

## 11. Syria Dismantled

*It's as if the price Syrians must pay to recover their freedom and dignity includes every last stone, tree, nook and cranny, so that Syrians cannot, in fact, win back their country from the clutches of the dictatorship. They have lived in the shadow of that dictatorship for 50 years, during which time they've invented endless ways to resist it and coexist with its decay – at the very least by holding their tongues and waiting, defending a civic culture that is thousands of years old.*

Khaled Khalifa<sup>1</sup>

In the 27 months since we finished writing the first edition of *Burning Country*, Syria's popular and democratic revolution appears to have been almost comprehensively crushed. The country itself is shattered into zones of foreign influence. The revolution's erstwhile urban centres are utterly destroyed and for the most part under foreign occupation. Assad's war against the revolutionary populace has birthed a further series of sectarian, ethnic and regional conflicts. At least half of Syrians are now displaced from their homes. The region primarily, and to some extent the entire global system too, is critically destabilised. Meaningful resolution is nowhere in sight.

The Assad regime and its more sophisticated sponsors, moreover, appear to have won the narrative war in the West, not only among foreign policy 'realists', but in mainstream society too, even, or especially, in circles considered 'radical' and 'progressive'. This last point says as much about disintegrating political, social and cultural circumstances in the West as it does about the tragedy in the Middle East. It also demonstrates the inseparability of Syrian and global events.

The revolution suffered self-inflicted wounds, first among them the inability (under almost impossible circumstances, certainly) of revolutionary forces to achieve unity of purpose or arms. Armed Kurdish and Arab factions proved ultimately incapable of working together, and therefore became vulnerable to manipulation by Assadist and imperialist interests. Extremist Islamists, meanwhile, were able to embed themselves in liberated territory before they turned on the principles and personalities of the revolution. Syrians who today are struggling simply to survive must one day absorb these lessons of defeat.

Self-criticism is essential. And yet even with all its shortcomings, the rebellion was finally beaten only by the (often competitive and contradictory) efforts of powerful foreign states – including the self-styled 'Islamic State'. Most obviously Russia and Iran, but also the United States, Turkey and others, threw their enormous weight against Syrian democracy, sovereignty and peace.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh describes three stages of the Syrian Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The first, from early 2011, pitted the local, at first non-violent, struggle for freedom, dignity and social justice against a

<sup>1</sup> 'Living in a Void: Life in Damascus After the Exodus', *Guardian*, 22 August 2017.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Impossible Revolution: A Syrian Dissident on How a Fight Against a Dictator Became a Proxy War', *Democracy Now*, 22 December 2016, [www.democracynow.org/2016/12/22/the\\_impossible\\_revolution\\_a\\_syrian\\_dissident](http://www.democracynow.org/2016/12/22/the_impossible_revolution_a_syrian_dissident).

hyperviolent dictatorship. Under such slogans as Assad or We Burn the Country, the regime shot, raped, tortured, then bombed and starved the revolutionary populace. The revolution took up arms in response. Territory was liberated and democratic councils were organised.

The second stage, which began in April 2013 with the appearance of ISIS and the open intervention of Iran's proxy Hizbullah, gave the conflict a regional and sectarian dimension. From this point on, regional power rivalries and transnational Sunni and Shia identity politics were played out on the Syrian battlefield.

The third, imperialist stage, which internationalised the war and dismantled Syria, began in September 2014 as American military might was aimed against ISIS and other jihadists – as well as the civilians unlucky enough to be in the way. Syrian concerns would henceforth be subsumed into the West's 'War on Terror' discourse.

A year later, Russia launched its own massive, and decisive, intervention, but not primarily against ISIS. Less than 20 per cent of its bombs fell on ISIS targets. Instead it targeted the communities which had driven out both ISIS and Assad.<sup>3</sup> Before the Russian intervention Assad had lost four-fifths of the national territory. Rebels were advancing across the Idlib and Hama countryside to the edge of the Lattakia mountains and the ancestral villages of key regime officers.

On 30 September 2015, Russia's bombing campaign began. On the first day at least two dozen civilians were killed, including many children, and destroyed targets included a building used by a revolutionary council<sup>4</sup> and Byzantine ruins near Kafranbel.<sup>5</sup> Over the next months and years the pattern was endlessly repeated: Russia won urban areas for Assad by massacring Syrians and pulverising their schools and hospitals.<sup>6</sup> It frequently showered civilian neighbourhoods with weapons whose use against civilian targets is banned. These comprise cluster and incendiary munitions, including white phosphorus and thermite, a substance which burns at 2,200°C.<sup>7</sup>

The refugee crisis dramatically worsened. People who'd stayed put under barrel bombs – usually the poorest of the poor, those with the fewest options – now fled Russia's assault. The resurgent imperial power obliterated courthouses, bakeries and water treatment plants as well as farmhouses and residential blocks. By mid-December 2015, a United Nations official in southern Turkey estimated that 260,000 more people had been displaced by the escalation in northern Syria.<sup>8</sup> By February 2016, another 150,000 people had been driven from their homes in the south.<sup>9</sup>

To complement Russian airpower, Iran brought many more Shia militiamen to Syria. The rebellion's first response to this double challenge was impressive. By mid-October 2015, as Assadist forces backed by Iranian-aligned reinforcements launched multiple ground offensives, Free Army

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<sup>3</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/10/01/47132/>. The Second Anniversary of the Russian Intervention in Syria. Syrian Network for Human Rights.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Syria Daily: Russia Begins Bombing of Rebels and Civilians', *EAWorldview*, 1 October 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Maria Luca and Myra Abdallah, 'How Russia Bombed a UN Heritage Site in Syria', *NOW*, 1 October 2015.

<sup>6</sup> In October 2017, on the second anniversary of Russia's intervention, the Syrian Network for Human Rights found Russian forces had been responsible for the deaths of 5,233 civilians, including 1,417 children. The report documents 707 attacks on vital civilian facilities including 143 on educational facilities and 119 on medical facilities. SNHR, 'The Second Anniversary of the Russian Intervention in Syria', 1 October 2017, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/10/01/47132/>.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Josie Ensor, 'Russian Jets Drop Thermite Bombs on Syrian City', *Telegraph*, 8 August 2016. Video evidence of thermite use here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6P5krKT4A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6P5krKT4A).

<sup>8</sup> Liz Sly, 'Russian Airstrikes Force a Halt to Aid in Syria, Triggering a New Crisis', *Washington Post*, 14 December 2015.

<sup>9</sup> 'Russia Strikes Displace over 150,000 in Deraa: Rebel Media', *Now*, 2 February 2016.

militias were destroying up to 17 tanks a day with newly delivered TOW missiles.<sup>10</sup> The TOWs were gifted by the Saudis, certainly with CIA permission. As ever, this temporary largesse was no more than an American gesture of displeasure with the Russians. But even when the TOW supply dried up, as it inevitably and rapidly did, the rebels held their positions tenaciously.

Still, slowly but surely Russian brute force made tactical and then strategic advances. The rebellion was not short of fighting men, but months of attrition against its supply routes, ammunition stores and field commanders weakened it considerably. Intensified bombing combined with the effects of a long-term starvation siege eventually forced the surrender of the western Ghouta suburbs. The hardest blow to the revolution here was the defeat of revolutionary Daraya.

