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Synopsis

Six years into the Syrian civil war, the reign and security of President Bashar-ul-Assad’s regime is secured - but it is increasingly viewed as a facade for it is said to lack the strategic premise for reuniting the country. The sharply differing interests of Russia, USA and the contesting neighborhood of Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and the local concerns of a myriad array of pro-regime irregular militias and a vast array of minorities within, are the decisive factors fueling the conflict — not the decisions of the country’s own divided rulers. This impacts the calculus of the “regime” side in the war, in determining its strategy in the conflict – and its aftermath.

The recent strategic military gains by the Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) and Arab/Kurd militias backed by the US led coalition ousted IS control from provinces and cities like Raqqa, Southern Allepo, breaking years long siege in some of the IS’ most pertinent strongholds in Syria. Russian air and military support has also propelled the Assad regime-backed Syrian army to lead interventions into Deir Azor, advancing on multiple campaigns and fronts since September last year in powerful, intensive raids that have allowed the army to
liberate some 90 towns in the past month. The end for ISIS is imminent – Lieutenant General Alexander Lapin, head of the Russian contingent in Syria stated that only 15% of Syrian territory now remains under control of extremist IS groups. The IS has found itself significantly weakened, pushed back several miles east and across the Euphrates banks.

While it was unprecedented that international players from opposing ends such as the US and Russia could spearhead joint, cohesive victories against the deeply entrenched strongholds of IS, without resorting to the high risk of inadvertent political infighting themselves, the military campaigns were seen by many as only a stepping stone to the real challenge that awaits Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

It is important to note the backdrop of said challenge; what essentially prolonged the conflict were the initial years of Western approach to Syrian uprising and civilian protests, with a myopic view that the Assad regime would fall in a short span of time. These hopes flickered as Assad tightened his grip, reined in Islamist opponents but sought to broaden his power base beyond minority sects. He promoted Sunnis to power and restored ties to Aleppo - a Sunni majority stronghold with which relations had been tense since the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s. Thus, the advent of IS too was seen in the light that once Assad was removed from power, a long-term vision and result-oriented pragmatism could be invoked later to work toward genuinely helping to solve the conflict.

While they may have cleared their “political conscience” by expressing support for the opposition since the civil war uprisings in 2012, they were, in reality, unintentionally contributing to prolonging the war and helping Assad move toward victory by not matching military backing with their rhetoric and inflating opposition’s expectations and this was particularly underscored after Russia started to intervene militarily on the regime’s behalf in September
2015. With this combination, the Syrian revolution was doomed to failure — certainly as long as the Assad regime received military support from its allies Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah.

By branding the rule of President Assad as illegitimate, Western countries may have been morally just, but they thereby prematurely blocked any opportunity they might have had to play a constructive role in finding a political solution to the crisis. The question was: What should take priority — being morally correct or executing a quick solution?

However, the strength of the regime was completely underestimated, partly out of ignorance and lack of knowledge of the Syrian regime, as well as because of misplaced optimism.

6 years into the conflict, the absence of a coherent strategy by Assad or the international stakeholders is bound to lead to lockdown in the region with no end in sight. Defeated or neutralized much of the insurgency in his country, domestic and international attention has begun to turn toward stabilization and reconstruction. It is now possible to envision a postwar Syria, at least in parts of the country.

A post-settlement Syrian state is likely to see new elites and bastions wielding power and influence across the country. As the fighting in eastern Aleppo has shown, Assad’s forces are only able to make real progress with Russian support committing to its victory. So the crucial question is of Russian, not Syrian intentions. It is widely perceived that Moscow may well have already achieved most of what it came to Syria to achieve. It has ensured the safety of its bases in Latakia province. A long-term basing agreement giving Russian ships and planes access there for 50 years, a major commitment that underscores Russian President Vladimir Putin’s years-long effort to restore Russia’s once-powerful role in the Eastern Mediterranean and a measure that effectively guarantees the survival of its ally’s regime. It is an unavoidable reality, much
to the dismay of Washington, that there can be no diplomatic process to settle the war without Moscow’s involvement.

Kremlin’s interest now lies in ending the conflict as soon as possible and appears keen to transition its role in Syria from a military actor into a peacemaker as a way to its maintain leverage. In the long term, Moscow’s objective is to restore a strong state with functioning institutions.

Political analysts of the region however foresee that there is not much the opposition can salvage now to tip the scales in their favor and influence as the dynamics predict a war tilted heavily in Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s favor.

