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[Two years in Syria: What's the balance?](#)



Two years into the Russian military campaign in Syria, the Kremlin's fight on behalf of Damascus dictator Bashar al-Assad continues. Truth be told, while it used to be a chip for political bargaining with the West, this fight has long since become an end in itself. Since 2016, Moscow's main efforts have been targeted at *capitalization* of loss-making *assets* represented by Bashar al-Assad. And now that an international coalition has liberated the Iraqi city of Mosul from Islamic State (ISIS) and the fight for the Syrian city of Raqqa is under way, the question arises: What comes next? Is Moscow really the winner? Can it use al-Assad in future attempts to reach an agreement with Washington after investing so much time, effort and the remnants of its reputation in him?

Possible winners

It takes more than success on the battlefield to win a war. It is important to seal those successes with political decisions that will ensure long-term benefits for the winner. Therefore, possible winners should be assessed both by their ability to fight and by their ability to develop and implement a political agenda. What is the evidence in this case?

The only political agenda for the postwar period is being offered and implemented by the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, with the support of the United States. There is no question whether an independent Kurdistan is going

to exist *de facto* (or *de jure*); the question is about its borders. Let's look at the trends. The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (a quasi-state that unites areas inhabited mainly by Kurds) was proclaimed in late 2016. A referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan is scheduled for late September 2017. Moreover, the Iranian Kurds, inspired by the fight against ISIS, are demonstrating their [readiness to oppose](#) Tehran, too.

Officially, the Kurds do not limit themselves to their own ethnic identity (although ethnicity undeniably dominates the Kurdish question in practice). After the liberation of Raqqa, the Kurds [propose](#) to hold a referendum on forming a government under the auspices of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) for those Syrian Arabs on whose territory they are now fighting ISIS. Incidentally, the Kurds make up [as little as 40%](#) of the SDF (the rest are Arabs) although they appear to be the most combat-ready part. In any case, this is a possible post-war arrangement for the coexistence of communities liberated from ISIS. Not only the Kurds, but also the Americans, are interested in its success. Whether the successful political experience of the Kurds and SDF can be applied in the whole of Syria is a different story.

Turkey has withdrawn from the international coalition and seems to have lost the ability to offer ideas for Syria, because of the irreversible political trauma suffered by the Erdogan regime more than a year ago. Ankara is now only worried about the Kurds in Syria. However, it is unclear what outcome will be to its satisfaction in the current situation. This dissonance [pushes it closer to Moscow](#), although this affinity is only ephemeral since Moscow cannot offer anything substantial to Turkey on this issue.

Tehran - Russia's ally - is also a candidate to be declared a winner. It uses the paradigm of the Arab-Iranian military, political and religious conflict and the paradigm of confrontation with Israel and the West. Hence, on the whole Iran is not really concerned about what happens to Syria. Tehran will be happy with its growing influence on the Shia community in the country and the possibility to use Syrian coastal areas (for example, to [deploy](#) its military production) with Russian diplomatic and military assistance.

In other words, neither Turkey nor Iran - two countries Russia has bet on - sees satisfactory outcomes of the war. Moreover, the Assadites themselves can't be expected to strive for peace, because of their limited political viability. What is Moscow doing against this backdrop?

The Kremlin's approach

Russian aspirations to be one of the winners in Syria are not backed by a plan for postwar [economic reconstruction](#) of the country or any reasonable political agenda. The [proposed new Syrian constitution](#) presented during the Astana negotiations this winter represents a cherished dream of a full restoration of authoritarianism in the country.

The difficulty is that Assad's regime cannot be reinstated within Syrian borders. The Damascus dictator does not have [an efficient army](#), while the Russian advisors, special operations forces and mercenaries [back](#) Assad-allied warlords.

Still, the Kremlin is trying to ensure its contribution to the defeat of ISIS and use military and diplomatic resources in Syria. This is indicated by attempts to create de-escalation zones, which serve as strongholds to target ISIS forces in [Deir ez-Zor](#), as well as [reports](#) of a rising death toll among Russians (both soldiers and private contractors) in 2017.

At the same time, [Shia brigades](#) arriving from Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine, largely controlled by Iran, are extremely active on many fronts. As a result, Russia also has to deal with these groups, and in fact help them in achieving their political goals. However, it is unable to convert this cooperation into a desirable result.

In other words, for two years Moscow has failed to formulate a joint political agenda with its allies, who seem to disregard Russia's opinion on the issue. The Kremlin is only expected to have an input in battlefield victories (Aleppo, Palmyra etc.) and share political responsibility for developments.

Let's say that after the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, the Americans will sit down with Russia at the negotiation table and discuss the future of Syria, disregarding a number of their existing disagreements. However, Moscow's view of Syria after the defeat of ISIS, and how it can contribute to the settlement of the

civil war, is not very clear.

A vicious circle of radicalization

At first glance, it seems that developments are easy to predict: the Kremlin and Bashar al-Assad will focus on a crackdown on the opposition in Western Syria after the defeat of ISIS. Moreover, the fight among opposition groups naturally leads to the dominance of the most radical ones. This was seen in 2014, when similar processes led to the triumphal march of the Islamic State (although the “chemical deal,” which demoralized moderate oppositionists, also played a role). This is also the case in 2017, as the jihadists from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly the al-Nusra Front) and other radical Islamist groups exert control in [Hama](#) and [Idlib](#).

It turns out that Russia and the Assadites enjoy the opportunity to pursue their goals while avoiding an upsurge of international discontent (as happened with the assault on Aleppo). And they will think about the Kurds later on, at some point in the future. However, Moscow apparently underestimates certain factors.

The defeat of ISIS does not mean that it will disappear altogether. The number of ISIS fighters was [estimated](#) at 12,000–15,000 back in March, including 2,000 in besieged Mosul alone. The number of Islamists also [reached](#) 2,000 in Raqqa. These figures raise the question of the number of current and future ISIS guerrillas who will form the backbone of the local criminal-and-terrorist network. The same goes for other radicals. Moreover, the methods of waging warfare that we witnessed in Aleppo create new radicals.

Both the Russian authorities and Bashar al-Assad (let alone Hezbollah fighters and representatives of other, similar groups) have no desire or ability to engage in a dialogue with ordinary citizens. They have no attractive political or economic alternative for those who live in the areas controlled by the Islamists. Syrian citizens are only offered the opportunity to exchange one set of radicals for another.

The Kremlin’s confusion is concealed behind its seeming confidence. How else can we explain the fact that Vladimir Putin had [no time](#) even for a telephone conversation with Bashar al-Assad in 2017, while trying to [establish](#) a dialogue with Saudi Arabia and [lamenting](#) the blockade of Qatar (which is partially related to Syrian affairs)? All of this means that as regards Syria, Moscow is involved in diplomatic improvisation in the absence of political planning. Russia’s goal is to be involved in any settlement plan, be sitting at a common table, bear no responsibility for the plan and not be drawn into a serious conflict on a side that is doomed to fail.

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