Daraya had achieved remarkable things. The residents organised a local council which in turn provided services including field hospitals, schools, a soup kitchen – even an underground library.<sup>11</sup> The council was run on a democratic basis. Its 120 members chose executives by vote every six months, while the council head was chosen by public election. Unusually, and very significantly, the Free Army militias defending the town operated under civilian orders. And Daraya's women played a central role in establishing *Enab Baladi*, one of free Syria's most impressive media ventures.<sup>12</sup>

Daraya illustrates how revolutionary Syrians in the most difficult of circumstances began practising democracy, building their own institutions on their own terms. The town's legacy of civic engagement owes a great deal to the locally based religious scholar Abd al-Akram al-Saqqa, who introduced his students to the work of 'liberal Islamist' Jawdat Said, a proponent of pluralism, free expression and women's rights.

In liberated towns and villages across Syria, communities were experimenting with self-government, with varying levels of success.<sup>13</sup> Rather than 'importing' democracy, they were developing it organically, from their own cultural references and immediate lived experience. Their activism provided a glimpse of a possible future – pluralist, participatory and peaceful – which would have benefitted the whole world.

We could perhaps imagine a world not so different from our own in which these nascent democratic communities were defended, and their representatives accorded political recognition. Elected council members – the only 'representative' Syrians we have – would then be central to any settlement negotiations. In a post-Assad future, strengthened local democracy would allow ideologically polarised communities to coexist. Towns could legislate locally according to their demographic and cultural composition and mood. No longer limited to the business of survival, they would focus instead on further developing popular institutions, and rebuilding Syrian nationhood.

In reality, however, the revolutionary work in Daraya and elsewhere didn't fit with the easy Assad-or-ISIS narrative, and so the Western media, like the political class, very seldom deigned

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<sup>10</sup> See 'Syria Daily: Regime-Russian Offensive Tries to Advance on 3 Fronts in the West', *EA Worldview*, 9 October 2015.

<sup>11</sup> The council website: <http://darayacouncil.org/>. Story on the library, Mike Thompson, 'Syria's Secret Library', *BBC News*, 28 July 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://english.enabbaladi.net/>.

<sup>13</sup> For another example, see Anand Gopal, who reported in August 2012 that the citizens of Taftanaz had elected professional councils – of farmers, merchants, teachers, students, judges, engineers, the unemployed – which 'in turn chose delegates to sit on a citywide council ... the only form of government the citizenry recognized'.

to notice it. Denied protection from siege and aerial assault, these communities succumbed one by one.

The United Nations failed to provide humanitarian relief, bowing to regime bullying despite several UN resolutions stating that its permission was not required for aid delivery.<sup>14</sup> The first and only aid convoy to reach besieged Daraya entered in June 2016, and it seemed to signal a joke at the malnourished residents' expense. After 'checking' by regime forces, the trucks were largely empty, containing mosquito nets and baby milk formula, but no food. After that, the bombing targeted and burned the crops grown in town, the last food supply. On 19 August 2016, the last surviving hospital was destroyed by incendiary weapons.

Then on 25 August, four years to the day after the 2012 massacre, Daraya finally surrendered.<sup>15</sup> According to the surrender agreement, the town's fighters and their families were transferred to Idlib province. Pictures soon followed of troops carrying looted furniture out of town, and Iraqi militiamen performing their prayers in the ruins. Then came reports of 300 Iraqi Shia families being moved in.<sup>16</sup>

The threat of large-scale sectarian population transfers had loomed since the regime/Hizbullah victory at Qusayr in 2013, and in Homs itself, where the land registry was burned. Those driven out were usually Sunni; those brought in were usually Alawi or Shia, including foreign Shia. The battle at Zabadani revealed just how deeply invested Iran was in this project.

Zabadani, in the mountains near Damascus, was one of the first towns to be liberated (in January 2012) and one of the first to establish a council. In 2015, Hizbullah led a months-long assault, pulverising the town and its historical monuments. When the persistence of the defenders led to negotiations, the Islamist militia Ahrar al-Sham spoke on the rebels' behalf. Its interlocutor was not the Syrian regime, but Iran.

Ahrar hoped to win a mutual ceasefire – that Hizbullah stop attacking Zabadani, and the opposition stop attacking Fu'ah and Kafraya, pro-regime Shia towns in Idlib province. But the Iranians wanted a population exchange – that Sunni residents leave Zabadani, and Shia leave Idlib.

Tens of thousands of Sunni civilians were also deported from the Barada valley and the Homs suburb of al-Waer. 'Iran and the regime don't want any Sunnis between Damascus and Homs and the Lebanese border', said one Lebanese leader. 'This represents a historic shift in populations'.<sup>17</sup> Between the Assadist-Iranian project and ISIS, Syria is witnessing sectarian engineering far worse than under the French. The ramifications will feed into the wars suffered by coming generations.

For most of 2016, the most crucial battles raged in and around Aleppo, Syria's largest city and once its economic powerhouse.

The city's eastern, generally working-class districts had been liberated twice in recent years. On the first occasion, July 2012, armed farmers swept in from the countryside to join urban revolutionaries against their Assadist tormentors, and for a few weeks it felt the regime would crumble. But the battle soon succumbed to the war's general logic: rebel ammunition ran out, the fighters squabbled and looted, foreign jihadists took advantage.

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Security Council Resolution 2165, S/RES/2165 (2014).

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 8, p. 169.

<sup>16</sup> 'Iraqi families moving into Damascus suburbs', *Now*, 6 September 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Chulov, 'Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime's Control', *Guardian*, 13 January 2017.

These strangers pranced about on blast-traumatised horses, imposed their brutal versions of sharia law, murdered a 15-year-old coffee seller for supposed blasphemy, and finally declared themselves a state. In January 2014, prompted by popular anger, the entire armed rebellion declared war on ISIS, driving it out of western Syria, the city of Aleppo included. This was the second liberation.

Aleppo was the revolution's most important centre of civil activism. It housed revolutionary councils and emergency healthcare projects, independent newspapers and radio stations, theatre groups and basement schools. Despite the years of barrel bombs and scud missiles, up to 300,000 people remained in the liberated zone.

On 17 July 2016, following weeks of Russian bombing and ground attacks by Iran-backed militias, the regime captured the Castello Road and thereby placed the liberated city under siege. Russian and Assadist planes upped the war on hospitals, hitting six medical facilities in 24 hours (on 23 and 24 July).<sup>18</sup> The US administration had nothing to say about this. On the contrary, President Obama approved a proposal to coordinate American airstrikes with Russia, against Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>19</sup>

In the first days of August, fearing suffocation, rebels fought to lift the siege, attacking from multiple directions on a front 20 km long. Civilians, meanwhile, marched in support of the battle, and organised their own impromptu no-fly zone, burning hundreds of tyres in an attempt to cloud the skies and shield the advancing fighters.

Working in concert, rebels from within and without the besieged area took the Ramouseh neighbourhood and such hard targets as the enormous Artillery College compound. Thus they precariously, temporarily, broke the siege. The victory brought a brief renewal of hope, but also signalled the political and military desperation of the revolution. By now, hard hit Free Army and Islamic Front forces, in the north at least, depended on coalition-building with jihadists to win major battles.

The battle to lift the siege brought the liberated city's Fatah Halab operations room, a coalition of Free Army and Islamist battalions, into coalition with Jaysh al-Fateh, the vanguard force in the southern countryside which comprised Ahrar al-Sham and the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra. Jaysh al-Fateh's efforts were essential to breaking the siege from the outside.

