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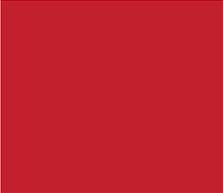
## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOUTHERN SYRIA - THE ELEMENTS AND TRAJECTORY OF A CIVIL WAR**

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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOUTHERN SYRIA - THE ELEMENTS AND TRAJECTORY OF A CIVIL WAR

## SOUTHERN SYRIA'S IMPORTANCE TO KEY PLAYERS

The war in southern Syria gets less media and analyst attention than Syria's northern conflict areas. Yet the struggle over the south is at least as important as the northern war's high-profile Turkish ground incursions, Russian air campaigns, and US-led war on ISIS. It is also just as likely to trigger international conflict and transform the region's geopolitics. Despite recent ceasefire agreements brokered by the United States, Russia, and Jordan, they are far from certain to lead to a lasting end to violence between the regime and the opposition in the south.

Southern Syria encompasses the deserts of Homs and Damascus provinces, the Hawran plain including Suweida and Daraa provinces, and the Quneitra hills

southwest of Damascus city. In addition to its symbolism as the birthplace of the Syrian uprising in 2011, southern Syria's significance lies in its proximity to Israel, Jordan, and the Syrian capital. This makes it a critical geography for the conflict's key participants.

The Syrian regime and Iran understand that a south held by hostile forces would pose a permanent threat from insurgents who could be coopted by the United States, Jordan, and perhaps Israel. The Hawran area in the south is also historically important to the Alawite-dominated regime as it provided important Sunni support. It is home to most of Syria's Druze who, as a minority, have also helped legitimize the regime as a cross-sectarian protector of minorities. Thus, to the regime, losing the south means ceding control of Syria's borders, inviting foreign intervention, losing key constituencies, and

facing open-ended insurgent pressure on the capital. It cannot accept such an outcome, even if it temporarily tolerates it due to limited resources and competing priorities. Russia's interest in the south overlaps with the regime's single-minded focus on survival.

Southern Syria is also critical for the insurgency, though not for the same reasons. Unlike the unitary regime, there is no 'Syrian Insurgency' in the sense of a unified, coherent entity with a concrete, nationwide political vision or organization. Additionally, partly because Islamism is less rooted in the south than the north, the insurgency in southern Syria has tended toward parochialism, tribalism, and localized conflict. In other words, southern Syria is important to a broad array of rebel groups partly because that is where they are from, and are therefore deeply invested. The land border with Jordan over which rebels have received covert US support makes the south critical for the insurgency's continued survival.

Iran is arguably the foreign power most invested in southern Syria, for defensive and opportunistic reasons. Like the regime, it recognizes that a rebel-held south would permanently threaten the government in Damascus – its only Arab ally; a conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon; an active front with Israel; a link to Lebanon's substantial Shia Muslim population; and a critical source of strategic depth in a region of enemies. Defending these assets requires ensuring a friendly government in Syria. Whereas it was not at first inevitable that a successful Syrian uprising would have brought a regime hostile to Iran to power, after years of Iranian-backed violence against the opposition any replacement for the Bashar Assad government will be deeply antagonistic toward the Iranian regime. That alone commits Iran to defending Assad by keeping the south out of rebel control.

Hezbollah was drawn into southern Syria for some of the same reasons, arguably

under greater pressure than befell Iran. Its key strategic priorities are securing its position in Lebanon including its supply lines, military autonomy and dominance of Shia politics, and defending itself and its constituency against Israel and Sunni militants. These goals require a friendly regime in Syria and, in the event the regime falls, control of key Syrian territory. Protecting Damascus requires securing its southern flank, but Hezbollah also needs to secure the capital's western mountainous flank in the Qalamoun (Hezbollah has consistently fought for this ground as a buffer against Sunni Syrian militants). The approaches to the capital are critical to Hezbollah's strategic depth.

Iran and Hezbollah first entered Syria to defend the Syrian regime and their core geo-strategic interests, but new ones have emerged along with new obligations and opportunities. Southern Syria offers a potential new front against Israel in Quneitra province and

southwest of Damascus. There have already been Israeli airstrikes on apparent Hezbollah and Iranian assets in those areas. Israel is acting on the reasonable assumption that the two are exploiting Syria's civil war to establish a new front against Israel by surveilling the area and building a military infrastructure. This will probably remain an important objective for Iran and Hezbollah, though ensuring the regime's security takes priority for now.

