

Power Plays in Syria: New Developments and Prospects

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Since the United States and then Russia both got involved in the Syrian situation in the name of “anti-terrorism,” the fate of Syria has been dominated by great-power rivalry. The US and Russia have basically established their respective spheres of influence after several rounds of complicated competition, but this is by no means the two powers’ ultimate objective in Syria. In general, the power plays between the two countries in Syria are linked to their competition in Eurasia and to their intervention in other hotspot issues of the Middle East. As the US-Russia competition plays a leading role in the trajectory of the Syrian and the broader Middle East situation, geopolitical confrontation between regional powers, especially that between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has been subordinate to and become part of the US-Russia rivalry.

Syrian Situation Dominated by Great Powers

Originating in March 2011, the Syrian turmoil is internally because of seriously flawed governance, and externally due to the spillover effects of “regime changes” in Tunisia and Egypt and the intentional instigation of Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France. In response to the anti-government demonstrations that took place from March 15 of that year in several major Syrian cities, which raised the demands for political reform and improving human rights, the Syrian

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authorities arrested more than 3,000 people. However, the government's hardline approach failed to quell anti-government activities, instead driving the street movements into armed resistance. From April on, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Kurds and the Druze launched guerrilla warfare against government forces in the northern region, which caused casualties among the military and police and forced the government to strengthen suppression under the banner of "combating terrorism." The government's military operations led to the exodus of large numbers of people into Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. In this context, Western countries began to openly interfere in Syria's internal affairs. The leaders of the US and European countries repeatedly accused the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of "suppressing democratic movements" and demanded his stepping down. The US and European countries also launched a series of sanctions against Syria and promoted the adoption of a motion at the UN Human Rights Council, which condemned the Syrian government and was co-sponsored by 15 countries. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar also joined the West in urging Bashar to step down, while asking the Arab League to expel Syria. Such international and regional pressure greatly encouraged the Syrian opposition, and strengthened their determination to overthrow Bashar with outside support. In July 2011, a group of mutinous officers and soldiers headed by Colonel Riad al-Asaad founded the "Free Syrian Army," a move which became the prelude to the Syrian war.

From the establishment of the Free Syrian Army until September 2014, the Syrian war was mainly a "proxy war." That is, the United States, Europe, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar provided funds, weapons, equipment and personnel training to the Syrian opposition, while the latter relied on external support to fight government forces with the goal of overthrowing the Bashar regime. In the meantime, countries like Russia and Iran provided full support for the Syrian government with the goal of preventing Bashar from being overthrown.

The "proxy war" in Syria not only caused people to be homeless, but also provided opportunities for the rise of terrorism. Since June 2014, the Islamic State (ISIS) has seized territories in Syria and Iraq, and expanded to the Sinai Peninsula

of Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. The sudden emergence of ISIS has not only disrupted the process of the “proxy war” and threatened the ruling status of the Iraqi central government, but has also posed a real threat to the national security of US allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan.

In this situation, the United States had to raise the banner of “anti-terrorism.” Since September 2014, it has launched air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. Only after 2017, when ISIS collapsed in the main battlefields of Syria and Iraq, have US air strikes become sporadic. At the end of 2015, the US military sent 50 troops of Special Forces to northern Syria, trying to establish military presence in the country. In 2016, hundreds more of US troops were deployed to Syria. After Donald Trump took office, the number of US troops stationed in Syria rose to more than 1,000.¹ By supporting the Kurdish Democratic Political Union and its Popular Protection Units and Women’s Protection Units, and by relying on the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” (DFNS) set up by the Kurds, the United States has established its sphere of influence, which was further extended to the Tanf region in the south in 2018.

On September 30, 2015, Russia, “in response to the request of the Syrian government,” launched “anti-terrorist operations” in Syria, and carried out air strikes against various anti-government armed forces including ISIS. As of October 2017, ISIS lost its “temporary capital” of Raqqa, while the Russian military launched more than 20,000 air strikes, which turned the battlefield situation favorable to the Syrian government. With the support of Russian air strikes, the Syrian army successively won the battles in Homs, Hama, Jisr al-Shughur and Aleppo, and controlled about 70% of the Syrian territory, fully taking the upper hand in the battlefield. This situation has been maintained to this day. Under the “anti-terrorism” banner, Russia and the Syrian government signed an agreement on the long-term use of the Tartus military port and the Khmeimim Air Base. The Russians not only stationed sea and air forces in Syria, but also sent ground forces there. Russian military advisers directly participated in battlefield command of the Syrian army.