The operation to seize the Artillery College was named after Ibrahim al-Yusuf of the Muslim Brotherhood's armed wing, who in 1979 infiltrated the same college, separated Alawi from Sunni cadets, and killed the Alawis. After years of the most brutal sectarian oppression, confronted by an international brigade of Shia jihadists, this boastful identification with a sectarian killer was perhaps not surprising, yet it obviously alienated Alawis and others (as it was designed to do), and blatantly contradicted the inclusive ideals of the 2011 uprising.

America watched or actively collaborated as Russia, Iran and Assad drove Aleppo into the abyss. Nusra, on the other hand, came to the people's rescue. For a while at least.

For Syrians under occupation, military realities often weigh heavier than social and political differences. Now rebranded as 'Fateh al-Sham' and formally delinked from al-Qaida, Nusra was embedding itself through military prowess.

Russia repeatedly bombed Turkey-Syria border crossings, and burned convoys carrying food and medicine as well as weaponry. It further outraged Turkish sensitivities by hammering Syrian

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<sup>18</sup> 'Syria Daily: The Russia-Regime War on Hospitals', *EA Worldview*, 25 July 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Roy Gutman, 'Why's Obama Covering for Russian War Crimes in Syria?', *The Daily Beast*, 28 July 2016.

Turkmen communities in northern Lattakia. On 24 November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet that had briefly crossed into Turkish airspace. Russia responded by blocking Turkish imports and halting tourism to Turkey. It also announced the installation in Syria of its advanced S-400 air defence system.<sup>20</sup>

‘We sincerely advise Russia not to play with fire’, warned President Erdoğan.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, he soon had to bow to the new reality. Germany and the Netherlands, discomfited by the Erdoğan government’s crackdown on the Kurds, had already withdrawn their contribution to the NATO Patriot missile batteries on the Syrian border. In early October, the US pulled its missiles too. Western states, led by the Obama administration, had reacted to the Russian onslaught on Syria with a mixture of appeasement and collusion. Worse still, from the Turkish state’s perspective, the US was allying increasingly closely with the PYD, despite designating the PKK – the PYD’s Turkish-Kurdish parent – as a terror organisation.

If Turkey wished to confront Russia, it would do so alone. Its choice now was to risk losing an open war against a more powerful foe, or to swallow its pride, take what it could, and remain relevant in the long term. The 15 July 2016 attempted coup against his government by a (Gülenist) section of the military spurred Erdoğan’s desire to shore up foreign friendships. It also unleashed his authoritarianism as never before. Waves of mass arrests targeted Turkish soldiers, civil servants and journalists.

On 9 August, President Erdoğan visited President Putin in Saint Petersburg. Clearly some kind of deal was struck. The rapprochement was an essential element in the final defeat of Aleppo city. It also enabled Turkey to intervene robustly in northern Syria against both ISIS and the PYD.

The PYD had inherited the three Kurdish-majority cantons from Assad without a fight. It repressed dissenting Kurdish parties and dominated political and military matters in these areas. On the other hand, it won an undoubted nationalist victory for Syrian Kurds, who could now teach and conduct business in their own language; it encouraged women’s public participation; and it presided over a democratic commune system. It also had to fight off challenges at various points from ISIS, Nusra and other jihadists.

In its rush to guard and expand its territory, the PYD entered into alliances which seemed tactically intelligent but may prove strategically disastrous. In October 2015 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was founded as a multi-ethnic coalition, primarily to fight ISIS. It contained Arab tribal militias as well as Assyrian and Circassian formations, but it was led and dominated by the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the PYD’s military wing. Under the SDF guise, the PYD allied with the United States against ISIS, and then with Russia against the Syrian opposition.

In August 2016, after a two-month battle, the SDF drove ISIS from the city of Manbij. The fighting took a heavy toll (up to 160 civilians were killed in American air strikes on 19 July).<sup>22</sup> Still, most residents welcomed the opportunity to breathe (or remove their cloaks), and at first greeted the SDF as liberators.

Trouble soon brewed. Before the foreign jihadists took over, Manbij had elected its own council and boasted Syria’s first independent trades union. This revolutionary council wanted to return to Manbij, but the PYD imposed a council of its own choosing without coordinating with local activists. ‘We really appreciate everything the SDF fighters did in order to push ISIS out of Manbij,’

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Russia to Move S-400 Air Defense System to Syria’, *Tass Russian News Agency*, 25 November 2015.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Syria Daily: Russia and Turkey Throw Political Jabs at Each Other’, *EA Worldview*, 28 November 2015.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Syria Daily: US Airstrikes “Hit School”, Killed Up to 160 People’, *EA Worldview*, 20 July 2016.

said one activist.<sup>23</sup> ‘But it seems that we are moving from one dictator to another’. Many had feared the PYD since its conquest of Tel Abyad in June 2015. Local Arabs complained then of home demolitions, torture, killings and forced displacement. Amnesty International supported their claims.<sup>24</sup> The PYD rejected them, but the perception limited Arab cooperation with the SDF.

Arab perceptions of the PYD were further embittered when it helped prepare the Russian-Iranian siege of Aleppo by invading Arab-majority towns to the north of the city. Tel Rifaat, for example, was occupied in February 2016 after most of its residents had fled ferocious Russian airstrikes. The PYD claimed it was fighting ‘jihadists’ (and its Western supporters amplified the claims), but these areas were defended by Free Army and Islamic Front militias and ruled by independent councils. American artist Molly Crabapple had visited nearby Azaz, a town hard pressed by the PYD, shortly after it wrested back control from ISIS. She described it thus: ‘They’d painted over the ISIS emblems in shocking pink, and then they’d painted the Quranic verse “There is no compulsion in religion”’.<sup>25</sup>

These are not towns that Kurds were driven from as part of regime Arabisation policies. This area always had an Arab majority, which is why the PYD didn’t initially claim it as a canton. By occupying this land the PYD was attempting to link the Rojava cantons into a territorially contiguous zone. In this respect it applied the hard-nosed realpolitik that states and state projects always apply. Whatever its rhetoric, it became clear that the PYD was now aiming for a state, not ‘democratic confederalism’. This was understandable from a nationalist perspective. But it was entirely counter-revolutionary, and short-sighted too in its alienation of Arabs as well as Turks, the neighbouring peoples who will remain on the land when Americans and Russians leave. Yet it must be repeated that Arabs in the opposition’s elite structures also bear responsibility for the breakdown in trust. Had the coalition or the Higher Negotiations Committee unambiguously defended the right to Kurdish autonomy early on, far fewer Kurds would have been attracted by the PYD programme.

In March 2016, the ‘Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava’ was declared. This was not an act of popular self-determination but a top-down directive from the PYD. The declaration only served to blacken the image of federalism in most Syrian eyes.

By this point Erdoğan, who had probably once hoped for a moderate Islamist government in Damascus containing technocrats and businessmen who would swim in Turkey’s sphere, was focussed on more minimal aims: to stop both ISIS and the PYD from building states on the border.

ISIS had perpetrated a string of atrocities in Turkey, including at Istanbul’s international airport, culminating in the suicide bomb killing 50 guests at a Gaziantep wedding. As for the PYD, Turkey has long feared that a Kurdish state in Syria would boost Kurdish separatism within its own borders. Since the last ceasefire broke, war between the PKK and the Turkish state had killed over 1,800 people, mostly Kurds, and destroyed Kurdish villages. The state engaged in collective punishment; the PKK repeatedly bombed military and police targets, killing many civilians too.