The lack of cohesive opposition and the recent actions of the United States and its allies, has pushed away chances of Assad’s negotiated removal from power. The U.S. recently ended its support for rebels and supposedly told the opposition to accept that Assad will remain in power. Even the U.N.’s special envoy to Syria has questioned whether the Syrian opposition would “be able to be unified and realistic enough to realize they did not win the war.”
Why has the war prolonged?
For years spanning the conflict, Syrian rebels have been rightly blamed for being divided, unorganized and inadvertently obstructing the creation of a united alliance as a credible alternative to the Syrian regime. But now, competing agendas among the Syrian regime’s backers are being seen as the main obstacle to efforts to end the Syrian conflict.

Taking command of fragmented pro-regime forces in Syria makes enforcing discipline difficult – it is widely perceived that while Assad remains the face of the government, the Syrian troops are largely scattered and in visible disarray with deeply diverging agendas. Intervention by the Russian forces with their vast stockpile of military equipment, forces and monetary support catapulted the waning pro-regime militias to decisive strategies and victories. This has allowed for Assad’s continued support as well as tipping the legitimacy scales in his favour. Russia has managed to take on a war that the US feared would become a quagmire and turned it around. Defying the then US Defence...
Secretary Ashton Carter’s statement on the Russian approach “doomed to fail”, Russia has actually succeeded on its own terms.

Interestingly this new acceptance for Assad’s political stay is a sharp turnaround from the previously anti-Assad rhetoric from the Middle East such as that espoused by Saudia Arabia and Jordan. Initially viewed as a thinly veiled disguise to allow Iranian influence to pervade in the Syrian territory, the complexities and intensity of the Syrian war have allowed these concerns to wane as government forces have gained back an astounding 45% territory from IS militias.

However, pro-regime forces are now caught between sharply diverging agendas - Russian command requires peace to be brokered in areas that Syrian forces often seem to repeatedly spoil. Loyalties are scattered. Turkey’s hegemonic control over rebel groups in northern Syria stems from its geographical locations and moderate rebel groups are pressured to follow Turkey’s instructions, or at least to avoid opposing them.

In March, this year the Turkish military, backed by Syrian rebel groups, ended its seven-month military operation dubbed Euphrates Shield in northern Syria. Turkey’s regional influence through a power reconfiguration in post-conflict Syria, is seen in light of its aspirations for two causes; For one, critics view Erdogan’s influence in Syria seeping in to secure a predominantly Islamist power elite in the North; second, its historic concern about its border and territorial integrity as it attempts to rebuke any potential power surge of Turkish and Syrian Kurds in the form of the Kurdish majority Syrian Democratic Front (SDF), from positioning a united front to gain leverage for the emergence of a Kurdish state, or a government structure with increased autonomous powers and control.

Thus, Turkey’s hardliner policy for power reconfigurations in North Syria on its terms can be viewed in Turkish President Erdogan’s statements made to the
U.S. forces operating in the North that if they continued to work with Kurdish YPG fighters along the border, Turkey would respond with a no holds barred approach in the form of Turkish rockets. Turkey considers the Kurdish YPG to be the armed wing as the PKK, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party, a designated terrorist group inside Turkey that has waged a multi-decade campaign to carve out an independent Kurdish state.

The United States has too identified the PKK as a terrorist organization, mostly in a move to appease Ankara but insists that the YPG is a separate group. Washington has found in the secular beliefs of the disciplined Kurd fighters, its main leverage in Syria and U.S. Army General Raymond Thomas, head of Special Operations Command, described it as a "stroke of brilliance" to include ‘democracy’ in their new name: The Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Kurdish Question
Mazloum Kobani, the Kurdish commander who leads the SDF and remained adamant in one of his statements to Al-Monitor news that Kurds ‘do not want to fight anyone, but we will defend ourselves.’ Syria’s Kurds, thus motivated by their major advances for the region’s overall stability now look towards their own less ambitious goal: winning recognition for the self-rule they seized during Syria’s war. Rojava momentarily hit the world stage in early 2015 after Kurdish fighters -- with American air cover -- valiantly liberated the city of Kobani from ISIS’s grip after 112 days of fighting. For the U.S., the Kurds of Rojava are the only reliable, effective fighting force against ISIS on the ground. They say their aspirations for a federal system in Syria may now find more international and domestic support, and they are positioned as a player Damascus must deal with in any final resolution of the conflict.