1 “Why the Trump Administration Is Sending More Troops to Syria,” PBS, March 23, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/trump-administration-sending-troops-syria>.

The evolution of the Syrian “proxy war” shows that the rise of ISIS in June 2014 was a turning point, when the “proxy war” was transformed into a conflict where the two military powers of the US and Russia began to intervene directly and broadly, each delineating their own sphere of influence. With this signature development, Syria’s future and destiny has fallen into the hands of great powers, and become an important bargaining chip for great-power transactions.

Divided Parties Involved in the Syrian Issue

Occupying an important strategic position in the Middle East, Syria has always been a battleground for global and regional powers. At the same time, there are complex ethnic and sectarian conflicts with spill-over effects, which concerns the interests of all parties inside and outside the Middle East. Since the outbreak of the Syrian chaos in 2011, the major countries and forces involved include the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, Israel, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Focusing on the fate of the Bashar regime, the initial two major camps consisted of the US-led and Saudi and Turkey-based “anti-Bashar” camp, which is followed by Qatar and Jordan, and the Russia-led and Iran and Hezbollah-supported “pro-Bashar” camp. In July 2016, after the attempted coup to overthrow Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the relationship between Turkey and the US deteriorated sharply, while that between Turkey and Russia rapidly improved. Thus, the original configuration of blocs witnessed a major shift. Turkey accused the US military of being connected with the coup, slammed Washington for its strong support for the Syrian Kurdish armed forces, and demanded the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, a religious leader living in exile in the US, which was rejected by Washington. As a result, Turkey allied with Russia and Iran as a temporary group of interests, which greatly weakened the “anti-Bashar” bloc. At the same time, Erdogan, by successfully frustrating the coup attempt, became the “strong man” in Turkey and the Middle East, which encouraged his impulse to compete with Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Islamic world. Beginning with his support for the Palestinian cause, Erdogan

joined hands with Iran in the Islamic Cooperation Organization to strongly condemn Israel's suppression of the Palestinian people and the US partiality for Israel,² while publicly accusing Saudi Arabia of "betraying the Palestinian cause" and engaging in "dirty collusion with the US and Israel," statements which worsened Turkey's relationships with both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The dramatic changes in Turkey's Middle East policy have bolstered Iran's resistance to the United States, and consolidated the "Shiite Crescent" with Iran as the pivot, encouraging Tehran to reinforce its military presence in Syria "to fight against terrorism." In addition, the Lebanese Hezbollah's military presence in Syria has been further strengthened as well. This situation has led to Israel's involvement in the Syrian issue. Israel believed that the military presence of Iran and Hezbollah has directly threatened its own security, and therefore they must be driven out of Syria. At first glance, it seems that Israel readily joined the US-led camp, but while the other countries of the camp were insistent on the overthrow of Bashar as their core objective, Israel was not concerned about Bashar's rule and was only focusing on Iran and Hezbollah. On the contrary, Israel believed that it was in its own security interests that the Bashar regime could maintain strong control of the situation and drive the Islamic fundamentalist anti-government forces away from the Syria-Israel border. Although Syria and Israel have not been reconciled, the ceasefire agreement has been strictly observed by Bashar and his predecessor Hafez al-Assad since the end of the Yom Kippur War, and the "cold peace" between the two countries has maintained to this day.

Turkey's shifting stance favored Russia in its competition in Syria with the other regional powers. Since Russia, Turkey and Iran all have profound and irresolvable conflicts with the US, the common interests between the three countries are quite stable. They created the mechanisms of the Astana Process and the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi in 2017, with the aim of promoting a political solution to the Syrian conflict which is favorable to the three countries. For Russia and Iran, the maintenance of the Bashar regime is the

2 Stuart Williams, "Turkey's Erdogan Seeks to Lead Muslim Response on Jerusalem," December 9, 2017, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/turkeys-erdogan-seeks-lead-muslim-response-jerusalem-012031309.html>; "Erdogan: US Jerusalem Move Puts Region in Ring of Fire," *Al Jazeera*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/erdogan-jerusalem-move-puts-region-ring-fire-171207075318262.html>.

political solution they wish to achieve. And for Turkey, the solution is favorable if the Bashar regime could prevent the Syrian Kurds from founding an independent country and tacitly approve a sphere of influence for Turkey in Syria. Under these conditions, Turkey will not move to overthrow Bashar. The Astana Process and the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi have been recognized by the United Nations and play an equally legitimate role as do the Geneva peace talks on Syria. Although the United States and Europe deliberately downplay the former while stressing the leading role of the latter, they also pay attention to the former's influence, and attended relevant meetings every time they were held.