So on 24 August 2016, Turkish tanks and Syrian rebel infantry moved into northern Aleppo province. The Syrians were drawn from local Free Army and Islamic Front militias which Turkey had previously supported. Many were ethnic Turkmen. Some left frontlines elsewhere in Aleppo to join the Turkish-led operation, titled Euphrates Shield. The consequent weakening of those

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<sup>23</sup> Haid Haid, ‘Was Manbij a Successful Model for Future Anti-ISIS Action in Syria?’, *Now*, 23 August 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Amnesty International, ‘We Had Nowhere Else to Go: Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria’, October 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Speaking at an event for *Burning Country* at Bluestockings bookshop, New York, April 2016.

lines was another contributing factor to Aleppo city's fall. In other words, Euphrates Shield transformed revolutionary militias, at least to an extent, into another state proxy force. It also stymied Nusra's plans – after its successful effort to lift the Aleppo siege – for a grand merger of northern rebels under its aegis.

Euphrates Shield expelled ISIS from Jarablus, then moved west along the border to meet up with rebel-held territory at al-Rai. Dabiq, of symbolic importance to the jihadists, was captured in October. The SDF, meanwhile, was pushed south of the Sajur River. ISIS was expelled from the city of al-Bab in February 2017 after a grievous three-and-a-half-month battle. Turkish artillery and planes killed hundreds of civilians. When the US failed to provide air support, the Turks called in Russian bombers.<sup>26</sup>

Erdoğan announced the next target would be Manbij, where the PYD continued to dominate. The PYD responded by handing the villages west of the city back to the Assad regime, a move which illustrated the essentially Turkish-Kurdish, as opposed to Syrian-Kurdish, priorities of the PYD/PKK. The PKK considers the Turkish state its primary enemy, and with good reason, but Syrian Kurds were oppressed primarily by the Assad regime.

Could the revolution possibly survive these distractions? Aleppo city might have been its last chance.

In early September 2016, allies of the Assad regime recaptured the Artillery College and the Ramouseh district, and so reimposed the siege on the liberated section of the city.

Savage Russian aerial bombardment underlay the turnaround. But so too did cannon fodder organised by Iran. Whenever the Russian planes relaxed, dozens of militiamen rushed towards the Artillery College. When they arrived they were torn to bits by rebel canons. This happened every day for a month. Assad – or the Iranians – lost up to a thousand men, just on this front. But 'spent' seems a better word than 'lost'. They seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of the currency.

Eighty per cent of Assadist troops surrounding the liberated enclave were foreigners.<sup>27</sup> For years the Syrian army, hollowed out by defections, desertions and high casualty rates, had been incapable of winning a battle on its own. The regime lost the Artillery College in the first place because it was defended by released criminals, rounded-up deserters and boys press-ganged at checkpoints.

The militias composed Shias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere. Some Afghans fought in return for Iranian residence, or to avoid imprisonment. Some militiamen fought for wages. Many others fought because their religious passions or political fears had been manipulated. They believed they were defending shrines and crushing Sunni jihadism. Of course the opposite was true. Their presence in a Sunni-majority country, their participation in a slaughter of Sunni Arabs, only fanned Sunni demonisation of Shia.

The Russian bombardment intensified through September and October. In the most notorious incident, a Red Crescent Aid Convoy was struck repeatedly over several hours, destroying

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<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, 'Airstrikes by Russia Buttress Turkey in Battle vs. ISIS', *New York Times*, 8 January 2017.

<sup>27</sup> See Martin Chulov, 'Sectarian Fighters Mass for Battle to Capture East Aleppo', *Guardian*, 29 September 2016.



18 trucks and killing 20 civilians.<sup>28</sup> Displaying his imperial might to a largely indifferent Europe, Putin chugged an ageing naval flotilla around Scandinavia and through the Mediterranean, whose frigates then fired cruise missiles, and whose aircraft carrier launched jets to rain death on Syria. Alongside the incendiaries, the Russians now employed ‘bunker busting’ bombs which penetrated the earth, then undermined and collapsed up to three residential blocks at once.

By this stage there were no working hospitals left in all Aleppo, and the White Helmets civil defence, the men and women who dug victims from the rubble, had themselves been repeatedly targeted.<sup>29</sup> Planes dropped leaflets over the city reading: ‘If you do not leave this area immediately you will be finished. You know that everyone has given up on you. They left you alone to face your doom.’<sup>30</sup>

Monther Etaky, a Fine Arts student before the revolution, had moved with his family from the west to the liberated east of the city in 2012, ‘first because we wanted to participate in the revolution, second because the entire family was wanted by the security services for activism’. He had seen the siege coming since 2014:

I prepared myself. I stored some food. My son was born during the siege. Aleppo’s local council also prepared. It had enough wheat to provide each person 150g of bread every two days. People in the city had high hopes. Aleppo is a great city known around the world. It seemed impossible it would be besieged for long. But when all the hospitals and most of the civil defence points were bombed, the effects on morale were terrible. We knew the wounded would die in the absence of medical care. And the regime and the Russians targeted the infrastructure, the wheat stores, the water system. The international community failed absolutely to respond to civilian needs.<sup>31</sup>

Rebel defences crumbled in late November after Assadist forces captured the Hanano district, the first area to break free in 2012. Now neighbourhoods fell one after the other to the advancing Shia militias. The speed of the retreat and the crescendo of bombing meant that many dead and dying civilians were left where they lay, or were shredded as they fled in search of shelter from one burning neighbourhood to another. Reports spread of Assadist fighters executing scores of people, including children.<sup>32</sup> Some were able to cross into the Kurdish, PYD-held Shaikh Maqsood neighbourhood. Others moved into regime-held territory, or stayed put when regime forces arrived. Women and children were then housed in warehouses; the men were screened, some detained, some forcibly conscripted into the army.

By 13 December the revolution controlled only 5 per cent of Aleppo’s original liberated area. Tens of thousands of civilians, and thousands of fighters, were crammed into this tiny pocket. Media activists like Monther Etaki, Lina Shamy, Zouhir AlShimale, Abdulkafi Alhamdo, Ahmad Al Khatib, Primo Ahmad, Rami Zien, Ismail Al Abdullah, and Dr Salem Abualnaser had done their best to reach out to the world.<sup>33</sup> Many so-called ‘progressives’ in the West ignored or made excuses for the carnage, but people were stirred to demonstrate in greater numbers than they

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<sup>28</sup> The evidence was plentiful, but Russian state and media were quick to deny responsibility. *Bellingcat* analyses the evidence and answers the propaganda here: [www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/21/aleppo-un-aid-analysis/](http://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/21/aleppo-un-aid-analysis/)

<sup>29</sup> *The White Helmets*, Netflix, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Leila Al Shami ‘How the Syrian Civil War is Creating a Nation of Exiles’, *In These Times*, 23 January 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with the authors, October 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Syria: Reports of Execution-Style Killings in Aleppo Point to War Crimes’, 13 December 2016.

<sup>33</sup> All of whom have a Twitter or Facebook presence. See in particular Dr Salem’s moving message here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ5B4eoWuno](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ5B4eoWuno). (It is worth pointing out that Dr. Salem is an Alawi.)

had before in Istanbul, Ankara, Gaza, Amman, Kuwait, Paris, London and elsewhere. The largest and most moving solidarity protest was held in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Public sympathy for the victims, as well as Erdoğan's entreaties, helped a victorious Putin to allow a ceasefire and an evacuation deal.