Backed by the U.S. in the fight against IS, Kurdish forces control nearly 25 percent of Syria, and are a force to be reckoned with in any post-IS Syrian
construct. They hold most of the northern border with a hostile Turkey and are beginning to expand into non-Kurdish, Arab-dominated areas, attempting now to bridge Kurdish populated town of Afrin in the West to the strategic Qamishli in the East. The Americans have set up bases there to provide battlefield support for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, as well as the training and advising of security forces and the new civilian administrations in liberated areas, that the SDF monitors. A striking undercurrent of the growing influence of Kurds and the nascent threat to neighboring Turkey is perceived in the startling development; that a fellow NATO state such as Turkey would make belligerent remarks to the US over its Kurdish allies in the North, close to Turkey’s borders is reflective of the pressing threats that permeate Turkey’s society and politics, in case the Syrian civil war structured in ethno-sectarian terms, spills over to its borders.

It is clear however, that despite the potential souring of relations with Ankara, the US has found in the SDF its most loyal proxy in the region and Kurds too are aware of the reality that without Washington's political support for the Kurds pushing for a federation or some form of regional autonomy in the North, any gains in the fight against IS may be lost. The Assad regime as well as its Shiite military allies are increasingly hostile to any Sunni secessionist movements which may emerge under the very areas of their influence. This threat of Iranian influence perhaps, is only secondary to the ISIL threat, perceived by Kurds and the US forces, as their common enemy. A similar race is currently on between the U.S. and the Kurds on one side and the Syria-Russia-Iran alliance on the other for the oil-rich, eastern province of Deir ez-Zour, which seems to be heavily tipped in SDF forces favours. Potential IS withdrawal from the North of the city is being cited as a result of an ‘unannounced agreement’ between ISIS and Operation Jazeera Storm, the US-led coalition’s campaign against the militants, alongside the regime forces attempts to infiltrate the last of IS’s strongholds in the city. Each side is fighting
to take back as much territory as it can from IS. That race could determine the borders of a Kurdish-administrated area.

There is and has been palpable tension between the two camps as they continue their independent campaigns within Syria. In May 2017, the rebels forces in the south received a boost when a US coalition airstrike targeted pro-Assad allied forces that were advancing on a base used by U.S. and British Special Forces. Clearly, if the United States and its partners are willing to use force to defend its own allied groups in the area, it is hard to envision how the regime can hope to reestablish its rule there. In this light, the permission of veiled threats for a NATO ally to potentially use force against U.S. troops highlight just how risky and complicated U.S. intervention in the Syrian civil war has become.

Turkey’s time?

The ensuing threat from Ankara is not relatively recent. In a bid to further solidify its hold on the Syrian-Turkish border in the North, Turkey last month announced the start of its second major cross-border military operation in Syria, and Turkish troops are now preparing to deploy alongside Syrian opposition groups in a province controlled largely by al-Qaida-linked militants. The campaign begins after an agreement reached last month in the Kazakh capital of Astana, in alliance with Russian and Irani forces, aimed at enforcing the so-called de-escalation zone agreement in territory currently held by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), also sometimes referred to as Al-Nusra, in the Idlib province. According to Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute, while no imminent concerted action against the extremists, for now, appear to be on the agenda but a negotiated settlement between the terrorist group and Ankara seems to have taken shape, he told Syria Deeply.
This agreement to establish a Turkish protected buffer zone from the Idlib border village of Atme through Darat Izza to Anadan, into western Aleppo, comes after a new agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran last month. This is a deeply worrying prospect for Syrian civilians who see the growing Turkish influence in Syria as a sign of permanent and long term set-up in the Syrian state framework and any alliance between Russia (an increasing synonym for the Assad regime) and Turkey as a move towards further alienating any moderate opposition to Assad’s government. Moreover, it is the daunting idea that Turkey has chosen an openly-declared terrorist faction as a plausible option to form diplomatic agreement over land control, that has raised concern. The withdrawal of all Syrian regime military depots on the frontlines in Northern Hama and Southern Idlib further fuel the local anxiety that the permission of more foreign troops on Syrian land will only hinder, not bolster any clean, democratic transition that awaits Syria’s future.

Interestingly, for Turkey, the popular Kurdish YPG in Northern Syria is perhaps an even more critical concern than HTS. The fact that Turkey is looking to establish a lookout post or a launching-pad base on Mount Barakat, which overlooks Kurdish-held Afrin, speaks to that.

