

Delegitimising Syria's President is an Error

A Looming Humanitarian Catastrophe Requires Engagement

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The civil war in Syria has all but disappeared from the headlines. Is the fighting still going on, or has the conflict been suspended?

Skirmishes are continuing. There are also regular rumours of a major offensive in the province of Idlib, where the armed opposition is currently still holding out. But there are very few fronts where fighting is still taking place.

The winner of the war is clear. Will we soon see Bashar al-Assad returning to international conferences or the UN headquarters in New York?

He may have won the war, but he is losing the peace. Despite its military success, the central government has been unable to prevail politically. Assad remains isolated internationally. And the U.S. is in the process of tightening the sanctions.

President Joe Biden ordered the bombing of Iranian militias in Syria. What role do you expect the USA to play in the future?

As far as the U.S.'s Syria policy is concerned, there is scarcely any difference between Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden. I see a lot of continuity there.

But Trump withdrew a large part of the already small U.S. contingent in Syria, creating a vacuum.

I think this vacuum is a myth. He publicly announced three times that the U.S. would withdraw from Syria. In fact, the withdrawal of forces was insignificant, and there is still a U.S. presence. The national security bureaucracy in Washington has always opposed a withdrawal and was ultimately able to convince Trump by claiming that America had to secure the oil wells in northeastern Syria.

The Iranians have also established a lasting presence in Syria. What are the consequences of that?

Syria is a battlefield between Israel and Iran; Israel regularly bombs positions and kills Iranian military advisors. But Iran is traditionally a close ally of Syria; theirs is the most stable alliance between two countries in the Middle East. As early as the Iran-

Iraq war in the 1980s, the Syrians were the only state in the region to support Iran. Tehran therefore felt obliged to come to the aid of the Syrian government after 2011. But this commitment is also putting a strain on Iran whose own economy is groaning under international sanctions.

What role will Iran play in Syria in the future?

The Iranians will continue to be present; they saved Assad, together with the Hezbollah in Lebanon. Despite that, they can't just issue him orders. Rather, it's the Russians who will have considerable influence. Ultimately, however, much now depends on the West. In particular, whether the Europeans will continue to pursue their misguided policy in Syria.

It's also about not letting the butcher Assad get away.

Assad is understandably loathed, but this is a big mistake from a rational point of view. The European strategy risks a humanitarian catastrophe and serious consequences for our security, for example, another big wave of refugees. New forms of extremism may emerge that will then be unleashed in Europe in the form of terrorism. It is not Israel or the USA that have been primarily affected by Islamist terrorism in the past 20 years, but Europe. Europe therefore needs to pursue a completely different Syria strategy.

What kind of strategy?

The economic situation in Syria is catastrophic. Of course, Assad is largely to blame for this. But besides the war, the crippling sanctions imposed by the USA and the Europeans are also partly responsible. Over 80 percent of Syrians now live below the poverty line, according to the UN. The sanctions do not hit the regime, but the Syrian people, few of whom are supporters of Assad. The sanctions also prevent Syrian refugees in Europe from returning home.

Why?

There is neither the political nor the economic basis for their return. Attempting to establish a democracy now is completely unrealistic. Since the fighting has diminished, one could imagine what a genuine European humanitarian policy focused on reconstruction could look like. Europe's political influence would remain minimal. But it would certainly be greater than if we continue to pursue the current repressive policy against Damascus.

Despite all the criticism of the West's sanctions, the problem is Assad. For the past ten years he has brutally suppressed an uprising, used poison gas and tortured critics of the regime. And now we are supposed to work with this man?

Do we have any choice? Assad is undoubtedly guilty of grave crimes, but so too are many others. The fact is that he is in power. And if that were to change and al-Qaeda or Islamic State (IS) Islamists were to take charge, the problem wouldn't get smaller,

it would get bigger. Europe cannot take the entire Syrian population hostage just because they do not want to negotiate with Assad. Europe must act politically, especially when it wants to be less strategically dependent on the USA. That is why Europe should talk to Assad.

If Europe did this, it would legitimise the involvement of the Russians. And they have bombed bakeries and hospitals.

The Russians were the last to intervene in Syria in 2015. Their air power enabled Assad to win the war. I understand the outrage over the brutal conduct of the war. But outrage is neither politics nor strategy: the Russians are there, that too is a reality. Another inconvenient truth is that the Russians made a significant contribution to the fight against ISIS.

The fight against IS was led by the U.S. armed forces.

Indeed, as part of a Western coalition. But the cost in terms of lives was paid by the Syrian and Iraqi armed forces on the ground, pro-Iranian militias and the Kurds – we should not rewrite history. Others, on the other hand, have noticeably held back in the fight against IS. For example, the Turks or the largely Islamist Syrian opposition. But now the question is, who is paying the price for our failure to face reality. And right now it's the Syrian people. Today the country resembles an African state facing a great famine. And in Europe we appear to be completely indifferent to that. That surprises me.

The Danish government considers the capital Damascus at least to be safe again. Is there a possibility that the former Syrian refugees in Germany or Switzerland will return home at some point?

If Europe worked with Damascus to rebuild the country that would speed up their return. Reconstruction could be a European project. You cannot send people back if you continue to pursue a tough sanctions policy at the same time. Because then they would end up in a disastrous economic situation and have no chance of establishing themselves.

Should Switzerland also be involved in the reconstruction?

I consider this to be the only correct approach, not only for humanitarian reasons, but also for purely strategic reasons. Unlike the Americans, we in Switzerland and in Europe experience the consequences of the war in Syria directly. Europe has taken in hundreds of thousands of people, and billions are being paid to Erdogan to stop Turkey from admitting any more refugees to Europe – a dubious deal, in any case. Counter-terrorism costs are enormous and continue to rise. We have long supported an opposition in Syria that has not been democratic or pro-Western for a very long time. Who is in charge in Idlib? Effectively, it's al-Qaeda. Anyone who wants an idea of what Syria might look like after Assad is overthrown need only look to Idlib.

At least in the beginning there was a democratic opposition.

Yes, but the liberal and secular forces were obviously a minority, otherwise they would not have lost so much influence after such a short time. For sure, many Syrians want democratic freedoms as we know them. But we should not use our predilection for democracy as an excuse to abandon the Syrians. They are paying the price of our ostensible virtue.

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