In June 2017, Saudi Arabia convinced some countries to break off relations with Qatar and imposed a land blockade on the country. This not only caused serious division within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but also significantly weakened the cohesiveness of the “anti-Bashar” camp. Within the GCC, Oman and Kuwait sympathized and did not sever diplomatic ties with Qatar, which reflected Saudi Arabia's “command failure.” Only Bahrain and the UAE followed Saudi Arabia. At the beginning of 2018, the armed forces of the UAE-supported Yemeni Southern Transitional Council occupied Aden, which triggered discord between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and tore the GCC further apart. In response to the Saudi-led “joint force” against Qatar, Turkey and Iran took the opportunity to improve relations with the country. The Turkish parliament even passed a resolution to expand Turkish military presence in Qatar, indicating its military “protection” for the country. Iran fully opened its sea and air passages to Qatar and shipped a large amount of daily necessities to the country. In return, Qatar increased its investment in Turkey to help it achieve its Vision 2023, while working with Turkey to support organizations such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Liberation Front, with the aim of forging them into proxy forces that supported Turkey and Qatar, and dividing and disrupting the Army of Islam, which was receiving support from Saudi Arabia.

Turkey's “combined blow” centering on a divided GCC and the chaos in Syria provoked even greater strategic vigilance from Saudi Arabia. In March 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman talked about the “triangle

of evil” during his visit to Egypt,³ arguing that Turkey, Iran and regional terrorist forces had constituted this triangle in order to undermine regional peace and stability. Mohammad bin Salman also accused Turkey of seeking to rebuild the “Ottoman Caliphate Empire” in the Middle East. The Saudi Crown Prince’s remarks triggered strong indignation from Turkey, which lambasted Saudi Arabia’s “support for terrorism” in Syria and the Middle East. Turkey also acted against Saudi Arabia on issues related to Syria. For example, the proxy forces supported by Turkey and Qatar had a number of battlefield conflicts with the Saudi Arabia-supported Army of Islam on a number of occasions. The “triangle of evil” remark also brought Turkey closer to Iran, Russia, and Qatar.

The complex changes in the Syrian and Middle East situation have resulted in significant divisions in the strategic goals of the axis of the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The US and Israel insist that the core objective is to destroy Iran, and their Syria policy also gives priority to “driving Iran out of Syria,” whereas Saudi Arabia seeks both to destroy Iran and to curb the “regional expansion” of Turkey. The US and Israel have failed to convince Saudi Arabia to change its claims. At present, on the issue of “fighting against the Bashar regime,” the only firm partner that the US can rely on is Saudi Arabia.

Protracted Fragmentation of the Syrian Situation

Syria has experienced two stages of fragmentation. Divided by the end of 2015, when the United States dispatched ground forces to Syria, the first phase lasted from April 2011, when the war broke out, to the end of 2015; and the second phase started with the US army’s direct entry into Syria, after which people witnessed the rise of the DFNS, the Turkish military operations in Syria such as the “Euphrates Shield” and the “Olive Branch,” and the Turkish occupation of Afrin as well as its joint patrol with the US in Manbij. The fragmentation has remained to this day.

3 Dominic Evans, “Saudi Prince Says Turkey Part of ‘Triangle of Evil’-Egyptian Media,” *The Star Online*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2018/03/07/saudi-prince-says-turkey-part-of-triangle-of-evil--egyptian-media>.

The first stage started with the guerrilla warfare in the northern region launched by the Muslim Brotherhood, the Kurds and the Druze, followed by rebel forces such as the Free Syrian Army, the Army of Islam, the Kurdish Popular Protection Units, and the Women's Protection Units. The war-torn areas have spread to the governorates of Daraa, Quneitra, As-Suwayda, Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa, and Al-Hasakah, as well as to the outskirts of Damascus, leading to the fragmentation of the Syrian situation. Syrian government forces had to fight on multiple fronts well beyond its capacity. In September 2012, the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps entered Syria. In October, the Lebanese Hezbollah sent 3,000 elite soldiers to help the Syrian government fight against rebel forces,⁴ thus curbing the rapid fragmentation of Syria.

The first stage of fragmentation had seriously weakened the Syrian government's ability to safeguard national sovereignty, ensure territorial integrity, and effectively govern the country. This situation was fully taken advantage of by terrorists, which was apparent in the rapid rise of ISIS. In response to this major change in the "proxy war" in Syria, the United States sent ground troops to the country at the end of 2015 under the pretext of "counter-terrorism," thus initiating the second stage of fragmentation.