But herein lies an oft overlooked factor when the international community views Kurds in Syria; While Ankara views the YPG Syrian Kurds as a limb of the banned terrorist organization in its own state, the PKK, for many political observers, this may just be a convenient policy decision on Erdogan’s part. In essence, the People’s Protection Units, the YPG is actually the armed wing of the ruling Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the PYD who head a de facto self-rule administration in the Kurdish-majority region of northern Syria known as Rojava. While both the PYD and the Turkish banned PKK share ideological beginnings, stemming from famed Kurdish leader of 80’s Abdullah Ocalan’s leftist leanings, both parties have fundamental differences based on their currents stances within the Syrian civil war. The PYD, by early 2018, hope to
elect their first regional parliament, representative of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrian. Unlike the Iraqi Kurds, who lead an autonomous independent regional government in their three-tier provinces, with little inclusion from Baghdad, the Syrian Kurds under the PYD are focused on a comparatively less ambitious goal; their aim is to establish a semi-autonomous region within the Syrian government frame to create a Kurdish province that seeks to protect and further Kurdish interests in Syria. To accomplish this, the Kurds stacking up on their recent strategic gains against IS in relying on their backing by the US, wish to connect the Kurdish majority Afrin in the west and Al-Qamishri in the East. Thus, the Kurds with their secular leanings and call for autonomy represent not just an indisputable interlocutor to their US allies and Syrian civilians amid an opposition, otherwise dominated by Islamist extremists but also represent a potent security threat to Ankara and Iran, whose own Kurdish population spans around 20 million collectively.

It is poignant that while the regime’s lack of knowledge and acknowledgment of its internal political factions, their varying interests and landscapes may lead to greater turmoil in Post-IS Syrian territory but this must be pitted against the fact that it is widely perceived that decisions made by Assad and those around him will not likely be any decisive in determining Syria’s future.

Currently thus, Syria’s fragmented de facto division is a result of the inability of any one particular force to prevail over all others and not by deliberate design. Syria, today is divided into no less than seven enclaves: the territory controlled by the regime, Turkish defacto control in the North, three separate regions of rebel control, two Kurdish strongholds, and the Islamic State control that still pans over 15% of Syrian land.
The ‘Others’ of Syria

In the middle of this all, trapped between government forces and extremist rebel groups, Syria’s embattled religious minorities attempted various survival tactics, including attempts at remaining neutral. But in choosing to stay apolitical, they incurred the wrath of both sides and have paid a terrible price. Comprising a quarter of Syria’s population, the support of Syria’s minorities has traditionally been seen as key to any government’s survival under a banner of a secular, national identity. In a mutual bid to not let their minority status hinder their presence as well as a collective concern for a majority Sunni takeover, non-Sunni groups were left to choose between a secular autocracy under Assad and a sectarian democracy as a latter option, when vicious government crackdowns via the Shabbeha, predominantly Alawite groups of pro-regime armed militia forces, led to Christians, Alawites and Druze to fend for themselves. The 2012 massacres in Houla and Qubeir, Sunni farming settlements on the fault line between Alawite heartland of the Alawite Mountains, were alleged to be fueled by sectarian clashes, intended by radical Alawite elements in the north-west to clear nearby Sunni villages in order to create a protectionist Alewite majority lobby that is easy to defend. Similar claims however, as to persecution of Christian communities were however relatively few in initial years - Christians in Syria, an ethnic mix of Assyrians, Armenians, Arab Greek Christians make up about 10% of the population and have largely been in support of the regime, citing their survival linked to the survival of a pro-secular government over the hardliner Islamist factions that have threatened to alter the demographic composition of areas of Syria via the removal and exodus of non-muslim minorities. Retaliation by opposition forces to regime support however and formation of crude ethnic militias aligning with Free Syria Army factions and other Assyrian Christian militias such as the Sutoro in allegiance with YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces, began surfacing in 2013 in opposition to regime forces and extremist threats to their ancestral lands – remaining apolitical in the civil war has no longer been a viable option for any
group caught in the Syrian quagmire. Inevitably, any distancing from taking a stance by any minority, is viewed as a defection from both the government and rebel forces.

