

Editorial

The Wars Go On.....

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The conflict that has engulfed Syria over the past five years has been a horrendous humanitarian catastrophe that has, and continues to have, very real serious consequences not only for the people of Syria but for neighbouring states and increasingly regions beyond the Middle East. Syria is beset by two major cross-cutting wars, one largely between the Syrian government and opposition forces and the other between the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and a wide range of local and external actors. The war between the forces of President Bashar al-Assad and a myriad of opposition forces has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and an unknown number of wounded, and generated an immense tide of refugees that have spilled beyond adjacent countries to flood into Europe with serious political consequences for the unity of the European Union. The threat posed by ISIL today transcends Syria and Iraq to affect extra-regional states. In countries such as Libya and Afghanistan ISIL has established fairly significant associate organizations that claim allegiance to its flag and beliefs, while elsewhere in Asia and Africa small yet threatening franchises have emerged. ISIL has long had a fairly long reach, as it has utilized various social media to endeavour to inspire seemingly innocuous foreign civilians to commit 'lone-wolf' terrorist attacks, such as occurred in December 2015 in San Bernardino, California, and to entice legions of both the young and

the old of both genders to join ISIS in Syria. In the past six months the devastating terrorist attacks in France, Turkey, Iraq and Belgium demonstrated the ISIL leadership's murderous intent and capability to strike at its enemies through the commission of atrocities against these states innocent citizens. Yet in spite of the dire consequences that have occurred and the prospect of more to come, there appears to be no end in sight for these two major conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Over the past year there have been many developments in the conflict between the Syrian government and the groups that oppose it. Most notable perhaps was that in late August 2015 Russia started to build up ground and air capabilities in Syria. The US interpreted this effort as Russia providing more arms and aircraft to the then relatively beleaguered Assad government. The US, and indeed the rest of the world, was thus caught wrong footed in September when Moscow announced that it was joining the ongoing international coalition campaign against 'terrorists' which had been attacking ISIL targets in Syria and Iraq for almost a year. Very shortly it was evident that the sustained aerial campaign Russian military forces were embarking on was intended to provide support to the Syrian government, as the primary targets being struck were the numerous opposition groups fighting against Assad regime forces. There were any number of assessments, including from US President Barak Obama, that Russia would soon discover that it had inserted itself into a quagmire from which it would struggle to extract itself. These assessments, however, have proven to be misplaced, as Russia reduced its forces operating in Syria in mid March 2016 after its support furnished the means for the Syrian government forces to consolidate many areas where they had been under pressure, regain ground previously lost and expand the territory under its control.

Russia's intervention into the Syrian conflict was understandably not welcomed by the US and its coalition partners. Russia's aerial operations and Syrian government forces' gains against opposition forces, many of which are directly or indirectly supported by one or another members of the anti-ISIL coalition, added yet another dimension of complexity to the already inordinately complex conflict. Yet Russia's intervention has had some salutary effects due to the leverage Moscow obtained with the Assad government through its direct military support. Moscow's influence with the Assad government, along with its diplomatic efforts in cooperation with the US, resulted in the agreement to a partial ceasefire at the end of February 2016 that has held

longer than most expected. The UN-led negotiations on the future of Syria that were restarted on 13 April 2016 were only possible due to Russia's and the US's willingness to strong arm their clients and, in the case of the US its anti-Assad partners in the anti-ISIL coalition, into participating. That US and Russian diplomats have been talking about shared goals and Syrian opposition groups claiming they have developed a level of unity that will bolster their capability to extract concessions from Damascus, has allowed for a glimmer of optimism that the talks in Geneva might achieve some positive outcomes. Yet even as the negotiations opened the partial ceasefire is crumbling, with serious fighting resuming between anti-Assad groups and Assad government forces in Aleppo province and eastern parts of Damascus. Equally worrisome is that while the Syrian government has sent a delegation to the Geneva talks, Assad spokespeople have been adamant that Assad stepping aside or leaving is simply not acceptable, seemingly backing up this stance by holding parliamentary elections in government controlled areas on the day Geneva talks opened. There is no way to know what will happen at the Geneva talks at the time of writing -- only time will tell -- but the events in Syria over the preceding two weeks suggests that whatever glimmer of faint optimism might have been previously present may now be fading into the distance.

The cross-cutting conflict to that between the Assad government and opposition forces is the fight against ISIL. US military leaders regularly assert that estimates that several tens of thousands of ISIL fighters may have been killed, an increasing number of ISIL leaders both high and low eliminated, and the loss by ISIL of some 40% of the territory it had controlled in Iraq and some 10% of that in Syria are indications that the anti-ISIL campaign has started to gain some momentum.