Since the beginning of 2018, although Syrian government forces have successively achieved military victory in eastern Ghouta and the three southern governorates, and the area under the government's actual control has stabilized at about 67% of the whole country, this has not completely ended the fragmented situation. While Bashar has repeatedly vowed to recover the entire territory, he has been very cautious in military deployment and choice of main battlefields. The general strategy is to stabilize the south and control the north. As of early August 2018, the Syrian Army basically annihilated the remaining forces of ISIS near the Golan Heights in Quneitra. At the same time, while dealing a heavy blow to rebel forces such as the Free Syrian Army, the Army of Conquest and the Army

4 Regarding the Lebanese Hezbollah's military operations in Syria, see Nicholas Blanford, "Accusations Mount of Hezbollah Fighting in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/1015/Accusations-mount-of-Hezbollah-fighting-in-Syria>.

of Islam, the government army has forced the rebels to transfer to Idlib following designated routes after surrendering their heavy weapons. In that way Bashar has succeeded in “stabilizing the south.” From mid-August, the main forces of the Syrian army began to implement battlefield maneuvers in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia governorates, aimed at eliminating the rebel remnants in Aleppo, Hama and Latakia and forcing them into Idlib, before besieging and defeating them in Idlib and thus consolidating government control of the north.

The above-mentioned moves by the Syrian government has caused the US, Europe and their allies in the region to be more vigilant, whereby they have reached a consensus that they must frustrate the general offensive of the Syrian army on Idlib. Whether the decisive battle in Idlib is launched or prevented is of strategic significance to both the US-backed bloc and the Russia-led group. If they can overcome the obstacles and launch a general offensive on Idlib, Russia and its allies can eliminate all rebel forces except the Syrian Democratic Forces. As a result, Bashar’s rule can be stabilized for a long time, while Russia and Iran can maintain their long-term interests in Syria. If the United States fails to stop the Syrian army supported by Russia and Iran from launching a general offensive on Idlib, the seven years the US has spent on the “proxy war” would be in vain. There is no telling when the rebel forces would recover their strength and rise again, let alone any possibility for “regime change” in Syria. Also, there will be no hope for expansion of the “fragmented areas.” Therefore, reducing or expanding the “fragmented areas” has become the major focus of conflict between the two camps.

In order to reduce the “fragmented areas,” the pro-government camp must solve three major problems. First, they must ensure the support of Turkey before any general offensive. According to the Astana Process, the three countries of Russia, Turkey and Iran are respectively responsible for the operation of the four “de-escalation zones” in Syria,⁵ which are aimed at ensuring de-escalation of the conflict and even ceasefire. And the Idlib de-escalation zone happens to be in Turkey’s charge. Turkey has set up a dozen military camps in this governorate with

5 “Regional Powers Agree on Syria ‘De-escalation Zones’,” *Al Jazeera*, May 5, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/regional-powers-agree-syria-de-escalation-zones-170504121509588.html>.

its troops stationed, to supervise the order of the de-escalation zone and mediate and mitigate conflicts. At present, Idlib is the most populous governorate in Syria, with about 3 million people, half of whom are from other war-torn governorates. More than 100,000 rebel forces are mixed in with the general population, and have thus “hijacked” them as “hostage shields.” Half of the rebels are supported by Turkey, with the Free Syrian Army as the core. More than ten armed groups there have formed the National Front for the Liberation of Syria with the Free Syrian Army,⁶ and taken control of 40% of the territory of Idlib. The other 60% of Idlib’s territory is controlled by other rebel forces, which consist of nearly 100 organizations such as the Army of Conquest, the Army of Islam and the Army of Glory. Among them, the strongest is the Army of Conquest, with over 30,000 armed forces, which maintains a tenuous relationship with Turkey. If the Syrian army launched a general offensive, it would mean reducing Turkey’s sphere of influence and ruining Turkey’s important bargaining chip in Syria, which, of course, would be opposed by Turkey. However, in view of the escalation of Turkey-US tension, Turkey has an urgent need to act against US pressure by working with Russia and Iran. Therefore, there is a possibility that it will “conditionally” acquiesce to the Syrian government’s general offensive on Idlib. The conditions listed by Turkey may include the demand that Russia, Iran and Syria recognize the Turkish occupation of the Afrin region and the US-Turkey joint patrol of the Manbij region, and that the Syrian army cannot attack the Turkish-backed separatist armed forces. The question as to whether the Syrian army can actually annihilate the rest of the rebel forces depends on its own capabilities and has nothing to do with Turkey, and thus Russia, Iran and Syria are not in a position to blame Turkey for failing to destroy the rebel forces. In order to be given green light by Turkey for launching a general offensive on Idlib, Russia is frequently negotiating with Turkey.

