

The United States and Syria

by Michael Curtis



The country has been warned on two occasions in February 2018 by Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence, of various threats to the United States. China and Russia, great powers, both seek spheres of influence and endeavor to check U.S. appeal to regions. The terrorist organization ISIS has experienced a number of military setbacks, yet defeating it resembles killing an octopus. It is not only a terrorist organization, but also an ideology, and perhaps a theology, and may outlast defeats on the battlefield.

Serious as these threats are, in addition the U.S. faces an immediate additional hazard as a result of its participation in the continuing imbroglio in Syria.

The brutal war in Syria seems endless. So far, 465,000 people have been killed, one million injured, and 12 million, half of the pre-war population, are displaced. A war that began as a

result of a peaceful demonstration in the Arab Spring of March 2011 led to violence by the regime of Bashar al-Assad that killed thousands of protestors. Most Syrians are Sunnis, but government and security control in the country is in the hands of Alawites, a minority religious group that supports President Bashar al-Assad.

Following the murders by the Assad forces, in July 2011 defectors from the military announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army, armed brigades, to overthrow the Assad regime, and the civil war began.

That civil war, involving Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds in Syria and spreading to Iraq, is now multi dimensional and regionalized, with the entrance of outside powers and Syrian groups acting as proxies for some of them. Countries and groups which are majority Shia, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon-based Hezbollah, are pro Assad, while majority Sunni countries, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, support anti-Assad rebels.

Turkey entered the war in 2011, seeking influence in the region, as well as supporting the rebels. Russia entered into the conflict in 2015 to help the Assad regime. It launched a bombing campaign against "terrorist" groups which include anti-Assad rebel groups backed by the U.S. as well as against ISIS. Diplomatically, Russia, like China, has vetoed all UN Security Council Western introduced resolutions critical of Syria.

The U.S. has armed anti-Assad rebels, backed the Free Syrian Army, and led an international coalition in bombing areas held by ISIS. On April 7, 2017 the U.S. carried out its first direct military action against Assad, with the attack of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the Mediterranean Sea at a Syrian air force base. It was a direct response to the Syrian chemical attack on April 4, and was aimed at the base Khan Sheikhoun, the base for the aircraft that carried out the chemical weapons attack. At the time, President Donald Trump

stated it was in the vital national security interest of the U.S. to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons.

Memories are still vivid of the unfilled warning by President Barack Obama in April 2012 that the use of chemical weapons by Syria was a "red line" that would change government "calculus," with the possibility of more direct U.S. intervention in the Syrian conflict. Now, French President Emmanuel Macron on February 13, 2018 issued a similar warning of his red line. He said that France will strike against Assad, if proof emerges that chemical weapons are being used against civilians in Syria. France will strike the bomb factories where chemical weapons are made or where they are organized. Macron already in May 2017, when he met Russian President Vladimir Putin at Versailles, talked of a very clear line on the use of chemical weapons, though the Russians considered this as Western propaganda.

The problem for the U.S. is danger of escalation, miscalculation by the players, Russia, Turkey, Iran, in this Syrian drama, and particularly a rift between the U.S. and Turkey, a NATO member, and differences with Russia which is supporting Assad.

Those difficulties were manifest when a U.S. fighter jet destroyed a Russian T-72 tank in an air raid to protect rebel fighters. In the war, at least 644 Russian mercenaries, whom Russia refuses to acknowledge as such, have been killed as have 200 Russian military contractors. The mercenaries are probably employed by a private army that has close ties to the Russian defense ministry.

Syria is not the only issue on which the U.S. and Turkey differ. One is the charge that the U.S. Central Command and the CIA sided with the plotters of the failed coup in July 2016 to topple the government, which in fact was carried out by a faction in the Turkish armed forces. But the Syrian

dilemma is the most pressing and ominous issue.

The U.S. and Turkey differ over operations in Syria, increasingly because of the Turkish offensive by aircraft and ground troops against the area of Afrin in northern Syria held by Kurds, intended to push Kurdish militias with whom the U.S. is friendly, away from Turkish borders. The issue stems from events in 2014. As ISIS was gaining strength in Syria and Iraq, Turkey refused the call by the U.S. to help check them, and thus the U.S. turned to Kurdish militias.

The U.S. wants Turkey to focus on fighting and destroying ISIS, but Turkey is primarily concerned about the influence of Syrian Kurds on its border. The U.S. has been supporting the main Syrian Kurdish group, YPG (Syrian Democratic Forces). However, Turkey regards YPG as linked to PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party), which it considers a terrorist group. The U.S. says the Turkish fight against the Kurds is lessening the fight against ISIS.

Discussions between Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara in February 2018 reached no agreement. Both sides want to defeat ISIS, end terrorism, and achieve peace in Syria. But the Turks are advancing into west Syria, and want to move the main Syrian Kurds, YPG, that liberated the town of Manbij, former ISIS stronghold, where U.S. Special Forces and military advisers are deployed, to east of the Euphrates river.

Iran is increasingly present. It has been using Afghanistani, and Pakistani Shia militias, Hezbollah, and its own Revolutionary Guards, headed by Major-General Qasem Soleimani. It has been building an underground factory in Lebanon that will provide Hezbollah with long range, precise missiles. Israel is confronted with an existential threat. To prevent this, in December 2017, Israel destroyed Iranian built military facilities at al-Kiswab, near Damascus.

An Iranian drone flew into Israel which responded on February 10, 2018, by attacking Syrian positions and Iranian targets in Syria. The danger remains. For the first time an Israeli F-16 fighter plane was shot down by Syrians.

The Trump administration is faced with a number of difficult and complex foreign policy problems but it is crucial to tackle the Syrian issue and to reach accommodation on it with both Russia and Turkey.