Monther Etaky describes the situation:

The Russians had no problem with evacuating civilians, but the Iranians and the Shia militias had an ideological problem, they wanted total destruction and further massacre. Our role as activists was to show the world that we civilians were still in the city and in serious danger. The city wasn't silent, even on the last day when I think I was the only one still with an internet connection. We played our part in saving the people.

Those last days were barbaric, like something from the dark ages. People were lost and they lost control of themselves. People were running in any direction trying to save their lives. I went over fifteen days without washing. Others went longer. People were sleeping in the streets, covered in the falling snow. Those who owned animals killed them and distributed the meat. Some people burnt their homes before they left so as to leave nothing for the enemy.<sup>34</sup>

Iran objected to the evacuation deal, and laid down new conditions. Several days of back and forth followed. At one point a bus of evacuees was stopped by Shia militias, four men shot dead, the other men and women beaten and robbed, and then sent back into the smouldering, snow-bound city to wait again.<sup>35</sup> Eventually the civilians were permitted to leave – most to Idlib, some to the Aleppo countryside. Even then, some were stopped and arrested, including Ahmad Mustafa, a journalist with *Halab Today*, and Abdulhadi Kamel, a volunteer with the White Helmets.<sup>36</sup> Most, however, escaped, if only to a refugee camp or another heavily bombed urban area. Because the alternative was immediate annihilation, this was the best outcome possible. But nothing could hide the ugliness of the deal. It was an internationally brokered forced population transfer, both a war crime and a crime against humanity. It provided a terrible image of the precarious global system.

The Russian and Iranian imperialists, and their supporters in the West, had framed the assault on liberated Aleppo as a battle against al-Qaida. The city was held by al-Qaida, they proclaimed in press conferences and opinion columns. It was an al-Qaida stronghold, and the White Helmets and other civil society organisations present there were all al-Qaida fronts.

How many Nusra fighters were actually in the city? Always prone to lean towards the Russian narrative, UN envoy Staffan de Mistura estimated a maximum of 900 – less than an eighth of the total 8,000 rebel force. Better-informed sources considered de Mistura's figure to be far too high, and judged the real number to be no more than 200, perhaps less than a hundred.<sup>37</sup>

While the Assadist coalition was focussed on obliterating democracy in Aleppo, ISIS recaptured Palmyra. It had first taken the city in 2015, and proceeded to destroy the Roman-era tower tombs, the Triumphal Arch and the beautiful 2,000-year-old temples of Bel and Baalshamin. This

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with the authors, October 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Arwa Ibrahim, 'Aleppo Evacuation: Refugees Killed and Robbed as Convoy Flees City', *Middle East Eye*, 16 December 2016.

<sup>36</sup> See Leila Al Shami 'How the Syrian Civil War is Creating a Nation of Exiles', *In These Times*, 23 January 2017; and Amnesty International 'Demand Safety of Rescue Worker Abducted during Aleppo Evacuation', [www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/demand-safety-rescue-worker-abducted-during-aleppo-evacuation](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/demand-safety-rescue-worker-abducted-during-aleppo-evacuation) (accessed March 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Tom Miles, 'Aleppo's Jabhat Fateh al-Sham fighters far fewer than UN says', *Reuters*, 14 October 2016.

vandalism of the country's best-known ancient monuments seemed to symbolise a total rupture with Syria's past and presumed future. After further damaging Palmyra's heritage through bombardment, Assadist forces recaptured the city a few months later, lost it a second time at the end of 2016, and then captured it again in March 2017. On this occasion – for the first time, and marking the new Donald Trump presidency – US air power backed the Assadist advance.

Later in the month, American helicopters airlifted SDF troops to the Tabqa Dam on the approach to Raqqa. Soon the assault on the ISIS-occupied city was underway, at the expense of its people. In June, UN investigators lamented a 'staggering loss of life' caused by US airstrikes.<sup>38</sup> In August, at least 433 civilians died as a result of the US-led coalition's actions. According to Airwars, 'on average one Coalition bomb, missile or artillery round was fired into Raqqa every eight minutes during August ... A total of 5,775 bombs, shells and missiles were launched by US-led forces into the city during the month in support of the SDF on the ground.'<sup>39</sup> At the time of writing, in late October 2017, the battle appears to be in its final days, and Raqqa is entirely devastated.<sup>40</sup>

Across the border, ISIS was steadily but very slowly driven from its urban bases in Iraq by a coalition of US bombers and special forces, the Iraqi army, Kurdish Peshmerga and the Popular Mobilisation Units – an umbrella for a plethora of militias, many of them Shia identity formations organised by Iran. The battle for Mosul stretched from October 2016 to July 2017. In the end, ISIS fighters themselves destroyed the twelfth-century Nuri mosque. This was in no way a resolution. The scale of the physical, economic and social destruction, and early reports of torture and humiliation of civilians by the triumphant militias, guaranteed a continuation of violence in the coming years.

Back in Syria, Free Army-aligned tribal militias, some accompanied by US special forces, cleared ISIS from almost all of the southern desert in the spring and summer of 2017.<sup>41</sup> The Free Army groups incorporated fighters who had fled Deir al-Zor when ISIS took over in 2014. At first it seemed the US hoped to use them to drive ISIS from the lower Euphrates valley. But as these rebels advanced eastwards against Sunni jihadists, Iran's Shia jihadists came from the west and claimed the newly liberated territory. When they advanced near al-Tanf, where Syria, Jordan and Iraq meet, and where the US special forces were based, in the spring of 2017, the Americans struck their columns at least three times, and destroyed at least two Iranian drones. Soon, however, the special forces were pulled out, the Free Army fighters dropped, and south-east Syria effectively conceded to Iran.

By now, with Aleppo and most of 'useful Syria' subdued, Iran and Assad were racing east under Russian air cover, seeking to dominate the post-ISIS order on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Iran had almost achieved its aim of projecting its influence through a land corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. In this new context, Assad and his backers turned on the SDF, attacking it near Tabqa on 18 June. When a regime warplane joined the assault, the

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<sup>38</sup> [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/14/staggering-civilian-deaths-from-us-led-airstrikes-in-raqqa-says-un](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/14/staggering-civilian-deaths-from-us-led-airstrikes-in-raqqa-says-un).

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Oakford, 'Intensity of Coalition's Raqqa Bombardment Greater than for All of Afghanistan, Official Data Shows', Airwars, 20 September 2017, <https://airwars.org/news/raqqa-bombardment/>.

<sup>40</sup> According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the US-led international coalition caused, over the course of three years, no less than 2,286 civilian deaths, including 674 children. The SNHR blamed the coalition for 124 massacres and 157 attacks on vital civilian facilities. SNHR, 'Three Years since International Coalition Forces Intervention Started in Syria – The Bloody Price', 24 September 2017, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/09/24/46828/>.

<sup>41</sup> <http://eaworldview.com/2017/03/us-special-forces-and-rebel-offensive-v-isis-in-eastern-syria/>.

Americans shot it down. In early September 2017 regime and Iranian-led forces reached Deir al-Zor city. The SDF faced them from the eastern side of the Euphrates.

In this twenty-first century 'great game', the Iranian project, backed for now by Russia, competes with the SDF project, backed for now by the United States. Both are deeply problematic. As in northern Iraq, the dominance of Iranian-organised Shia militias in Sunni areas will ensure an indefinite continuation of sectarian tensions and the endless frustration of democratic hopes.