Second, the Syrian government must prevent the White Helmets and rebel forces supported by the United States and Europe from deliberately staging incidents like chemical attacks on civilians in order to scapegoat the Syrian army.

6 “‘Largest Military Entity’ against Assad Regime Formed,” TRT World, August 2, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/-largest-military-entity-against-assad-regime-formed-19316>.

After Trump took office, he twice ordered the US forces to strike Syrian military targets in retaliation for alleged Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against civilians. Once an offensive on Idlib takes place, it is highly likely that the US will attack the Syrian army under the same pretext. For this reason, Russian and Syrian intelligence services are working hard to find evidence that the White Helmets and rebel forces fabricated the alleged cases of chemical attacks, in order to expose this hoax and prepare, on the moral front, for the general offensive on Idlib.

Third, Russia and Syria must guard against the use of the “humanitarian disaster” pretext by the US and Europe to cause trouble in both diplomatic and military fields. The key lies in avoiding massive casualties of innocent civilians in the Idlib general offensive. At present, the Syrian army is carrying out operations in peripheral areas such as Aleppo, Hama and Latakia, pushing the rebel forces toward Idlib, while launching tentative attacks on the areas surrounding Idlib, which serves as a battlefield investigation to reduce civilian casualties. However, the situation on the Idlib battlefield is extremely complicated. The vast majority of the people have been hijacked by various rebel forces as “hostage shields.” Once the general offensive of the Syrian army begins, it will inevitably cause massive casualties. Given this situation, the reason why the Syrian army still insists on launching the general offensive lies in its strategic significance for the long-term survival of the Bashar regime. The general principle can thus only be to minimize civilian casualties. According to predictions by think tanks and the media in the Middle East, it will be difficult to avoid the Syrian army's general offensive on Idlib, which is only a matter of time. After the general offensive is launched, the US, Britain, France and their regional allies are likely to push for an emergency meeting at the UN Security Council to review the “humanitarian disaster” in Idlib. They will submit relevant draft resolutions, demanding that the Syrian army stop the general offensive, set up a “no-fly zone” and a “humanitarian relief corridor” in the governorate, and may even propose the establishment of a “ceasefire monitoring force” organized by the UN. If such a resolution is vetoed by Russia, the US, Britain and France may disregard the UN entirely and launch a large-scale military strike against the Syrian army on grounds of “stopping a

humanitarian disaster,” until the Syrian army stops its general offensive.

In the future, even if a US-led coalition succeeds in stopping a general offensive of the Syrian army on Idlib, the fragmentation of Syria will continue for a long time for the following reasons.

First, the US military will remain in Syria for some time to come. Since the end of 2015, US ground forces have established their own sphere of influence in the DFNS and Tanf, where there are more than 2,000 Special Forces soldiers, two airports, and more than a dozen barracks. The area accounts for 25% of Syria's total territory. In its sphere of influence, the US fosters the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, and strives to conduct “political transformation” on them, that is, to “transform” them from separatist armed forces into forces that can overthrow the Bashar regime. In the seven years of Syria's turmoil, the US has tried to support many rebel forces, including the Free Syrian Army. However, these rebel forces are vulnerable in confrontation with the Syrian army. Thus, the US has turned to the stronger Kurds, and regard the DFNS as the main rear base of the “proxy war.” Although Trump has said several times that he will consider withdrawing the US military from Syria, he has also set a number of conditions for the withdrawal, including the complete elimination of ISIS, the removal of Iran's military presence in Syria, the return of all Syrian refugees, and a “breakthrough” in the political settlement of the Syrian issue at the Geneva peace talks. Not a single one of these conditions can be realized in the short term. In essence, Trump is actually seeking excuses for the US military's sustained presence in Syria.

Second, Turkey will strive to maintain long-term existence of its sphere of influence. From August 24, 2016 to March 29, 2017, the Turkish army crossed the border to launch Operation Euphrates Shield, which separated the main areas of the DFNS from Afrin. On January 20, 2018, the Turkish army launched Operation Olive Branch,⁷ occupying the Afrin area in early March and marching eastward to besiege the Manbij area, which lies on the Syria-Turkey border. In mid-March, Turkey and the US reached an agreement on joint patrol in

7 “How Far will Operation Olive Branch Extend in Syria?” *TRT World*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/how-far-will-operation-olive-branch-extend-in-syria--14505>.

