

# After Aleppo: The Long Game in Syria

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**ABSTRACT** *In the aftermath of the victory by pro-Syrian government forces in Aleppo in December 2016, many see an opportunity for a political resolution to the Syrian civil war. Although Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the time being seems to have secured his position in power, there remains much work to be done in order to bring Syria back to life again after the deep level of disruption and destruction. No less work is needed to create a vision for the future of Syria that will appeal to a critical mass of Syrian opposition elements and pro-Syrian government constituencies. This essay details how far Syria has to travel in terms of becoming a functioning state again as well as potential options for a workable and sustainable political system into the future.*

In an interview with French media published in early January, following his government's forces re-taking of east Aleppo from opposition elements, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stated that this success signaled a "tipping point in the course of the war" and that his government was "on the way to victory."

But what is "victory"? Is it merely staying in power and holding onto what many have called "useful Syria," i.e. the line of cities from Aleppo in the north down through Hama, Homs, and Damascus along with the Syrian Mediterranean coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus? From this position, the Syrian regime might then

hope to gradually take over other parts of the country, the majority of which, territorially speaking, is still held by the ISIS, the YPG, and some remaining Syrian opposition armed groups. The idea might be that Assad's Russian allies as well as the U.S.-led coalition will continue to whittle down the ISIS, eventually liberating Raqqa itself, the ISIS' *de facto* capital. The YPG might then be boxed in and prevented from expanding beyond the territory it already controls in northern and northeastern Syria by a combination of Syrian government forces south of YPG territory, and by the Turks, whose recent rapprochement with Moscow may sacrifice the YPG on the altar of Ankara's grudg-

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Key actors and powerbrokers –Russia, Turkey and Iran– brought the warring sides (representatives of the Assad regime and the opposition groups) together in Astana to discuss the Syrian crisis on February 16, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / STANISLAV FILIPPOV

ing acceptance of Assad’s continuation in power, as well as its diminished support for Syrian opposition groups. With the takeover of Aleppo, along with the tenuous cessation of hostilities negotiated by Russia, Turkey, and Iran this past December, it is certainly more than likely that Bashar al-Assad and the regime he oversees will continue to govern Syria into the foreseeable future.

But then what? Even under this rosiest of scenarios from the point of view of Damascus, without true political restructuring combined with a comprehensive rebuilding effort, such a “victory” might only be a stay of execution from the inevitable. Indeed, true political reform may be the only thing that opens the spigot of international largesse that will be necessary to rebuild Syria. Without these things, Syria may become a state such as Somalia, where the central government may reign but doesn’t really rule. The Syrian government may have a representative to the United Nations and embassies in some countries; it may stamp passports and print currency, but little else. This is hardly a state. Under these conditions, regional powers will continue

to interfere in various parts of Syria, essentially dividing it into spheres of influence that will result in a barely functioning, patchwork state that remains a source of instability in the heartland of the Middle East.

## The Challenges

The challenges facing the Syrian government moving forward are staggering. Even though the following statistics are estimates, they will, if anything, only get worse with the continuing matrix of wars in the country.<sup>1</sup> More than 80 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line. According to a 2016 report, nearly 70 percent of Syrians live in extreme poverty, meaning they cannot secure their basic needs. The unemployment rate is close to 58 percent, with a significant number of those employed (at least a third according to UN officials) working in the war economy as smugglers, fighters, or arms dealers, etc. Those invested in the war economy, who exist on all sides of the conflict, are going to be difficult to pry away from their current careers toward something more productive and peaceful.

Life expectancy has dropped by twenty years since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011. About half of school-age children no longer attend school – a lost generation in the making. The country has become a public health nightmare. Diseases formerly under control, such as typhoid, tuberculosis, Hepatitis A and cholera, are once again endemic. And polio, previously eradicated in Syria, has been reintroduced, probably by fighters imported from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Upward of 500,000 Syrians have been killed in the war, and an untold number of Syrians have died indirectly from the conflict, such as those who could not receive kidney dialysis because the hospitals have been destroyed, those who needed vital medicines that were unavailable, those who required immediate medical treatment but could not get it because there were no doctors, etc. Syrians' nutritional intake, even beyond the hunger, has dropped dramatically, resulting overall in a much less healthy population susceptible to more disease and grave illness. With more than two million injured, about 11.5 percent of the prewar population has become casualties. And close to half the population of Syria is either internally or externally displaced. A 2015 survey conducted by the United Nations refugee agency looking at Syrian refugees in Greece found that a large number of adults (86 percent) had secondary or university education. Most of them were under 35 years old. If this is the case, it indicates that Syria is losing the very peo-