The ramifications of the PKK/PYD-led SDF project in the non-Kurdish areas of eastern Syria are still not clear. In the absence of better options, many local fighters joined up to liberate their areas from ISIS and to prevent the regime's allies doing it first. Their influence and popular pressure may yet win some degree of local self-government for the people of the region. The great fear is that the PYD will deal once again with Assad, Russia and Iran at the expense of Syrians, and that Assad, whose scorched earth paved the way for the ISIS takeover in the first place, will in the end be handed back the territories he lost. If (more likely when) the United States no longer needs the SDF, air support in any case will be withdrawn. To prevent this scenario, the SDF may welcome further American military bases.

Foreign domination, Shia militia rule and inter-tribal resentments enflamed by war will continue to offer ISIS, or its successor organisations, ideal conditions for recruitment and guerrilla and terrorist activity. ISIS in its defensive stage is engaged in a war of attrition. It held out so long in its urban centres not merely through fanaticism but due to the strategic purpose of weakening its enemies enough to render them vulnerable to future episodes of conquest.

In any case, while the SDF advances against ISIS appear solid and permanent, the same cannot be said of the regime's progress. In late September 2017, ISIS fighters appeared as if from nowhere in areas of the central desert supposedly cleared weeks earlier. They re-entered the desert towns of Sukhna and Qaryatayn, killing scores of regime-allied militiamen and capturing heavy weapons.

By smashing the Aleppo stronghold of the democratic revolution, Russia and Iran didn't defeat Nusra, but strengthened it. Aleppo fighters and activists arriving in Idlib, like those from the Homs and Damascus suburbs before them, found themselves operating in a more conservative rural environment where Nusra was an increasingly dominant power. Through the spring of 2017 Nusra escalated its violent attempts to absorb or dissolve the rebel militias of Idlib. To protect themselves, smaller militias amalgamated with larger formations, until two major factions faced off: on the one hand, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition dominated by Nusra (Syrians sometimes refer to it as 'Hatesh', scornfully echoing 'Daesh'), and on the other, a coalition dominated by Ahrar al-Sham. In July a series of battles saw Nusra's grouping assert dominance over Ahrar al-Sham. Free Army brigades, who avoided this conflict, remained strong in Idlib, but not nearly strong enough to push Nusra aside.

Nusra's military strength doesn't reflect the support of Idlib's residents. Many people – particularly in Saraqeb, Maaret al-Nowman and Kafranbel, where revolutionary civil society was strong – protested on a daily basis against the organisation's authoritarianism.<sup>42</sup> And people continued to practise democratic self-organisation. On 18 July in Saraqeb, for instance, women and men elected their local council after public debates between candidates.

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<sup>42</sup> Sadik Abdul Rahman, 'Maarrat Al-Nu'man: One Hundred Days of Confrontation with Al-Nusra Front', *Al Jumhuriya*, 4 August 2016.

In early October 2017, Turkish armed forces entered parts of Idlib province. Syrian revolutionary responses were passionate and deeply divided. Some welcomed Turkey as the least worst option, hoping it would provide protection from aerial bombardment as well as from HTS dominance. Others, including many who vehemently opposed HTS, considered that the risks to Syrian independence outweighed any potential benefits.

Immediate Turkish goals appeared to be twofold: to push HTS away from the border, and to isolate the PYD in the Afrin canton.

A full-scale confrontation between Turkey and HTS is unlikely for now; the idea is to encourage defections so as to isolate the Nusra core. In terms of popular and rebel fighter opinion, the time seems propitious for such a process. After speaking to rebel groups in October, the analyst Charles Lister reported, 'Over the three or four years that I've met with all of Syria's opposition, this was the first time not a single group expressed some element of defense or support of HTS'.<sup>43</sup> Already in the weeks before Turkey's incursion, HTS was losing many of the allied militias that had joined briefly as the group won battles earlier in the year. And yet the Nusra core – and especially the Nusra members displeased by Golani's pragmatic breaking of ties to al-Qaida – will not respond passively to its defanging. At the same time, rebel brigades that have been attacked by Nusra are awaiting revenge.

In order to isolate the PYD in the Afrin canton, meanwhile, Turkey may connect Idlib to its *de facto* safe zone in northern Aleppo via Tel Rifaat, currently occupied by the PYD. It has proved easy for Turkey to defeat the PYD in such areas before, where the party rules over ghost towns with minimal popular support. It would be almost impossible, however, for Turkey to drive the PYD from Afrin itself, a densely populated region where the PYD does enjoy a firm support base.

Many in Idlib hope Turkey's armed presence will neutralise the threat of Russian and Assadist bombing, as it did in northern Aleppo, where many refugees have already returned. At the same time they look at the failure of Turkish-aligned militias in northern Aleppo to refrain from gangsterism and warlordism, and they fear for security on the ground.

In a positive sign simultaneous with the Turkish incursion, control of the Bab al-Salamah border crossing was assumed by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), an administration founded by the opposition's coalition. The Free Army's Jabha al-Shamiyya also put its military camp in Azaz under SIG control. If other crossings are ceded, the SIG will profit from an independent income source and consequently increased authority. It is perhaps possible, therefore, that opposition-controlled territories in Syria's north-west – Idlib and parts of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia provinces – will eventually provide a safe area for oppositional Syrians and a base for an alternative Syrian government.

The price is Turkish oversight, a highly compromised independence and the end of current hopes of national liberation. Turkish incursions into Syria come in the context of the Astana talks, held in the Kazakh capital from December 2016 onwards. The Astana process is led by Russia, Iran and Turkey, and focuses on freezing the battle lines, leaving Assad and his foreign allies in charge of much of the country. In May 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to establish 'de-escalation zones' in Syria's north-west, in the liberated area of northern Homs, along the southern border and in the Ghouta near Damascus. In the following months there was indeed a reduction in the number of bombings, but battles continued to flare, and Russian and Assadist

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<sup>43</sup> [www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/10/10/turkeys-operation-in-idlib-may-not-bring-all-out-war-with-al-qaida](http://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/10/10/turkeys-operation-in-idlib-may-not-bring-all-out-war-with-al-qaida).

planes continued to slaughter civilians. (At least 1,000 civilians were killed in September 2017, almost all by aerial bombardment.)<sup>44</sup> The longer-term significance of the supposed de-escalation zones lies in the possibility of federalism or soft partition.

In the south, the Free Army had promised a disciplined effort to oust Assad without jihadist help. More than elsewhere, the rebels' movements here were controlled and limited by foreign powers, primarily the US and Jordan, via the Military Operations Centre in Amman which disbursed or withheld weaponry and funds. In general, these powers starved the Free Army, particularly after Russia and Jordan reached a friendly understanding. Following many months of inaction, the rebels liberated the Manshiya district of Deraa city between February and May 2017. The Jordanians showed their displeasure by freezing funds and deporting refugees related to the fighters involved.

Repeated assassinations of opposition figures, perpetrated either by the regime or by the ISIS affiliate Jaish Khalid ibn al-Waleed, make it unlikely that the interim government will be able to operate here any time soon, but it is also unlikely that Assad will reinherit the liberated parts of Deraa province.