Manbij, which began in June. From then on, Turkey has achieved the following geopolitical gains. First, it has established a sphere of influence, which laid the strategic foundation for destroying the Kurdish DFNS when conditions are ripe. Turkey insists that the DFNS is actually a disguise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria, that the Kurdish Democratic Political Union in northern Syria is a PKK branch, and that the Kurdish Popular Protection Units and Women's Protection Units there are the PKK's armed branches. Therefore, Turkey believes, they must be eliminated, otherwise they would encourage the Kurdish separatist movements in southeastern Turkey and threaten its unity and territorial integrity. Second, Turkey has maintained its dominance of the Idlib de-escalation zone. The large number of rebel forces under Turkish control can be an important bargaining chip to influence the future situation of Syria. Relying on these bargaining chips, Turkey can negotiate with Russia, the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia at the same time, and make maneuvers for achieving geopolitical transactions in its favor.

For Russia, Iran and Syria, the bottom line of power plays with the US and Saudi Arabia is to ensure that the Bashar regime is not overthrown in the long run. Even if the US and Turkey establish their spheres of influence in Syria, it doesn't mean that the Bashar government will fall. Russia, Iran and Syria have neither the strategic will nor the strategic ability to remove the US and Turkish spheres of influence. Therefore, the fragmentation of Syria will remain for a long time to come.

Linkage of Syrian Chaos with Other Regional Hotspot Issues

The chaotic situation in Syria reflects the fierce competition between the United States and Russia in the Middle East, and has become the center stage for the contest between the two powers. But this is only part of the US-Russia competition in the region. At present, the Syrian chaos is closely linked with other regional hotspot issues, and has accelerated the evolution of regional landscape. Who can gain the upper hand here will not only profoundly affect the future of the Middle East, but will also greatly influence the future of US-Russia relations. Therefore, the chaos in Syria must be viewed from the larger

perspective of the evolving US-Russia relations.

Since the Ukraine crisis, the US, together with the EU and NATO, has imposed economic sanctions on Russia, and militarily squeezed Russia's strategic leeway in Eurasia, seriously hampering Russian President Vladimir Putin's strategic attempt to strengthen and revive his country, and worsening the security and cooperation environment around Russia. In order to overcome its strategic passivity, Russia chose to concentrate on the Middle East, where the US faces the most difficult problems, and has thereby reduced much of its strategic pressure in Eurasia. In 2018, pressured by the ongoing case of collusion with Russia, Trump had to adopt a tough stance toward Moscow. He took advantage of the incident that a former Russian agent was poisoned in Britain to convince other Western countries to expel a group of Russian diplomats, while strengthening sanctions against Russia, which have made US-Russia relations even more tense. Finding it hopeless to improve Russia-US relations, Russia further increased its diplomatic and military involvement in the Middle East, trying to reverse its overall strategic passivity.

Recognizing the link between the Syrian chaos and other regional hotspot issues, both the US and Russia have decided to utilize the situation. In its in-depth involvement, the US has laid out its Middle East policy, which consists mainly of the following elements. First, disrupting the burgeoning alliance between Russia, Turkey and Iran, and undermining Russia's influence in the region. Second, cutting through the "Shia Crescent" forged by Iran by means of "regime change" in Syria following its military operations there. And third, strengthening the regional alliance system, with Israel and Saudi Arabia as the axis, the GCC as the core platform, and Sunni countries like Egypt and Jordan as peripheral support, in order to safeguard the dominant position of the US in the Middle East. This includes using the system to serve "America First" on economic and security fronts, achieving a Palestinian-Israeli peace on Israeli terms, promoting breakthroughs in Arab-Israel relations, and curbing and destroying Iran.

In order to succeed in its Middle East policy, the US has embraced three hotspot issues: the "regime change" in Syria, the "maximum pressure" strategy on Iran, and manipulating the Palestine-Israel and Arab-Israel relationships. The issue

of “regime change” in Syria has been analyzed above, but the “maximum pressure” on Iran is also an important step in accelerating the “regime change.” On May 8, 2018, Trump unilaterally announced the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement reached in 2015, and re-imposition and strengthening of sanctions against Iran, while implementing “long-arm jurisdiction” for all countries having energy and economic cooperation with Iran. Countries that refuse to terminate their energy and economic cooperation with Iran would be subject to US sanctions, and all companies that do business with Iran would be expelled from the US market. On May 21, 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the imposition of “extreme pressure” on Iran in 12 aspects,⁸ the core of which was to intimidate Iran to stop nuclear R&D and exercise self-discipline of its behavior in the region. Such a move has been highly praised by Israel and Saudi Arabia.

