Syria Update

By Park Jae Sun

- The Syrian government still maintains its power as the opposition forces have been fatigued fighting a two-front war against not only the regime but also IS. Although Assad is losing ground he retains crucial backing from Iran and Russia.

- Opposition forces are fragmented and thus have been unable to coordinate their resources and planning so as to maximise their effect. Although the opposition direly needs foreign support, the key outside backers—the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have had difficulties aligning interests and remain unable to find common ground on how to end the conflict. In particular, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have displayed considerable ambivalence towards Islamic State.

- Islamic State, with its capital at Raqqa currently dominates in the eastern regions while making its way towards Homs and the central regions. The group is near the key city of Aleppo, but has not been able to wrest the western oilfields from government control.

- A UN-sponsored peace plan led by UN envoy Stefan di Mistura has called for a freeze with the aim of bringing Assad to the table with the opposition to unite and fight IS. No real movement towards a freeze or cease fire has been made and odds are low that government and rebels would feel a pressing need to cooperate.

After four years of protracted fighting, an end to the Syrian civil war still seems nowhere near. A close look at all the parties involved—the regime, the opposition’s foreign backers, the opposition forces including the Kurds, IS, and finally Iran and Russia—highlights the obstacles standing in the way of ending a war that has lasted more than four years, cost 250,000 deaths and scattered 4,250,000 refugees throughout the Levant and Europe. The Syrian civil war is complicated as the three parties fighting on the ground (the regime, the opposition, and IS) are locked in a stalemate with no one party dominating, and no two uniting to defeat the third. It is also a double-tiered conflict where four external powers, the US, the Gulf, and Iran and Russia have distinct and conflicting interests in the country’s future; each is propping up a group of fighters without being able to really shape the outcome.
The Regime and its strongholds

For nearly five years now, the media has been incorrectly predicting that the Syrian government would topple under pressure from opposition forces and IS attacks. While it is true that the regime has lost much of eastern Syria, it is nowhere near its end. At the beginning of the civil war, the Assad regime had a force of 325,000 troops of which 220,000 made up the army. Now that fighting has worn down his artillery and battalions, however, Assad has adopted a different tack. As recently as 26 July, Assad acknowledged his government’s dwindling manpower and announced his decision to cede certain non-strategic territory to insurgents to maintain hold over the strategically vital cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia.1 While he also acknowledged the difficulties faced by ordinary Syrians due to lack of access to electricity and water, Assad continued to blame foreign intervention as the source of his country’s woes; ironically, he is counting on foreign intervention from his own allies Russia and Iran to keep him in power.

Assad’s Restraint towards IS : using the opposition forces as a buffer

While Assad vows to fight to his last breath, he is purposely avoiding a full-on attack on IS; IS and its self-publicised brutality allow Assad to argue to the world that he is clearly the lesser of two evils. This avoidance has resulted in the loss of Raqqa, a province in the westernmost edge of IS’s stronghold which Assad has deemed unstrategic. Though regime forces did strike back at IS to recapture oil fields in the northeast, they could not regain key fields in the governorate of Dayr al-Zawr. IS now extracts and sells oil in eastern Syria and loot and sells cultural patrimony from Palmyra to fund its battles in Syria and mayhem abroad. But to Assad, staying in power and keeping his supporters firmly planted close to Damascus and Aleppo to protect the western and southern oil fields has now become his primary objective. His approach towards opposition-controlled areas, however, is particularly brutal. In Sunni areas where the resistance took root, Assad’s forces now target mosques, schools and markets, so that residents will flee and likely never return. Once the war is over, Assad wants these areas rebuilt by loyalists and pro-government citizens (however many remain). As long as rebels and IS do not unite against him, Assad’s control, though diminished, will probably remain intact.

The Opposition-backers and their limitations

The opposition has received support from EU, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar both in funding and in equipment. The United States has committed $500 million to vet and train the opposition but several obstacles stand in the way of forming a united front. The opposition consists of disparate groups of fighters from different regions that have banded together into various fronts that still compete amongst themselves for dominance. The diversity of underlying missions and allegiances greatly complicates foreign support. Furthermore, the opposition is divided into a Jihadist camp with affiliations to Al-Qaeda and a non-Jihadist camp — creating obvious complications for the US which otherwise favours the opposition.

In 2011, the US had worked with the Free Syrian Army, an opposition front made up of officers who defected from Assad’s army with clear objective of toppling the Assad regime. But when Washington shifted course by joining the UN’s international dialogues in Geneva two years later, pressuring the opposition’s main political umbrella body to join forces with the regime in fighting IS, foreign backed opposition groups began losing credibility, allowing al-Nusra and the Islamic Front to gain popularity by identifying itself as an opposition force made up by and for Syrians. As officers then defected from Free Syrian Army to al Nusra, which is well funded by the Gulf states, the Free Syrian Army collapsed and some of the best fighters on the ground

1 Aleppo (population 2,132,100), Damascus (population 1,414,919) and Homs (population 652,609) remain the largest governorates for which all warring parties fight to maintain control.
have disbanded to join other opposition groups that pay well and remain vigilant about fighting Assad.

