

Syria. The Creeping Partition

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The September crisis over Idlib was brought to a conclusion by the Russian Turkish agreement to create a partially demilitarised border strip. This should have been implemented by 16 October but hasn't.

Idlib

Some armed groups have pulled back their heavy weapons from the 15-20 km wide 250 km long strip but others haven't, while the groups internationally categorised as terrorist, including Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham (HTS), Hurras Ad Deen, and the Turkmenistan militia, have not vacated the area as the Turks promised. Russia was supposed to be allowed into the area to monitor but isn't. In blatant violation of the ceasefire some of the groups are shelling neighbouring government-controlled areas including the outskirts of Aleppo and northern Lattakia.

The Turks claim all is well. The Russians, putting a brave face on a very unsatisfactory situation, call for patience. The reality appears to be that the Russians don't think the Syrian government forces are strong enough to overcome the approximately 90,000 jihadi fighters in Idlib, many dug in in areas of difficult terrain, and all promised air cover by the US if Assad advances.

It has barely been noticed that the US has moved the goalposts on what it gives itself permission to do in Syria. The new US envoy for Syria, James Jeffrey, a former diplomat emerging from that neocon haven, the Washington Institute for the Near East Policy, stated explicitly recently that the US no longer felt itself bound to bomb Syria only if Asad used chemical weapons: henceforth the US would bomb 'if Asad advances. Period'. (In such an eventuality it would be interesting to see how the British government went about following suit, although it is worth noting that its much contested legal opinion which was offered in April (attached) would startlingly licence the government to bomb under any circumstances whatever as long as it claimed to be acting for humanitarian reasons.)

Some claim that the standoff and emergence of an effectively separate entity in the North could force the Syrian government to make concessions at the negotiating table. This is wishful thinking. The Syrian government would never regard recovery of a lost province as a fair price for surrendering power. That being the case what we are witnessing appears to be the beginning of the emergence of a safe haven for terrorists under the guardianship of the Turks and the air umbrella of the Western powers: a replay of US/Saudi support for the Taliban in the days when removing the Russians from Afghanistan seemed like a good idea.

The North East

The dismemberment of Syria continues also in the North East (Al Hasakeh province and part of Deir Ez Zor province) which is under the joint control of the Kurdish-dominated SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) and the US. Here too the US recently moved the goalposts virtually unnoticed, Secretary of Defence Mattis declaring that the purpose of the US forces' presence was to combat Iran, which has no presence whatever in the North East. The US barely even pretends now that the purpose is to defeat the lingering remnants of ISIS, a task which the Syrian forces could handle easily if they were allowed to enter the parts of Deir Ez Zor and Hasakeh provinces where ISIS lurks effectively under US protection. The US plan appears to be to condition the withdrawal of the US presence on the withdrawal of that of the limited number of Iranian military advisers in Syria and of the rather larger number of Iranian-funded militia forces, considered essential to its security by the Syrian government. As many have pointed out this is a recipe for another open-ended US commitment to a military presence in the Middle East.

When the US-led coalition does move against ISIS remnants it is careless of civilian casualties: 62 civilians were killed this week in an air strike on two villages in Deir Ez Zor. This being the conveniently anonymous 'coalition' we have no way of knowing if the RAF was involved.

Hopes had been aroused that the US might pull out because of the costliness of propping up local civilian services, which for Trump is anathema. The arrival of 100 million dollars from Saudi Arabia in the Pentagon's bank account last week (totally unconnected of course with the current predicament of Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman) may have upset the Turks, unhappy to see another Kurdish statelet emerging, but it has eased the financial burden of de facto US occupation.

Al Tanf

The US had given some hints that it might be willing to draw back from the Al Tanf enclave it controls with UK military support near the apex of the Syrian, Jordanian and Iraqi borders. Displaced persons started to go home from the jihadi-infested Rukban camp which lies within the Al Tanf perimeter. The Syrian government is offering to facilitate more returns but will not acquiesce in US control over sovereign Syrian territory. Hopes of US departure appear to have been dashed, however, as it becomes clearer that the new US strategy for Syria requires the US to keep all its assets in Syria, however vulnerable they would be in the event of major conflict, and however much they complicate the humanitarian situation, as potential bargaining chips to force the Syrian government to make concessions in terms of relinquishing Iranian military protection, preparatory to a reinvigorated Geneva negotiating process with a weakened Asad which would deliver the yearned for 'transition' away from him.

Return of refugees and reconstruction

With most territory clawed back and fighting now virtually on pause, the Syrian government is working hard to resettle the internally displaced and encourage the return of refugees. Syria's enemies have discouraged return but many Syrians have voted with their feet: 50,000 have already returned from Lebanon in 2018. Much has been made by those enemies of Law 10 which required property owners to register their claims, an essential step before large scale reconstruction of heavily damaged districts could proceed and new housing be allocated. This was disingenuously portrayed as a land grab by the government.

Reports suggest that registration has been put on hold.

Funds for reconstruction remain elusive. The Western powers continue to block any international development assistance as long as the holy grail of 'transition' has not been attained.

Meanwhile ordinary Syrians continue to groan under the handicaps of sanctions and government red tape.

Israel

Israel's mis- step in causing the shooting down of a Russian plane has been heavily punished. Syria has now taken delivery of several Russian S-300 anti-aircraft systems, as well as aircraft communication jamming equipment. As a result Israel, which carried out over 200 air raids on Syria before the incident, has not carried out a single one since, possibly pending delivery by the US of more stealth fighter bombers. The US has categorised Russia's delivery of the new (defensive) systems as 'destabilising'

Farewell Staffan de Mistura

The UN envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has announced his intention to step down in November, citing 'personal reasons'. His great achievement in the eyes of Western powers was to keep the Geneva process alive when it was clearly moribund. Without Geneva they would lose the commitment to 'transition' which Russia conceded in a moment of great weakness in 2014. The Geneva process has been void of significance, however, for years. The besuited opposition representatives who attend the Geneva discussions are transparently stooges of the Western and Gulf powers and have absolutely no influence over the Islamist battalions, who have not the slightest interest in the refining the constitution or sharing power and who listen only to Turkey, which controls their logistics. The only meaningful negotiation takes place between Turkey and Russia.

White Helmets

The government declined to answer Baroness Cox's parliamentary question as to their plans for receiving White Helmets who fled Syria via Israel in July, citing the protection needs of this particularly 'vulnerable' category of refugee, only to leak details via the Daily Telegraph a few days later. It transpires that the country can look forward to receiving 28 of these 'heroes' with their families. Meanwhile a White Helmets local leader who remained behind, giving the lie to those who claimed they would all be rounded up, told a Western journalist that half of the evacuees were not White Helmets at all but jihadis masquerading as such.

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Peter Ford was a British Ambassador to Syria; he is now an important, independent commentator on the dirty war.

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