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The cost of reconstruction will be enormous. A March 2016 study estimated that the total economic loss as a result of the conflict was \$275 billion, and the bill is only rising. Productive capacity has dropped precipitously, mainly as a result of the destruction of industrial plants and equipment. Added onto this is the destruction of the country's infrastructure –highways, bridges, etc. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the cost of needed repairs to the infrastructure of Syria will be anywhere between \$80 and \$200 billion. The regime is cash-strapped and resource poor. Even if the international community was uncharacteristically generous after the economic crash of 2007-2008, most of it will

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be unwilling to reward Mr. Assad by helping him rebuild and solidify his regime without significant reforms that probably would be seen by Damascus as undercutting the power of the regime and its ability to rebuild. And Damascus will need this international support because its primary allies, Russia and Iran, have their own economic woes.

The Syrian regime, in order to survive, has had to rely to an extraordinary degree on Russian and Iranian forces, and their proxies, such as Hezbollah. It really wasn't the Syrian Arab Army that retook Aleppo. Indeed, the Syrian military was (and is) stretched so thin by geography and attrition that this past December it lost most of the city of Palmyra (again) to the ISIS while pro-government forces were shifted to the north to take the fight to Aleppo. And although Assad still maintains some independence due to his utility, Moscow and Teheran, and even Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, will have much to say in Da-

mascus moving forward. Assad will have to at least listen.

Finally, the battle is, in reality, far from over. Neither Assad's forces nor the rebels he is fighting have achieved their goals. The opposition can no longer overthrow the regime, certainly not in the way they had at first intended. At the same time, an active insurgency by at least some armed opposition elements is all but assured, backed by regional patrons, such as Saudi Arabia, which in no way wants to see its rival, Iran, sail toward complete victory without headwinds. And by their very nature, insurgencies require much less support than opposition forces trying to hold and govern territory. Assad would then see what former United Nations Syria envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has called the "Somalization" of Syria.

And how will Assad rule the rump state? Pre-existing patronage networks have been shattered and replaced by semi-independent warlords, militias, or local governing bodies. This is even the case in government-controlled areas, where pro-regime militias and gangs who remained loyal to the regime will expect their just rewards. In my opinion, the Syrian leadership grossly underestimates how far the Syria population as a whole has moved away from it. Syrians by and large have for years now been empowered by living, surviving, and governing on their own. It is an utter delusion if the regime thinks it can return to anything close to the pre-war *status quo*.



Bana Alabed, 7 year-old Syrian girl who brought the plight of Aleppo's victims to the world's attention through her Twitter posts, meets with President Erdoğan in Ankara after she escaped under an evacuation program.

AA PHOTO /  
KAYHAN ÖZER

## A Vision for the Future?

It is not the purpose of this essay to examine and/or predict the outcome of the ongoing political negotiations between the Syrian government and Syrian opposition groups that were organized by Russia, Iran, and Turkey and initiated in late January in Astana, Kazakhstan. They may or may not continue, either with or without the direct involvement of the United Nations (or even the United States). As with previous diplomatic attempts, this one will most likely fail. However, because it is clear the Syrian regime, with the strong support of Russia and Iran, is here to stay in the near term, and that Assad will likely remain president through to the end of his current seven-year term in 2021, conditions for at least a partial negotiated settlement are more favorable

today than they were before the fall of Aleppo. At some point there will be a political settlement. The cast of characters sitting around the negotiating table may change, but the challenges will remain. Will a negotiated settlement be enough to stabilize Syria and put it on a footing to rebuild physically and, maybe even more importantly, emotionally? When all is said and done, there has to be a mutually agreed upon vision for the future of Syria that functions as an incentive for reconciliation, reconstruction, and repatriation. Such a vision must be the basis for a settlement, even if it is an amorphous vision of the future that needs to be refined by Syrians themselves over time. This is particularly the case in terms of governance.