Much has been written and reported about al-Nusra, the most powerful jihadist group with 6,000 troops united under a central command. The leader Jolani (also known as Golani) has sworn loyalty to Al Qaeda chief Zawahiri. It is important to note that Al Qaeda is not allied with IS and is only focused on fighting Assad and has not expressed the intention of establishing a caliphate. Among anti-regime forces, anti-IS sentiments have grown and pushed several of the smaller forces to unite with the stronger al Nusra to counter IS advances.

The US, however, naturally avoids alliances with Jihadist militants such as al-Nusra and other al-Qaeda affiliated rebel groups. al-Nusra has also been rejected by foreign trained fighters, the Syrian Revolution Front, who maintain control in the south. Although the US will not work directly with al-Nusra given its Al Qaeda affiliation, it still needs its cooperation to secure the safe passage of Syrian resistance fighters trained by the US in Amman, Jordan; al-Nusra controls the border between Syria and Jordan. Just this August, al-Nusra took six US-trained resistance fighters hostage (although it did release them shortly afterwards).

Having come to the realisation that the rebel groups on the ground have demonstrated military competence and capability, Saudi Arabia and Qatar continue to fund as many groups as they can. The problem lies in competition amongst the groups as they vie for Gulf funding, causing infighting and splits that prevent coalitions and cooperation as money becomes the key to domination. Saudi Arabia and Qatar fund the rebels but have not been able to train and shape them, relying instead on western military forces. Saudi Arabia maintains relations with all anti-regime fighters from non-ideological to Jihadist as long as they stand against Assad. It works with numerous opposition forces but expressly avoids association with the Muslim Brotherhood, who according to Wahhabi-Sunni Islamic beliefs stand against Islamic law. Thus, any rebel group with associations with the Muslim Brotherhood have been cut off from Saudi support, while Qatar also cuts funding for rebel groups which it considers unaligned with its objectives.

**Opposition groups and their Power Struggles**

For the US, identifying non-ideological non-Jihadist opposition groups who can be trained and remain loyal to the opposition coalition continues to be the pre-condition for creating a viable resistance that can upset the current status quo. But even non-ideological, more pragmatic opposition groups face power struggles and infighting that blunt their efforts at unity. Currently, three major opposition alliance fronts control rebel-dominated enclaves in northern Syria; the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, the Islamic Front, and Jaysh al-Mujahidin. While the Syrian Revolutionaries Front is clearly non-ideological, it is only strong in Idlib province. The latter two groups along with al-Nusra maintain the strongest hold over Aleppo.

The Islamic Front, known as al-Jabha al-Islamiya, is a national opposition alliance of Islamist factions and has played its part in taking control of key territories in the west. Within the Islamic Front, Ahrar al-Sham and three other non-ideological groups came together to try and establish joint-leadership under a singular command and control system. The effort failed however, as Ahrar al-Sham (admittedly the strongest both politically and militarily) began to dominate decision-making, leaving two other groups sidelined and increasingly unwilling to support the lead group.

Ahrar al-Sham is more pragmatic and less ideological than al-Nusra. The group currently dominates in Aleppo along with Liwa al-Tawhid (popular with the local population by standing for Sunni piety but still committing to a representative non-sectarian government), and works closely with Jaysh-al Mujahidin in the northern countryside fighting IS advances. The Islamic Front is potentially a rebel front that can aid the US in training smaller brigades of opposition forces, as they are familiar with the terrain and have proven strength and capability
in protecting their territories. The group shares the jihadist worldview of al-Nusra, but differs from al-Qaeda in that it views as positive the Arab, Turkish and Western involvement in fighting the regime and IS. The US continues to argue that backing this group is incompatible with its own objectives in Syria as Ahrar al-Sham is critical of democracy and remains somewhat ambiguous on the issue of equal citizenship for non-Sunnis.

Kurdish Forces, their potential and limitations:

Approximately 28 million Kurds make up the largest nationality on earth without its own independent state. Kurdistan sits atop significant oil and water resources, giving it considerable independence and regional clout. The Kurds in Iraq, the KRG or Kurdistan Regional Government, have demonstrated strong organization and leadership skills in constructing a viable, semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 and an army capable of blocking IS's advance towards the North.

ISIS suffered its biggest defeat in the border town of Kobani between Syria and Turkey, when Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG), supported by US airstrikes eliminated 2,000 ISIS fighters and recaptured the border town of Tal Abyad which now stores weapons and trains fighters in the war against ISIS. For the United States, Turkey's Kurds, who are united and friendly to the West, may be one of the few backable and effective groups within a fragmented opposition. Unfortunately Turkey, given its long and complex history with its own internal Kurdish population, refuses to let the Kurdish PKK to play a role in the Syrian conflict.