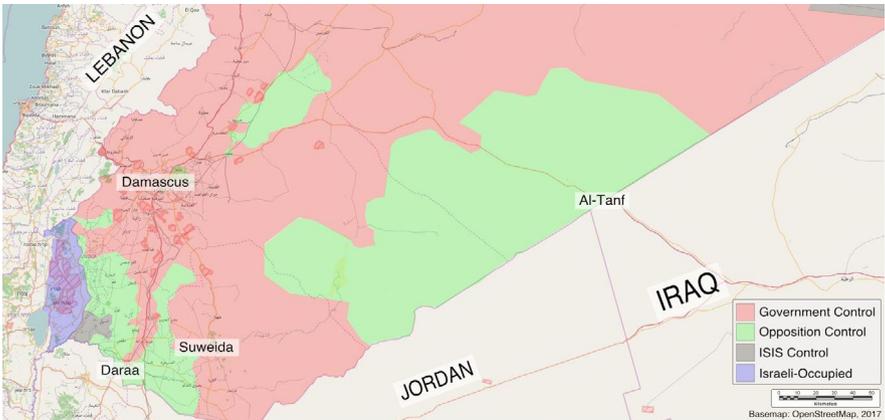
Israel has overwhelming military superiority over the Assad regime. Hezbollah, however, already poses a potent asymmetric threat to Israel from Lebanon – one that has deterred Israel from attacking Hezbollah even as it amassed a large ballistic rocket arsenal. Additionally, Israel is likely to evaluate all local, limited threats in the context of Iran's aggressive regional posture, strong anti-Israel rhetoric, and significant conventional capabilities. For this reason, Israel can tolerate fragmented localized rebel

groups on its border, but not Iranian-backed forces that are part of a larger strategic threat.

Jordan hosts hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees from southern Syria. As a relatively poor country it is ill-equipped to handle this. Yet the refugees' fate is ultimately tied to the military situation in southern Syria. Jordan has a deep interest in peace or at least de-escalation across its northern border but is also affected by which party controls southern Syria, which is potentially problematic. For example, an Iranian-controlled south would put a radical Shia sectarian regime with well-armed proxies on its border, whereas a south dominated by Sunni extremists would allow them to target the monarchy. Jordan would likely prefer the Syrian regime reassert control with Russian security guarantees to either of these scenarios.

The United States is the actor with the least well-defined interests and position in southern Syria. On the

one hand, it is by far the most powerful and least vulnerable one. It shares no border with Syria and no actor in the country can pose a catastrophic threat to US security. Yet, it is partly because the United States faces many options and few constraints that its exact interests and behavior are difficult to discern or predict. Other factors include a new administration in the White House that has granted greater freedom of action to the military and relayed inconsistent public messaging on Syria. Nevertheless there are some clear US interests in southern Syria, partly shaped by the interests of its local allies, Israel and Jordan. These include preventing the Islamic State from gaining a strong foothold in the south, using local southern militias to pressure IS, placing military pressure on the Assad regime and containing Iran and its proxies. It is less clear what the hierarchy of these interests is, how reconcilable they are, and whether or how this fluctuates over time. It is also noteworthy that none



Source: The Carter Center (2017)

of these interests necessarily require US support for an armed opposition to the Assad regime.

## MAJOR TRENDS

After capturing Aleppo in December 2016, regime and Iranian-backed forces were able to redeploy forces to other fronts. Southern frontlines that had been relatively static became active again as pro-regime forces moved to subdue the insurgency, including by threatening its supply lines from Jordan. Iranian-led militias have pushed against rebels in the Syrian desert and near Daraa City – an indication of their priorities

even as rebels continued to pose a threat in Idlib and Hama provinces and ISIS remains in control of Deir al Zour.

Despite its inclusion in the Russian and Turkish-backed Astana Agreement’s fourth “safe zone”, Daraa saw the most violence among the four areas. One reason is these agreements usually exclude the extremist group Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), whose cadres are often in close proximity to US and Jordanian-backed rebel groups. HTS has no interest in abiding by a peace agreement which leaves it as a target. As a result, it occasionally acts as a spoiler by attacking regime

forces, who in turn tend not to distinguish between HTS and rebel groups party to the ceasefire. The recent regime offensive in Daraa began as a campaign against HTS but eventually targeted mainstream rebel factions.

The United States, Russia, and Jordan have since brokered a de-escalation plan in the south. It has largely held in ensuing weeks, but is an unnatural situation in which the regime is tolerating hostile, foreign-backed opposition salients extending into critical government territory. The regime is extremely sovereignty-driven and wary of leaving “pockets” in strategic areas that foreign or local adversaries could exploit in the future to threaten it. Further, US officials indicate there is little to no US appetite for an armed proxy confrontation with the Assad regime in southern Syria or elsewhere. The United States is instead focusing single-mindedly on fighting extremists and securing Jordan’s border from jihadist infiltration.

Israel has an interest in keeping Iran away from its border, while Jordan has an interest in its large refugee population returning to Syria. Both are building up respective proxy partners in the south: Jordan is focused on joint efforts with the United States to build a local Arab anti-ISIS force, while Israel is reportedly cultivating local partners to police a buffer zone along the Golan-Syria border. However, there is little open source data on this, and given Syrian rebel groups’ generally poor operational security, one would expect to hear more if these proxy build-ups are substantial. The absence of information could indicate Israeli efforts are insufficient to create a new strategic reality in southern Syria.