I have long believed that the key to ending the war with a viable politi-

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cal settlement is finding an answer to the following question: Can the Syrian government give up enough power, constitutionally encoded and without caveats, to satisfy at least the minimum demands of a critical mass of the opposition who, as mentioned earlier, have become empowered by living for years without the state? This is, in essence, an equation, and like most equations, it can be solved. The primary obstacles to doing so are that both sides of the equation are deeply flawed, complicated by the multiple external patrons with their own agendas for resolving the conflict in a way that is to their own particular advantage. It has, therefore, been difficult, if not impossible, when combined with the shifting sands of war, to find an equilibrium that could lead to conflict resolution. But when that day comes – and it will come – what are the possible options for governance that not only generate incentives to enter into an agreement, but also provide a sustainable settlement that acts as a foundation to build a new Syria, rather than a prison to encase the country's existing fissures and fault lines?

Most representatives interested in a political settlement, on both the gov-

ernment and opposition sides, have talked about the possibility, if not the need, for some sort of decentralized political system moving forward.<sup>2</sup> Such is the politicization of the Syrian diplomatic environment that even the word “decentralization” in some quarters is held in disdain because it equates to spheres of influence by outside powers rather than producing an independent Syrian state. However, for our purposes the terms decentralization, centralized, federal, or unitary are simply references to types of governance and not to any sort of political environment that does or does not facilitate so-called spheres of influence. In any event, it is ultimately more important to define the details of how power will be divided and implemented than to decide on the name to be attached to the structure.

There are three types of governmental powers that can be decentralized: executive and legislative; administrative; and fiscal. For example, the state functions to be allocated include division of economic power (revenues, resources, etc.), public services (health, education, etc.), protection of identity-based rights, division of policing, security, and military power, and matters of organization and staffing. There are a number of alternatives regarding how to divide power at the national, provincial, and local levels within the state, but most of them are variations of the following four models: (A) centralized unitary state with administrative decentralization; (B) decentralized unitary or federal state with administrative and political de-



Buses are seen during an evacuation operation of rebel fighters and their families from rebel-held neighbourhoods in the embattled city of Aleppo on December 15, 2016.

AFP PHOTO / KARAM AL-MASRI

centralization; (C) decentralized unitary or federal state with asymmetric decentralization; and (D) highly decentralized federation of regions. None of these models are something that can or should be imposed from the outside, as these options should be developed in consultations with Syrians and based upon existing arrangements, such as the 1950 and 1973 Constitutions, the 2012 Constitution, Local Administrative Law 107, and Syrian Interim Government (in opposition controlled areas) laws and administration. Having said this, there are certainly examples of each model that more or less exist in other countries around the globe that can be instructive.

A) The advantages of a centralized unitary state with administrative decentralization are the following:<sup>3</sup>

1. Strong national government could minimize fragmentation
2. Strong national government could effectively oversee reconstruction and development
3. Administration decentralization could result in more responsive governance by bringing services closer to the people and allowing governorates to tailor implementation to their specific needs
4. Similarity to existing (or pre-uprising) system could entail fewer costs resulting from changes
5. Centralized governance could foster development of a national identity

Some of the disadvantages include:

1. Centralized governance could distance decision making from the people
2. Centralized governance could in-

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adequately respond to demands for local autonomy

3. National government's ability to re-trench and take back powers could create tension
- 4) Similarity to existing system could limit this model's attractiveness, especially by opposition elements
5. Would require dramatic changes to the current fragmented situation on the ground and may be less feasible in the near-term

B) The advantages of a decentralized unitary or federal state with administrative and political decentralization:

1. Political decentralization could bring decision making closer to the people
2. Political decentralization could respond to demands for local autonomy
3. Political decentralization could allow different geographic areas to set their own policies

Disadvantages:

1. Lack of capacity could prevent some governorates from fulfilling their responsibilities
2. Greater autonomy for governorates could increase tension around determining their borders

3. Negotiating a division of powers could be difficult in the current context

C) The advantages of a decentralized unitary or federal state with asymmetric decentralization:

1. Allowing areas to retain their current de facto level of autonomy could avoid partition
2. Ability of governorates to form regions could allow the system to evolve gradually
3. Asymmetric decentralization (à la Iraq with the Kurdistan Regional Governorate) could respond to differing capacities
4. Asymmetric decentralization could respond to differing interests

Disadvantages:

1. Additional layers of government would increase complexity and cost
2. Increased autonomy for certain regions could foster fears of secession
3. Decentralization of some powers to regions could create tension with the national government
4. Greater regional control over resources could exacerbate inequalities
5. Regional governments could themselves become overly centralized

D) The advantages of a highly decentralized federation of regions are the following:

1. Building from the bottom up could be more feasible in the current context, especially in an interim or transition phase
2. Existing arrangements could pro-

vide a basis for local-level structures

3. Significant regional powers and resources could respond to demands for local autonomy

Disadvantages:

