

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR IS OVER, BUT PEACE REMAINS OUT OF REACH

Synopsis of the intervention of Erwin van Veen at the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Security and Defense of 22 March 2018

The original core conflict in Syria is over. The popular revolt against decades of authoritarian rule has been defeated by the regime, at least for the moment. This very regime is now in the process of gradually re-constituting itself. This does not mean that the war is over and peace within reach. To the contrary. The complex mix - and mess - of local, national, regional and global interests means that a durable resolution to the conflict will be difficult to obtain. Key factors that will influence the duration of the conflict are the relations between the regime of President Assad and the Syrian Kurds, as well as the length of presence of US forces in the north and east of the country.

In any case, this means that a 'genuine political transition' is not on the cards in the short to medium term as the Syrian regime has neither incentive nor interest to make this happen. At best, we might see a Russian-brokered façade compromise with the 'friendly opposition' as prelude to a UN sanctioned re-engagement with Syria by the international community. However, reconstruction has already started with a focus on the urban areas of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus. It takes place on the regime's terms and is not waiting for the West to make up its mind. A final matter of import is that the Islamic State has not been defeated in the sense that the grievances that gave rise to it, its networks and its resources persists.

In regard of the nature of future reconstruction efforts, it is useful to note, first of all, that comparative evidence suggests that 'money won't buy you love'. That is to say that external financial support is unlikely to incentivize the Syrian regime to make political concessions that matter. Instead, the reconstruction logic will echo the regime's warfighting logic, meaning that it will reward loyalty, collectively punish disloyalty and keep a close eye on reconstituting its powerbase throughout. Such an approach suggests that reconstruction will be gradual and selective. It also means that the regime is unlikely to welcome the return of many Syrian refugees now in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

In fact, the re-establishment of authoritarianism in Syria makes it probable that many facets of the current situation will persist – consider a large-scale refugee problem, persistent violence of variable intensity and replication of the original causes of the conflict.

This situation jeopardizes the realization of current Western policy objectives like its implicit expectation of a meaningful political transition, a strong push for accountability and an approach that sees refugees being taken care of in the region *ad infinitum*. Against this backdrop, what can be done to reduce human suffering without supporting a return to authoritarianism? Three issues merit consideration:

1. Consider how the Syrian diaspora can be structurally supported so that its human capital can gain institutional, democratic and leadership experience for when a more propitious moment arrives for dealing with this – or the next - Syrian regime;
2. Engage Iran more thoughtfully and recognize its geopolitical interests in the region – without necessarily agreeing to them. Some form of accommodation is essential if a parallel Syrian quasi-state of Iranian proxies and loyalties is not to project permanent instability in the area;

3. Develop a containment strategy that can deal with negative effects like extremism, organized crime, illicit business and corruption that is likely to spillover from Syria into the region and towards Europe.

Thank you for your attention.