

Another result of the Daraa events is the increased rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria. The Daraa events have shown that Russia does not want Iran to be influential on the southern Syrian front. The two countries' priorities regarding the south of Syria are different. The Syria regime and Iran want absolute control in the south, while Russia wants to reduce tensions in the region and show that it is committed to previous agreements against Israel and the U.S. A similar situation appears to be the case for north-west Syria as well. Therefore, Russia, unlike Iran and the Syria regime, will be more sensitive about adhering to agreements with

Turkey regarding Idlib. In general, the increase in the rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria may provide more space for Turkey to maneuver.

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About SAM

Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (SAM) is a think-tank and a research center which is chartered by law and has been active since May 1995. SAM was established as a consultative body to provide Turkish Foreign Policy decision makers with scholarly and scientific assessments of relevant issues, and reviews Turkish foreign policy with a futuristic perspective.

SAM conducts research, organizes scholarly events relevant to the ever expanding spectrum of Turkish Foreign Policy in cooperation with both Turkish and foreign academicians, its counterparts from around the world as well as various universities and government agencies. SAM provides consultancy to the foreign ministry departments as well as some other state institutions in foreign policy issues while also establishing regional think-tank networks.

In addition to its role of generating up-to-date information, reliable data and insightful analysis as a think-tank, SAM functions as a forum for candid debate and discussion for anyone who is interested in both local and global foreign policy issues. Increasingly, SAM has become a center of attraction since it successfully brings scholars and policy makers together for exchange of ideas in panels, in-house meetings, seminars and training programs for young diplomats.

SAM has a widening range of publications. Along with its traditional publication, Perceptions, which is a quarterly English language journal that hosts distinguished Turkish and international scholars within its pages, SAM has initiated Vision Papers which expresses the views of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and SAM Papers that covers the current debates of foreign policy by various scholars.

With its commitment to contribution to the body of knowledge and constructive debate particularly in Turkish Foreign Policy, SAM will continue to serve as an indispensable think-tank and research center given its role promoting interaction and mutual benefits among the MFA, NGOs, other think-tanks and the broader scientific community and hence strengthen the human and intellectual capital of Turkey.



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