1. Lack of clear existing regions could exacerbate conflict and tension
2. Regional governments may not be legitimate or accommodating
3. Forming a highly decentralized structure could further undermine national unity and lead to claims for secession
4. Autonomous regions could be susceptible to outside influence
5. Lack of a strong national government could lead to uncoordinated and inequitable development without contingency planning

It is also important to note that these models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The implementation of one could evolve into another. For instance, decentralized administrative powers could be implemented on the basis of Administrative Law 107. Passed by the Syrian government in 2012, it lays out the contours of administrative decentralization in the provinces and districts. Critics of the law primarily focus on its lack of implementation by the Syrian government rather than shortcomings of its substance. However, if properly deployed, it could over time lead to a decentralization of political powers. In another example, asymmetric decentralization could be a first step toward broader political decentralization across the country, and so on and so forth.

## Conclusion

These are the types of ideas that are being discussed in some circles, and should continue to be discussed by the Syrian parties themselves, if there is the interest and willpower to do so. Again, political and military conditions have to be properly balanced in order to make any attempt at a political settlement halfway viable. We may be approaching that point. But these are the issues that need to be debated among and between Syrian constituencies if only, for starters, as incentive to engage in a process, much less successfully implement anything that may emerge from it.

Perhaps we are (or should be) past the point of assigning blame for how we arrived at this tragic moment in Syrian history. Historians will take care of the blame game, and they will need lots of pages to do so because the list is long. Energy would be better spent today on finding ways, in and outside of the box, to end the war. The equation mentioned above needs work on both sides, and while the many stakeholders in this war to date have lacked the compassion, vision, and statesmanship to produce a resolution, there is hope that enough of them are seizing the opportunity in the aftermath of Aleppo.

In the end, it may boil down to how Assad “wins.” How will he treat the perceived “losers”? History has shown that when the losers are treated with dignity and allowed to re-integrate into society, war-torn nations have a better chance of re-consti-

tution and healing. When the victors rub the losers' noses in the dirt, more often than not it only leads to continued societal distress and renewed hostilities down the line. My own country's experience may be instructive. At the end of the bloody U.S. civil war in 1865 that killed between 750,000 to one million Americans, President Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, set the tone for reconciliation and a long healing process with his remarkable entreaty to the losing side (the Confederacy) by calling for "malice toward none and charity for all."

Many believe it is not in the Syrian regime's DNA to be magnanimous or conciliatory. Will Assad be the statesman many thought he could be when he assumed the presidency in 2000, or will he be a vindictive, vengeful, and status quo leader? Back in 2012 I asked a top figure in the armed opposition (in Gaziantep, Turkey) why he was risking so much and enduring the daily deprivations of war.<sup>4</sup> His response was as profound as it was simple: "Because I have heard my voice for the first time." Perhaps Assad's only chance to really "win" is if he hears such people's voices as well. ■

## Endnotes

1. For these numbers and assertions, see David W. Lesch and James Gelvin, "Assad Has Won in Syria, but Syria Hardly Exists," *The New York Times*, (January 11, 2017).

2. Data for this portion of the essay is gleaned from the CDI-Trinity University Syria Initiative (CDI stands for Conflict Dynamics International in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Trinity University is located in San Antonio, Texas). The founders of the Initiative are the author (David Lesch) and Gerard McHugh, the president of CDI. The Initiative ran from early 2014 through the summer of 2016. The goal of the Initiative is to promote consensus-building within and between Syrian target constituencies on options for political dialogue and governance arrangements. The program intended to accomplish this by assisting target constituencies in identifying Syrian interests and facilitating the development of options through which those interests could be accommodated; it also sought to facilitate inter-constituency dialogue around those options. During the course of the Initiative, researchers carried out hundreds of consultations with Syrians from most constituencies in the country, including the Syrian government, its supporters, the Islamist and non-Islamist political and armed opposition, civil society organizations, women's groups, and business leaders.

3. The author would like to thank Gerard McHugh, Leila Hilal, and Jacob Uzman, all with CDI and the CDI-Trinity University Syria Initiative, for their central contributions in developing these models with our Syrian constituents.

4. This was part of the Harvard-NUPI-Trinity University Syria Research Project, co-founded by this author (David Lesch) and William Ury (Harvard University). An abridged version of the Final Report published by NUPI (Norwegian Institute for International Affairs) in October 2013 can be found at the following link: <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/284440>.