The campaign clearly has made some headway in Iraq over the past year. But what has been achieved is uneven. In northern Iraq fighting continues between Iraqi Kurdish forces and ISIL forces, but while Kurdish pesmerga forces managed to gain ground near Sinjar in an effort to able to block ISIL reinforcement from Syria, the battle lines in this part of the country remain fairly static with Kurdish positions reminiscent of World War I trench lines. More progress has been made in central Iraq where the Iraqi military, fulsomely supported by coalition airstrikes, managed to wrest control of Ramadi from ISIL forces, albeit leaving the small city effectively in ruins. This success indicated

a modicum of improvement in the capability of the Iraqi military under the tutelage of American military trainers, but it is far from being ready to take on ISIL in a major campaign such as will be required to retake Mosul. The military strategy appears to be chip away at ISIL, to take control of the main roadways and towns in order to slowly isolate and squeeze ISIL forces in Mosul, as well as in other significant cities such as Fallujah. This pythonesque strategy will almost certainly be slow and difficult, for since the recapture of Ramadi Iraqi government forces efforts to take more ground from ISIL has had indifferent results, with only some small successes and some obvious failures.

The situation in Iraq is definitely not helped by the fractious character of the central Iraqi government. President Haider al-Abadi is confronted with obstreperous political opponents, rampant corruption and an economy weakened by low oil prices. The central government continues to be deeply reluctant to pass on more than the barest minimum of arms and military equipment to the Kurds or Sunni tribal groups that are willing to fight against ISIL, out of fear that either if well armed may seek to gain their independence, and it has been completely unwilling to allow the US or any other state to provide arms and military supplies directly to them. The Iraqi central government has become paralyzed, incapable of governing effectively the areas that are under its control, never mind being able to arm and train its forces and conduct successful military campaign to regain the territory it has lost to ISIL. Thus while some advances have been made in Iraq, the road to regaining Mosul and other lost territory will be long, slow and arduous, and almost certainly will not be at an end even if and when Mosul is recaptured.

The concordant coalition aerial campaign against ISIL in Syria also seems have made some headway. Yet the number of ISIL members that may have been killed, while seemingly impressive if correct, is essentially meaningless for the same US military leaders acknowledge that ISIL still has a fighting force of upwards of some 30,000 or more - and foreign individuals of both genders from all over the world continue to enter Syria to join ISIL. More significant is that between the efforts of various ground forces and coalition, and in some cases Russian, airstrikes, ISIL has ceded some ground over the past six to eight months, including Palmyra which recently fell to Syrian government forces supported by Russian airpower and special operations forces. But this measure may be deceptive, for the ISIL leadership appears to have learned from its defeats by prioritizing its military operations instead of conducting operations widely across multiple fronts,

with its forces in recent weeks having retaken a number of towns it had lost to opposition forces or Syrian government forces. Possibly more promising is that the steady improvement of coalition intelligence on ISIL, on its main leaders and how it works as an organization, along with improvements in military operational intelligence, has resulted in an increasing number of successful air strikes against individual personnel that occupy positions in the various leadership echelons of ISIL. But eliminating ISIL leaders in positions high and low through kill or capture operations will not bring significant success any time soon, or possibly at all, given that individual leaders can and will be replaced. What 'high value targeting' may accomplish, however, is to weaken ISIL over time through the removal of its experienced, competent leaders, which may hamper the organizations' capability to conduct successful offensive and/or defensive ground operations in Syria and Iraq, and indeed to plan and conduct terrorist operations abroad. When all is said and done, however, ISIL is well entrenched in the Middle East and developing substantive branches which are becoming deep-rooted in other countries, and it will almost certainly remain a threat to one degree or another for a great many years to come.

What started as peaceful public protests by citizens against their authoritarian government has, five years on, become an enduring nightmare. Neither of the two main intersecting conflicts are going to be easy to resolve. The negotiations on the future of Syria that restarted on 13 April 2016, a mere five days ago as of the time of this writing, do not appear likely to make any real substantive progress, as the Syrian government is adamant that it will not agree to Assad stepping aside in favour of a transitional government and the opposition forces are equally immovable in their position that not even some form of power sharing arrangement that leaves Assad in power can be accepted. This assessment may be wrong, for it is possible that the US and Russia, supported by the international community, may be able to extract some concessions by leaning very heavily on their respective clients, but the degree of influence the US or Russia can bring to bear on these two parties with respect to the core positions they hold will be limited. The war against ISIL is not one in which there is any chance for a negotiated settlement. ISIL's terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Europe have heightened concern about the threat it poses, and as a consequence there have been

innumerable calls for the US and its allies, and indeed the international community as a whole, to act more decisively. Yet in spite of the myriad of proposals for how the US and the world should respond, there is no silver bullet that will address the problem. The possibility of the US and other states committing very substantial ground forces to combat directly ISIL is currently not on the table for obvious political reasons, but even were such an option plausible there have been no good answers to whether such a course of action would in fact succeed militarily in doing more than simply scattering ISIL into the local population and/or to other counties in the Middle East and beyond where they would continue to pose a real and dangerous threat. The current approach, at least as suggested in recent newspaper reports, is that the US, and possibly other states, will intensify further what they are already doing. This may allow the anti-ISIL and indeed the anti-Assad forces to increase their capability to exert more pressure on ISIL and the Syrian government, but it means there is still an extremely long road ahead. In the meantime, the wars -- and their damaging human and political consequences -- will go on