Islamic State's long term supra-national game

The Islamic State or IS, which emerged from Al-Qaeda during the US occupation of Iraq now controls Palmyra, Raqqa and Dayr al-Zawr, the governorate with significant oil resources in the northeast and east of the country. It also controls areas outside Aleppo and some villages near Homs, but it generally takes its time advancing towards Syria's central corridor aware that both government and opposition forces continue to repel IS advances towards the Sh'eer gas field northwest of Palmyra. It has also only selectively confronted Assad's fighters, preferring to let opposition forces do that work.

While IS is strongly organized, it still cannot penetrate western Syria and the key city of Aleppo, Assad's stronghold. IS also knows that it is outnumbered by rebels in the north and has withdrawn from Azaz to consolidate its powers in the east. In doing so, it was able to launch a surge in Iraq a year ago and continues to maintain a strong grip on Syria's east. Not even bombing campaigns have loosened IS's grip over key oil fields. Aerial attacks are likely to stay ineffective, but ground fighting could possibly regain control of key oil producing areas from IS. But recapturing the region will be difficult as it appears that the key players are each pursuing a strategy of holding the areas they value most and already dominate.

Iran and Russia: Assad's source of survival

Iran's main interest in the current conflict is to maintain the Shia Crescent to allow access through Syria to Lebanon and Hezbollah. While to Russia, the loss of a friendly government and possibly its only Mediterranean port would threaten its geopolitical interests, to Iran, the ultimate goal is not so much keeping Assad in power as it is to maintain its strong regional influence. The competition between Iran and the Gulf states for influence in Syria is one of the main obstacles to a negotiated agreement or ceasefire.

While Iran fights in Syria through Hezbollah, Russia, having little to offer aside from arms sales to all sides in the civil war, has become more aware of the situation on the ground and has convened high-level talks with Saudi Arabia to reach an agreement between Saudi-sponsored
rebel groups and Assad’s forces. Talks have taken place both in Qatar and Moscow, only to end with Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister al-Jubayr insisting that Assad has to go. To Russia, whose largest foreign port outside Crimea is based in Syria, letting the regime fall to IS or the opposition is an outcome it will try to prevent at all costs.

**Conclusion: Possibilities of an involuntary partition**

After almost five years of protracted fighting, the conflict that began with peaceful protests in the poor provincial towns of Dar’a and Idlib, is now morphing into a sectarian proxy war with Iran pulling the strings while Saudi Arabia tries to sever them. The US, on the other hand has kept out of sectarian struggles and set its sights on destroying IS. The increasingly sectarian nature of the war is likely to worsen as Iranian influence in the region grows. The architects of the UN-sponsored peace talks would prefer to see regime and opposition forces unite against IS in Syria, but in reality, a union between government and opposition will fail as each group has fought long and hard to protect and consolidate their respective territories.

Diplomatic talks and peace conferences in Qatar, Switzerland, and Moscow have made headlines and created hope for a possible end to the conflict. But as long as a newly powerful Iran and a recalcitrant Russia (and Saudi Arabia) hold their current line, no end to the fighting is likely. Gulf-backed rebels will continue to face off against Iran and Russia-supported Syrian forces, as the outside backers have minimal common ground to find a negotiated solution. By demanding the attention and resources of both Assad loyalists and the opposition, IS has prevented either side from successfully eliminating its opponent, and in doing so, prolonged this tragic state of affairs.

In the end, Assad cannot hide the fact that he has destroyed the Syrian provinces for the purpose of decreasing the Sunni population. And the US, along with wealthy Gulf powers, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, must come to terms with the fact that the fighting now runs along hardened sectarian lines and is inadvertently conferring legitimacy upon Assad in the eyes of his remaining supporters. For now, avoiding a full-on war against IS has saved his regime, but if the non-IS opposition were able to rally around a common cause and set their ideologies and egos aside, they might stand a chance of eventually toppling Assad.

The country is not consciously, but involuntarily leading itself towards a de facto partition. Assad clings onto the western regions where most of his supporters reside, while opposition forces fight throughout Syria working closely with the local leaders and citizens to conserve their resources and consolidate their territory. For Assad’s forces, this approach makes strategic sense—a western Syria is home to six out of ten Syrian oil fields, with the western oil fields more productive and lucrative than eastern ones. But now that rebel forces are tied down fighting the regime, IS continues to clear its way north and east of Aleppo while maintaining its stronghold in the east. Absent a decisive unification within the opposition, or a pragmatic alliance between two groups to fight the third, this bloody stalemate is likely to continue, further devastating an already suffering nation. A cease fire born out of necessity and exhaustion is possible, but likely one that lasts only long enough for one group to rearm, regroup and try once again to oust its rivals.