For years during the war itself, Syrian rebels were rightly blamed for being divided and unorganized, obstructing the creation of a united alliance as a credible alternative to the Syrian regime. But now, competing agendas among the Syrian regime’s backers are considered the main obstacle to efforts to end the Syrian conflict. Dozens of Syrian opposition groups merged last month to form a unified army, following the increasing divide between rebel factions that led to swift defeat at the hands of pro-government forces in key areas such as Damascus, the central Syrian province of Homs, and in southern Syria along the border with Jordan and recently to Turkish forces now in Idlib. The Unified National Army (UNA), a welcome replacement in lieu of the various divided factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliated groups, led by the only standing opposition government in exile attempts to bolster opposition troops on ground and maintain a presence in negotiations at the eighth round of peace talks set to start within the next month. The exchange of hands of Syrian territory ensures that civilians, particularly those who align with the moderate opposition find in the UNA a symbol of representative power of the common Syrian citizen.

Political analysts of the region however foresee that there is little the opposition can salvage now to tip the scales in their favour and influence as the dynamics predict a war tilted heavily in Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s favor.

The lack of cohesive moderate opposition and the recent turn of events of the United States and its allies giving up on their proxy war in Syria, with which they had pushed for Assad’s negotiated removal from power, has been a decisive blow to to all other political factions vying for democratic takeover
The U.S. recently ended its support for rebels and, along with Saudi Arabia, allegedly told the opposition to accept that Assad will remain in power. Even the U.N.’s special envoy to Syria has questioned whether the Syrian opposition would “be able to be unified and realistic enough to realize they did not win the war.”

The Role of International Actors
Short-term approaches motivated by self-interests of each party, that do not appreciate the overarching nuances of the conflict bring more risks and threats to Syrian stability than opportunities. International players must consider the long-term effects of their alliances and actions and acknowledge that their footprints must soon be reasonably replaced by legitimate representatives of Syrian civilian interest in the near future. The emerging status quo from the increased fragmentation within the international political factions in Syria seem to offer the insight that even as the conflict with IS nears its ends, a deeper undercurrent of dizzying state alliances and blocs will threaten the future stability and integration of the Syrian population. Pertinent questions have yet to be considered; Who carries out the costs of reconstruction? With the war turning tides to now focus on the elimination of all anti-regime opposition rebel groups, how will democracy with a credible opposition group fare in a post-IS Syria? More significantly, however, will Assad continue to find political legitimacy in the backing of its cash-strapped foreign backers?

The most recent offensive by government troops in Raqqa saw the coalition forces destroying most of the city alongside key ISIL hideouts that still spanned over 10% of the territory, in one of the biggest military victories against the former IS state capital. The campaign for Raqqa which began in June barely saw any traditional, conventional warfare methods. In October, roughly 75 coalition airstrikes were reported in a 48-hour span, preparing the ground for
SDF forces to begin assault on remaining ISIL holdouts. This unprecedented intensity of US airstrikes in Raqqa is very similar to Russia’s unrestrained bombing in Mayadin. Syrian regime forces fully encircle the city of Deir Ezzor after it’s controlled Madloum, Lower Hatla and Marat. Important gains toward expelling ISIS from the city and expanding further, especially with the push to enter Mayadeen. Critics and observers of the war in Syria such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, has voiced considerable concern over the reparations, costs of construction that will allow the 6.6 million internally displaced people in Syria (as of June 2017) to return home.

As the general pattern of warfare has fighting in eastern Aleppo showed, success of the Assad regime is contingent on Russian strategic, monetary and military spearheading the pro-regime troops on ground. So the crucial question remains of Russian, not Syrian intentions.

Kremlin interest now lies in ending the conflict as soon as possible and is keen to transfer its position in Syria as a military actor into a peacemaker as a way to its maintain leverage. In the long term, Moscow’s objective is to restore a strong state with functioning institutions and a monopoly over arms.

It is widely perceived that Moscow may well have already achieved most of what it came to Syria to achieve. It has ensured the safety of its bases in Latakia province. a long-term basing agreement giving Russian ships and planes access there for 50 years, a major commitment that underscores Russian President Vladimir Putin’s years-long effort to restore Russia’s once-powerful role in the Eastern Mediterranean and to effectively guarantee the survival of its regime allies. It is an unavoidable reality that there can be no diplomatic process to settle the war without Moscow’s involvement.