The eastern Ghouta remains under rebel control. This region, stretching into the capital, is a thorn in Assad's side, and has been very hard hit by bombing. On 25 December 2015, Zahran Alloush, the leader of Jaysh al-Islam, was killed by either a Russian or Syrian airstrike.<sup>45</sup> Syrian revolutionaries found themselves in the uncomfortable position of mourning a man who had been an important player in the military defence of the revolution from Assadist and then imperialist attacks, but also a counter-revolutionary figure who scared minorities with sectarian pronouncements and repressed democratic activism in the Ghouta. Alloush was one of the Salafists who Assad released in his 2011 amnesties, and was the most likely culprit in the Douma Four abduction. On the other hand, his militia had kept both Assad and ISIS out of the eastern Damascus suburbs, and this had allowed civil society to operate, albeit under constraints. In a Facebook status, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, whose wife Samira is one of the Douma abductees, summed up the feelings of many:

'I have a very big problem, both personally and publically, with Zahran Alloush. But I am not at all pleased by his killing at the hands of the Russians, the Russians who are my enemy even more than Zahran was.'<sup>46</sup>

Alloush's death was followed by infighting which pitted Jaysh al-Islam at different times against Faylaq al-Rahman, a coalition of local and moderate Islamist militias aligned with the Free Army, and Jaysh al-Fustat, linked to Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, regime-and Iranian-backed militias were able to reduce the Ghouta enclave considerably. Furious residents demonstrated against the squabbling factions and called for redoubled efforts to defend the revolution.

Civil activism continued in the Ghouta. In Douma, for instance, the local council established an office for women's affairs. It was headed by Rehan Bayan, whose tireless campaigning for

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<sup>44</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/civilian-casualties-spiral-in-syria-as-air-raids-target-areas-marked-for-cease-fire/2017/10/07/523a97b2-a919-11e7-9a98-07140d2eed02\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f449eb29dbdb](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/civilian-casualties-spiral-in-syria-as-air-raids-target-areas-marked-for-cease-fire/2017/10/07/523a97b2-a919-11e7-9a98-07140d2eed02_story.html?utm_term=.f449eb29dbdb).

<sup>45</sup> Hassan Hassan, 'Syria Rebel Group will Survive Leader's Death', *National*, 27 December 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Yassin Al Haj Saleh Facebook post, 25 December 2015, [www.facebook.com/yassinhsaleh/posts/1068455256506976](https://www.facebook.com/yassinhsaleh/posts/1068455256506976) (accessed March 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Aron Lund, *Showdown in East Ghouta*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 4 May 2016.

greater women's inclusion in oppositional political bodies paid off in October 2017, when 14 women were nominated to run in council elections.<sup>48</sup>

As we write, the Jobar and Ain Terma fronts, where the Ghouta stretches into inner Damascus, are still held by Faylaq al-Rahman after multiple large-scale regime assaults. The war is prosecuted via explosive hoses, tunnel bombs and anti-tank missiles, and the built-up urban space between regime and rebel lines has been reduced to rubble.

Rebel-held areas are cut off from each other and besieged. Russian and Iranian interventions on the regime's behalf are massive. The supposed 'friends' of the armed rebellion have accepted the new status quo. Turkey, fearing the US-backed PYD, is collaborating with Russia. Saudi Arabia's clumsy leadership has turned its focus to Yemen, where its bombing campaign compounds the damage done by Houthi sieges in the slaughter and further impoverishment of the Arab world's poorest people. The Saudis and the Qataris, meanwhile, are locked in a local dispute over the political leadership of the Gulf states.

President Donald Trump did hit the regime's Shayrat airbase with Tomahawk missiles on 6 April 2017. He did so in response to the regime's deployment of sarin gas in Khan Shaikhoun on 4 April, which killed at least 87 people, including many children. Given Obama's failure to act after the massive August 2013 sarin attack in the Ghouta, and the dramatic escalation in regime violence following that failure, not doing anything would have sent the worst possible message not only to Assad but to dictators around the world. But the action was a one-off gesture not supported by any coherent policy to stop Assad targeting civilians. Even more obviously than under Obama, Trump's America pursued a short-sighted 'War on Terror' in Syria. In July 2017 Trump officially cut all US support to anti-regime rebels.

After six years of the most extreme privations, Syrian society is exhausted. The armed struggle has been contained and almost defeated. Monther Etaky's response expresses very many people's thoughts:

'The big battles are finished. In these conditions there is no chance of liberating regime territory, and in any case groups like Nusra have penetrated the armed struggle. Now there is no point to military operations. That's how it seems to me.'<sup>49</sup>

But the war is by no means over, and the potential Assadist victory will be pyrrhic at best, for several reasons.

First, tens of thousands of men remain committed to the anti-regime fight. As well as active fronts such as Jobar, guerrilla actions inside supposedly secured territory will continue to bleed the regime. The Abu Amarah Brigade, for instance, has assassinated officers and detonated ammunition stores in Aleppo city. Car bombs and suicide attacks in regime-controlled cities are becoming increasingly common.

Second, the centralised state authority which was once watertight has been irretrievably splintered. The regime's most effective troops are sectarian and mafia forces more loyal to local warlords than to the regime itself.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Syrian Observer, 'Women Candidates Make History by Running for Douma Council Elections', 9 October 2017, <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/33365>.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with the authors, October 2017.

<sup>50</sup> See Tobias Schneider, 'The Decay of the Syrian Regime is Much Worse Than You Think', *War on the Rocks*, 31 August 2016. See also Fritz Schaap and Christian Werner, 'Assad's Control Erodes as Warlords Gain the Upper Hand', *Spiegel Online*, 8 March 2017.

‘Syria is not for those who hold its passport or reside in it’, declared Assad in July 2015. ‘Syria is for those who defend it’.<sup>51</sup> And here is the third point – the regime’s total dependence on outside powers. To keep his throne, Assad has handed the country over – economically as well as politically and militarily – to foreign interests. A series of agreements concede the Syrian oil and gas sectors to Russian exploitation.<sup>52</sup> Within the army, Syrian conscripts are often commanded by Iranian officers. Sometimes (if they disobey orders, or retreat) they are executed by Iranian officers. And regime officers who resist Iranian dominance are removed or assassinated. By now, the ‘state’ and its ‘national sovereignty’ are not much more than fictions mouthed by those who desire the country’s continued subjugation.

In October 2017, the Trump administration designated Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist group. This move suggested an American desire to roll back Iran and its militias in the Arab world. Realities on the ground, however, tell a different story. In its myopic focus on ISIS, the US under Trump as under Obama has allowed a build up of Iranian troops and militias in Iraq and in Syria. In Iraq it has even provided air cover for the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilisation Units. As battles break out between the Iraqi state and the Kurdish Regional Government (which held an independence referendum in September 2017), it is Iran’s Qassem Soleimani who mediates between Erbil and Baghdad.

It may be that, having first allowed Iran to occupy Syria, the United States will turn to fighting Iran in Syria. If Iran’s militias are compelled to leave Syria, Assad will once again lack the troops needed to suppress the Syrian people. But it is by no means clear that American actions will fit Trump’s overblown rhetoric.

Estimates of the Syrian dead – civilians and fighters on all sides – now reach beyond half a million. The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the killing of 212,786 civilians until September 2017, including 26,019 children. Many more, of course, are not documented. 90.6 per cent of those counted were killed by the regime and Iranian militias. The Russian military killed more Syrian civilians than ISIS (5,233 compared to 3,811). The US-led international coalition killed 2,217 civilians, and Fateh al-Sham (Nusra) killed 416. The PYD killed 759.<sup>53</sup>

Untold numbers are dying in Assad’s dungeons. (In May 2017 the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimated the number of detainees as exceeding 215,000. 99 per cent of these were detained by the regime.)<sup>54</sup> In February 2017, Amnesty International presented evidence of 13,000 detainees executed in Saydnaya prison between 2011 and 2015. These figures, added to the 11,000 victims recorded in the Caesar photos, give an idea of the scale of the hidden slaughter.