With regard to Russia, in order to retard the series of US steps aimed at driving it out of the Middle East, Russia has made full use of the linkage among various regional hotspot issues to counter the US strategy.

First, Russia took advantage of the leverage effect of the Syrian chaos to involve all stakeholders, whose combined strength can then be utilized to frustrate any US attempt to drive it out of Syria. The presence of Russia has a direct bearing on whether Bashar would be overthrown or not. For more than seven years, especially since Russia launched its “anti-terrorism” military operation in Syria in September 2015, the Russian army’s air and ground forces have strongly supported the Syrian army in the fight against rebels, which makes it impossible for the US and Saudi Arabia to overthrow Bashar through the “proxy war.” After taking battlefield control, Russia set up the Astana peace talks with Turkey and Iran, and stated its mutual complementarity with the Geneva peace talks. This demonstrates their commitment to a political solution, and ensures that the moral high ground is not lost. Since the US, Europe and Saudi Arabia, while engaging in the “proxy war,” have not abandoned any political solution that rejects Bashar, it is hard for them to find sufficient reasons to

8 Mike Pompeo, “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy,” US Department of State, May 21, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm>.

deny Russia's call for a political solution, nor is it easy for them to push the UN to negate the positive intent of the Astana peace talks. Russia has taken into account the differences in US and Israeli concerns with regard to Syria to persuade Israel not to proceed overthrowing Bashar. Russia also hopes that Israel can serve as a mediator between the US and itself. Even if a fundamental relaxation in US-Russia bilateral relations cannot be achieved, a compromise between the two major powers on Syria is possible.

Second, Russia leveraged the escalating conflicts between the US and Turkey to support the latter's confrontation against the former, thus consolidating its alliance of interests with Turkey and Iran. The leaders of the three countries have met frequently to coordinate their policies toward Syria, and discuss the expansion of the Russia-Turkey Black Sea gas pipeline. On April 3, 2018, Putin made his first visit to Turkey after being re-elected, where he witnessed, together with Erdogan, the opening ceremony of the first nuclear power plant in Turkey. The power plant, located in the Mediterranean port city of Mersin, has an installed capacity of 4,800 megawatts and 4 reactors. With a total investment of around \$20 billion, this power plant was built with the support of the Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation. In December 2017, Russia reached an agreement with Turkey to sell the S-400 air defense missile system, with a contract value of \$2.5 billion. According to the agreement, the system will be delivered in 2020. In August 2018, Russia announced that the delivery deadline will be one year ahead of schedule so as to demonstrate the strong momentum of deepening defense cooperation between the two countries. In the same month, Russia reiterated its willingness to provide the fifth-generation fighter Su-57 to Turkey.

Third, Russia, together with other signatories and related countries, took economic and diplomatic measures to preserve the Iranian nuclear agreement. On July 7, 2018, Russia and the other signatories of the agreement minus the US held a foreign ministers' meeting in Vienna. The foreign ministers of the participating countries expressed their unanimous stance on safeguarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Iranian nuclear agreement. Britain, France and Germany, as well as the EU, pointed out that the agreement is an important achievement in the field of nuclear non-proliferation. It has been recognized by the UN

Security Council resolution and is an important document of international law that should continue to be upheld. France, Germany and the EU said that they would continue to import Iranian oil, carry out economic and trade exchanges with Iran, and launch settlement process in local currencies. After the meeting, Russia announced that it would invest \$50 billion in Iran's energy sector, and negotiate with Iran on a settlement channel using local currencies. In addition to the important statements made by signatories of the Iranian nuclear agreement, Turkey and India, among other countries, have also indicated that they will continue to import Iran's oil.

Fourth, Russia is working by means of "friendly persuasion" to convince Iran to temporarily suspend its military presence in Syria as a bargaining chip with the US. In its competition with the US, Russia has demonstrated flexibility and pragmatism in diplomacy. Despite the tense relations, Russia is still attempting to achieve an exchange of interests with the US. In response to Trump's need to please Israel, whose main concern is to expel Iran's military presence from Syria, Russia is taking advantage of its own special relationship with Israel to convey the message that it is willing to mediate in Iran's withdrawal from Syria. As a first step, Russia has successfully persuaded the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the pro-Iran Shia armed forces to withdraw to areas 100 kilometers away from the Golan Heights. Russia hopes to reach agreement with the US on two major issues, namely Iran's withdrawal of troops in exchange for, one, the US acquiescence to the continued energy business and trade between Iran and the signatories of the Iranian nuclear agreement; and two, the US acquiescence to the Syrian army's general offensive on Idlib. If Iran is willing to withdraw, it would be a "trump card" for Russia in its negotiation with the US.