On the contrary, Iran’s vision is to maintain strong militia presence, as it does in Lebanon and Iraq, to protect its long-term interests in Syria and the region. Iran believes that its military operations in the country should continue after
ISIL defeat, in order to dictate a solution that secures its influence in a post-war Syria. Iran, alarmed over the growing presence of U.S. special operations forces in coalition with Syrian Kurdish and Arab troops in northern and southern Syria, is keen to secure a buffer corridor linking Tehran and Baghdad to Syria and Lebanon. Iran claims that U.S. forces have time and again, amassed troops on the border area to block any supply routes for Iran.

Thus, it is noted that Iran fights back with its deployment of Afghan and Iraqi Shiite fighters, and in recent weeks is alleged to have sent 3,000 Hezbollah troops to al-Tanf and Deir Ezzor, the Southeastern region of Syria. Fars news agency, affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps also reports that Lebanese Hezbollah troops were sent to the al-Tanf area “to prepare the Syrian pro-regime army and its allies for thwarting the US plots in the region and establish security at the Palmyra-Baghdad road and block U.S.-backed fighters” from moving north out of al-Tanf.

During the Assad regime’s last offensive to capture the rebel-held part of eastern Aleppo, Russia in cooperation with Turkey, brokered a deal to allow civilians and rebel groups to be displaced to other rebel-held areas in northern Syria. Iran, which was allegedly not consulted, pushed its proxies to sabotage it. The deal was then revised to include Tehran’s demands of evacuating people out of the two rebel-besieged Shia towns of Fuaa and Kafraya in Idlib. The exchange of these periodic hostilities based on gaining strategic leverage may be cited as one of the foremost regions, political observers cite, that reflect the inevitable breakdown of any peace dialogues.

The escalating tensions between Washington and Tehran in Syria coincided with tougher rhetoric from President Trump directed at Iran. In a speech in Saudi Arabia, Trump labeled Iran as a source of “destruction and chaos,” and
called on regional states within the Middle East to form a united front against Tehran.

Damascus too, in a striking turnaround from previously appeasing foreign interventionist states, strongly rejected the Turkish intervention in Idlib. Given the mass disapproval of Syrian civilians of any nascent Turkish aims to deposit and control Syrian lands under the pretext of Syrian refugee rehabilitation, spokesman from the Assad government asserted that the Idlib operation has nothing to do with the agreements with the sponsors of Astan and called on Ankara to strictly comply with previous diplomatic agreements. It is unlikely however, that Erdogan will comply to such demands, as the war nears its end.

The Way Forward
Six years into Syria’s conflict, ‘victory’ for any particular actor is likely to prove a relative term.

The absence of a coherent strategic vision or the political will to see it through by various players contributed to the increasing influence of extremist groups, paved way for enhanced regional contentions and the pro-regime and the opposition forces are also caught between sharply diverging agendas.

The political development and reconstruction of the Syrian institutions and governance post ISIL can no longer be countered solely by militaristic approaches. Without a political agreement to end the multidimensional conflicts, security gains against extremist factions may be lost, and a situation akin to the clashes between pro-government and ethnic regions in Kirkuk, Iraq may find itself repeated and exploited by local militias, benefiting from conflict economy. The regime must decide whether it is to strategically extend an olive branch to defected rebel groups, opposition parties, multi-ethnic minorities who now wield influence in their occupied regions and whether it is to allow
conditions-based dialogue and a seat at the table in potential peace talks, to ensure cemented stability and co-existence in post-war Syrian state construct.

A successful strategy by the Assad regime must balance national-level policies with local-level priorities and concerns in order to cultivate the support of the multi-ethnic local constituencies. The real challenge ahead for international powers now relies on bringing the regime and its allies together to respect the confidence-building measures and the ongoing ceasefires, no matter the glitches. Dialogue, therefore, must not be organized only across regime–opposition lines, but also among the regime’s allies who need to come to a unanimous settlement on Syrian re-habilitation process.

However, approaches that do not appreciate the overarching nuances of the conflict only add onto threats to Syrian post-conflict stability integration of the Syrian population.

International players must scrutinize the long-term effects of their alliances and actions. Their footprints must soon be reasonably replaced by an effective political transition, which represents and respects the re-building of a free and democratic Syrian society.

Western powers – specifically the US, the EU, the UK and France – must make the most of their limited leverage to extract concessions from the Assad regime and its international backers at this critical metamorphosis. The greatest leverage that the West possesses as Syria transitions into a functioning nation-state is economic: through checks and balances via sanctions, monetary aid, trade and reconstruction. This may prove significant in determining the contours of Syria’s post-settlement future.