Many more are living the slow death of starvation siege. In July 2017, an estimated 821,210 people were trapped in at least 34 besieged communities across Syria. The vast majority were besieged by the Assad regime and its allies.<sup>55</sup> The UNHCR estimates that 13.5 million people

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<sup>51</sup> Here Assad echoes ISIS ‘caliph’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who opines, ‘Syria is not for Syrians and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The land is for the Muslims, all Muslims.’ (By ‘all Muslims’ Baghdadi means that infinitesimally tiny minority which pledges allegiance to him.)

<sup>52</sup> ‘Assad is Preparing to Hand Over Syria’s Energy Sector to Russia’, *New Arab*, 15 February 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights, ‘Civilian Victims Toll March 2011– September 2017’, <http://sn4hr.org/> (accessed October 2017).

<sup>54</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/06/03/41322/>.

<sup>55</sup> Siege Watch, ‘Seventh Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria: May–July 2017’, <https://siegewatch.org/reports/> (accessed October 2017).



in Syria are ‘in need’; 6.3 million are internally displaced, many multiple times.<sup>56</sup> In October 2017, 5,290,498 Syrians were registered as refugees outside the country. The vast majority lived in neighbouring countries, 9 per cent in camps and the rest in host communities.<sup>57</sup>

Sometimes it seemed the only Syrian who wasn’t planning to leave was Assad. By 2015, desperation was setting in among refugees in the region, who were unable to work, to educate their children or to plan for the future. Rising numbers decided to pay smugglers to take them to Europe. In late October 2015, as the Russian terror-bombing was underway, around 9,000 migrants – Syrians and others – were arriving in Greece every day.<sup>58</sup>

They washed up on largely unwelcoming shores. Though volunteers across the continent did their best to help, refugees were more likely to meet nativist gangs and violent police. Hungary’s far-right government was particularly harsh. But the refugees didn’t cower. Clandestine migrants used to slip across borders at night, but Syrians have changed that image. In 2015, European news consumers were treated to the curious sight of hundreds of refugees, trained in the revolution, demanding free passage as they marched together towards Germany.<sup>59</sup> In August, Germany announced it would allow Syrians to apply for asylum regardless of how they arrived, and hundreds of thousands did. Then in September the picture of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian-Kurdish boy, lying dead face down on a Turkish beach, made front pages and briefly galvanised a wave of sympathy.

But the wave of xenophobia and nativism, already growing in Europe and strengthened now by paranoia over the incoming refugees and a spike in ISIS-inspired terrorism, soon drowned the wave of sympathy. In March 2016, as the western Balkan countries shut their borders, a deal was reached whereby Turkey would stop boats crossing, and refugees arriving illegally in Greece would be deported back to Turkey. In return, the EU agreed to accept 72,000 refugees of the three million in Turkey, to pay Turkey six billion euros and to allow visa-free travel for Turks in Europe. As of today, visa-free travel has not been permitted, tensions are rising between the EU and Erdoğan, and it seems the deal may fail.

In June 2016, Jo Cox, a young British MP who had championed the cause of Syrian freedom, was murdered by a fascist. The British media focussed on characterisations of her murderer, Thomas Mair, as a troubled loner rather than as a terrorist. Had he screamed ‘Allahu Akbar’ rather than ‘Britain First’ as he stabbed and shot, the emphasis would certainly have been different.

Later that month, Britain voted to leave the European Union. The referendum result was influenced by fearmongering over Syrian refugees, and was followed by a rise in violence against foreigners and ethnic minorities. The Brexit vote seemed to set the tone for a new era in which anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, protectionist and hyper-nationalist politics would comprise the mainstream. The impression of the post-war liberal consensus closing was reinforced in November by Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections.

The Republican primaries had turned into a rabble-rousing contest. Targets included Mexicans, Muslims and Syrian refugees, who candidate Ben Carson referred to as ‘rabid dogs’. The Trump victory brought white nationalists into the White House, as well as an appreciation for

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<sup>56</sup> UNHCR, ‘Syria Emergency’, [www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html) (accessed October 2017).

<sup>57</sup> UNHCR, ‘Syria Regional Refugee Response’, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (accessed October 2017).

<sup>58</sup> International Organization for Migration, ‘Greece Records Highest Weekly Migration Inflows in 2015 so Far’, 23 October 2015.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Refugees March on Austria after Hungary Blocks Trains’, *Aljazeera*, 4 September 2015.

Vladimir Putin. Already in its brief term, Trump's administration is killing far more Syrian and Iraqi civilians, and has promulgated a decree banning entry to America of people from seven Muslim-majority countries, including Syria.

Syria has revealed the West's own accelerating cultural sicknesses, its retreat into identity politics and conspiracy theory, its gullibility in the face of crude propaganda and its disappearing distinction between left and right. In the American election, some leftists put their hopes in Jill Stein of the Green Party, and her running mate Ajamu Baraka. Baraka believed that Bashaar al-Assad had won an election fair and square, while Stein, after attending a conference organised by RT (Russia Today), the Russian state's main English-language propaganda arm, (and a dinner with Putin) stood outside the Kremlin and praised how people there were coming together around 'basic human values, around human rights, the need for international law'.<sup>60</sup> As she spoke, Russian imperialism was slaughtering Syrians with banned weapons, and burning eastern Ukraine. Gays, ethnic minorities and investigative journalists in Moscow currently enjoy very limited human rights.

The West is entering dangerous waters. Its willingness to swallow propaganda concerning Syria will haunt its own political future. 'The ideal subject of totalitarian rule', wrote Hannah Arendt, 'is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists.' On a national and Arab level, Syria illustrates once again the calamity of authoritarianism. Sixty-eight years after failing to defend Palestine, Arab states have proved incapable of defending Syria from Russian and Iranian occupation. They have, however, taught a repeat lesson to their subjects – that sovereignty is meaningless without democratic control. This imperative, which galvanised the 2011 revolutions, is today more relevant than ever.

The Syrian revolution is often called the 'orphaned' revolution.<sup>61</sup> Unsupported, ignored, misunderstood and slandered, it had to stand alone against the combined forces of local, regional and international reaction. Its future, and that of the wider Arab world, remains radically uncertain. The only sure thing is that there can be no return to the status quo before 2011. Social, demographic, cultural and technological transformations have rendered the old security states' means of control permanently irrelevant. What comes next may be worse still. 'Behind every fascism', wrote Walter Benjamin, 'is a failed revolution'. But fighters will continue to fight, and revolutionaries, wherever they are, will continue to work. Inside Syria, street protests and revolutionary activism has never stopped, not for one day.

The armed rebellion may be almost defeated, but the revolution goes on. This is what Monther Etaky told us: 'The revolution won't stop, because the revolutionaries are people of principle. So long as revolutionaries are present, the revolution will start up again and again. So long as Assad remains, so does the revolution.'

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<sup>60</sup> Jill Stein speaks here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3Qhx2ON8RE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3Qhx2ON8RE). See also Clay Claiborne's writing on Stein and those leftists who voted for her: <http://claysbeach.blogspot.com/2017/01/my-posts-on-2016-election-and-aftermath.html>.

<sup>61</sup> See Ziad Majed's book of that title.