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Three years of conflict in Syria: No proxy war, no solution without society

Keeping the Syrian state intact entails powersharing among all its constituent groups.

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The conflict has intensified sectarian divides in Syria, but it is not a confessional war, writes the author [AFP/Getty Images]

In 2011, the now three-years-old conflict in Syria began as a peaceful protest for human dignity and political reform. While citizens were inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, Bashar al-Assad's regime drew its lessons from these events and decided, very much from the outset, on what it called a "security solution" (al-hal al-amni), i.e. the brutal repression of any popular protest by military force.

The regime's reaction - in turn - triggered defections from the armed forces and a militarisation of the uprising. From mid-2011, the conflict evolved into a civil war, a bloody struggle for power in Syria, which increasingly became overlaid with a regional struggle for Syria.

Confessional polarisation

Whoever wanted to stop the fighting in Syria needs to understand its nature. The war increased the confessional polarisation in Syria and the region. It is not, however, a confessional war.

It has a strong international dimension, but the United States, the European Union, and even Russia regard it as an unsavoury regional problem, into which they don't want to be dragged, rather than an

Bringing credible societal representatives together will certainly

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not end the military confrontation immediately, but it could create the basis for a new social contract, and thereby, change the political dynamics of the conflict.

international conflict.

Regional powers clearly pursue their own geopolitical agenda by supporting either the regime or oppositional groups. The Syrian war is not a regional proxy war. Al-Assad and his entourage are not fighting for Iran, but for their own power. Most regime loyalists are not even fighting for al-Assad and his family, but feel forced to defend the existing regime out of pure fear for their own physical survival.

The "moderate" or "patriotic" opposition (as represented in the National Coalition) is seeking the support of Europe, the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other states. It is not fighting for these powers' interests, however, but - still - for a better Syria.

Jihadists such as the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) follow their own nihilistic agenda that is totally unconcerned with the future of Syria or its people. The bitter irony is that al-Assad's regime - from the beginning - has denounced the uprising as an assault on the state by 'Jihadi terrorists', long before radical groups became a significant force in the war.

The regime is not actually fighting those Jihadists. In fact, it benefits from their presence inasmuch as these groups weaken the patriotic, state-oriented opposition and inspire fear among the moderate majority of Syrians both in regime- and in opposition-controlled areas.

The war in Syria is an unequal fight not only with regard to the available types of weapons, but also in the sense that the opposition would need the fighting to achieve its goals, whereas the regime has benefited from the escalation and from ever more brutal acts of barbarism - committed both by the regime and radical groups.

A Syrian Taif?

The longer the war drags on, the more likely Syria will fragment and not be put together again. This would not only have geopolitical, but also political-cultural consequences. Geopolitically, a fragmentation of Syria would dissolve the post-Ottoman (or: Sykes-Picot) inter-state order in the Arab East. Already, Syria's territorial borders with Iraq and Lebanon are beginning to evaporate. Geo-culturally, a breakup of Syria would probably

Inside Syria - Syria: A human tragedy

mean the end of the very idea of multi-confessional or multi-ethnic states in the region.

Instead, confessional polarisation and the idea of mono-cultural entities with, at best, some degree of "tolerance" for minorities - would gain prevalence.

It is rather clear - at this stage - that the regional state system can only be preserved if the Syrian war comes to an end. It is also more and more evident that none of the conflicting parties will be able to achieve a military victory *and* maintain the Syrian state in its current territorial shape.

External players don't control the fighting, some form of international and regional understanding, nonetheless, will be needed to end it. More concretely, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran would have to agree, in parallel, that they will not help their respective allies seek a military victory. If Syria shall be maintained, power needs to be shared among all its constituent groups.

Such an understanding is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for ending the war. A peace process can be externally mediated and supported, but Syrians need to agree on the future of their country among themselves. The UN-mediated Geneva process should be maintained. It has broad international backing and it constitutes the only forum so far where official representatives of the regime and the opposition have been brought together.

Its focus on the relationship between the government and the opposition also accounts for the limitations of this process, though. "Geneva" should, therefore, be complemented by what regional actors may call a "Syrian Taif" (the analogy refers to the 1989 negotiations in Taif, Saudi Arabia, that helped to end the Lebanese civil war): a consultative gathering of respected citizens from all Syrian regions, ethnic and confessional groups to debate and find out whether Syrians still want to live together in one state, and which constitutional basis this state would need to have.

Al-Assad and his regime will continue to reject a meaningful transition, but the same is not true for the Alawi community as such or for the large majority of people in regime-held areas.

Important elements of the opposition will disavow the idea of sharing power with representatives of a brutal, de-legitimised regime, but most people in opposition-held territories will prefer it to continued war. Bringing credible societal representatives together will certainly not end the military confrontation immediately, but it could create the basis for a new social contract, and thereby, change the political dynamics of the conflict.

Volker Perthes is the Executive Chairman and Director of the SWP German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

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