Fifth, Russia is working with Turkey and Iran to divide the GCC, which has to some extent already been achieved. The GCC is the core platform for the US to weaken Russia's influence in the Middle East and contain Iran. Since 2017, the GCC has witnessed serious internal conflicts. The landmark event was on June 5, 2017, when Saudi Arabia led some countries to break off ties with Qatar, and carried out a series of disruptive actions against the country,

including economic sanctions and a land blockade. Inside the GCC, the policies, positions and measures of different countries with regard to Qatar varied widely. While the UAE and Bahrain cooperated with Saudi Arabia, Oman refused to follow suit, and Kuwait acted as a peacemaker. On July 1, Putin called the Emir of Qatar, and told him that Russia was willing to continue investment and energy cooperation with Qatar. Leaders of Russia, Turkey and Iran later made telephone communication about Qatar's diplomatic crisis. Iran then announced that it would provide emergency food and daily necessities and open its airspace to Qatar, and deepen bilateral cooperation in the South Pars gas field. The Grand National Assembly of Turkey twice adopted resolutions extending the term of Turkish military presence in Qatar and expanding the size of troops. Russia said it would continue to sell Qatar the S-400 air defense missile system. Grateful to the three countries for their generous support during the difficult time, Qatar decided to inject 3.7 billion euros into Russia's Rosneft Oil Company, and announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Iran. When in August 2018, the US imposed large-scale tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum products, and sanctioned Turkey's Halkbank and two Turkish ministers, which caused the Turkish lira to depreciate by about 20% and seriously disrupted the Turkish economy, Qatar announced a \$15 billion investment into the Turkish banking system, which greatly helped Turkey withstand the pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia. At present, the division of the GCC triggered by Qatar's diplomatic crisis is still worsening. There is no longer any mutual trust between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In the short run, it will be difficult to stop Qatar from getting closer to Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Conclusion

The essence of the chaotic situation in Syria is the power play between the United States and Russia in the Middle East with a focus on Bashar al-Assad's political fate. The goal of US policy toward Syria has been to overthrow Bashar and support a pro-US regime by means of the "proxy war." If successful, it can drive out Russian presence and cut through the "Shiite

Crescent,” giving the US an overwhelming advantage and overall strategic initiative in the Middle East. Although the Trump administration is reluctant to invest large-scale strategic resources in the region, the US is still on the offensive while Russia is on the defensive in the evolving Syrian chaos, since Syria was originally under Russian influence and it is the US that intends to change that. Given the vital importance of Syria’s future, Russia is willing to take the risk of “strategic overreach” and increase investment in Syria, in order to frustrate US attempt to undermine its influence there. Therefore, neither the US nor Russia is willing to acknowledge failure and relinquish their claims there. In this process, Russia has emphasized respect for Syria’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity in accordance with the UN Charter and international law, while opposing the “neo-interventionism” of the US and the West and their implementation of “regime change” in sovereign nations, and advocating a political solution to the Syrian issue through peaceful negotiations.

As far as Syria’s future is concerned, since the fragmentation of the nation has led to the US and Russia both having their own sphere of influence in the country, the competition between the two great powers will enter a lengthy period of stalemate barring any significant increase of US military build-up there. The question remains whether the “fragmented areas” within territory under the Syrian government’s control will increase or decrease. Even with Russia’s military support, the Syrian army cannot eradicate all rebel forces. It is worth noting that whenever the rebel forces are in danger, the US and its Western allies will bring up the issue of “chemical attacks against civilians” or the risk of “humanitarian catastrophe” to warn Syria of what’s to come.⁹ They may even go so far as to launch military operations in order to curb the momentum of any Syrian offensive against the rebels. Given such a scenario, the Bashar government will not be overthrown, but any real breakthrough toward a political solution is also unlikely. The chaotic situation in Syria will be protracted albeit with twists and turns. 

9 Devan Cole and Tamara Qiblawi, “Trump Warns Syria, Russia, Iran against Attack on Rebel Stronghold,” *CNN*, September 4, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/03/politics/trump-syria-tweet-assad-rebel-idlib/index.html>.