Quneitra in the Syrian Golan has emerged as an important front. Free Syrian Army rebels and HTS have used it since 2012 to push towards Damascus. Foreign support for rebel factions and supply lines from Jordan had alarmed the regime and its allies at

one point. The opposition momentarily controlled most of the area, prompting regime counteroffensives involving IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) advisors, Hezbollah, and Shiite militia from Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Israel has reacted with warning shots and sporadic airstrikes on regime assets. Less visibly, it has provided public services to Syrian residents across the demarcation line, likely in hope of creating a zone of influence. Should Iranian-backed forces capture Quneitra, Iran would effectively open a new front in Israel's northeast. This would give Hezbollah the chance to shift or expand the focus of its "resistance" to Israel from Lebanon to Syria.

Southeast Syria has become the theater for the first confrontation between Iran and the United States in Syria. At the al-Tanf border crossing, where US forces are supporting Arab allies against IS, escalation with Iran and its partners seemed very likely at one point, as the former appeared poised to advance into IS-held

territory that the regime coveted. That risk appeared to subside after Iranian-backed forces preempted any US-led push north or east of al-Tanf by taking the territory themselves. The United States did not resist this, leading Iran and the regime to believe they could take control of Eastern Syria without confronting the United States, which remains disinclined to respond to provocations outside of its imposed 55-km deconfliction radius. As a result, the US coalition in al-Tanf was effectively contained without combat. US officials now anticipate a long-term US presence in al-Tanf, albeit confined within the deconfliction radius.

The geopolitical environment was largely unchanged in 2017 despite the election of a new US president. The United States has focused on fighting ISIS, cut support to anti-regime rebels, and pursued de-escalation agreements based on the assumption of Russian goodwill and influence over Iranian and regime behavior.

Multiple failures to establish meaningful ceasefires on the same premises in the past proved they were flawed. There are persons in the Trump administration advocating a more aggressive approach against Iran in Syria, but this seems unpopular among the military and the President has not endorsed it.

## FUTURE SCENARIOS

Below are descriptions of three impactful and plausible scenarios, along with their respective likelihoods and strategic implications. Of course, the scenarios are not exhaustive, and southern Syria may end up resembling a hybrid of them.

### Scenario: Status Quo Ante

#### *Description*

In this scenario, forces controlled by the Syrian government reassert control over the southern areas, ending the insurgency there as a strategic threat. The regime succeeds in coopting

or coercing enough of the local population to restore sufficient order and obedience to the state to stabilize the area. Security remains imperfect but allows refugees in Jordan to gradually return, and international aid helps keep them in Syria itself. Iran remains influential in Syria but the Assad government retains the authority and capabilities to assert its strategic independence, balance between Russia and Iran, and dominate the south.

#### *Likelihood*

Judging from the current military balance, the regime's low resources and capabilities, and the deep role of foreign actors in the Syrian conflict, 'Status Quo Ante' seems unlikely but not inconceivable. The Syrian government and armed forces have been severely degraded by years of attrition and loss of resources and capacity, but have survived as the most capable Syrian military and bureaucratic organizations. The regime also retains considerable popular support,

and the United States has explicitly abandoned covert support for the Syrian rebels. Among the Syrian parties, the regime is at the least first among equals, making it relatively well-placed to dominate other local factions given consistent foreign support and limited resistance from external adversaries.

### *Implications*

The regime's inherent vulnerabilities and deep unpopularity among many in Southern Syria would make this an unstable state of affairs in the long run. However, it is also an arrangement that would enjoy support or acquiescence from key foreign actors. While Iran and Hezbollah would not have an active Syria frontline against Israel, they would certainly prefer total regime control over the alternatives. Russia, for its part, has always sought to restore central government authority in Syria, and would welcome this scenario. Jordan's antagonism toward the regime is largely based on its alignment with Iran,

but this predates the Syrian conflict and Jordan lived with it. It would certainly welcome the opportunity to return refugees back to a pacified southern Syria. Israel would still prefer this scenario over Iranian and Hezbollah dominance in southern Syria, as would the United States. In summary, 'Status Quo Ante' is ideal for none of the main foreign players but probably acceptable to all. Whether Syrians in the south would accept it is a different matter, which presents a strong long-term possibility of violence.

### **Scenario: Iranian Dominance**

#### *Description*

In this scenario, the war is trending against the insurgency largely due to the deep involvement of Iranian advisors, foreign Shia militia drawn from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Hezbollah. These forces overwhelm the rebels, cut their supply lines from Jordan and, in the absence of capable regime forces, find themselves in

control of southern Syria. The regime retains some political influence but its dependence on the more capable Iranian-led coalition places the latter in charge of strategic matters. Hezbollah begins probing opportunities to establish a significant military infrastructure near the Israeli-Syrian border, mindful of the risk of Israeli military action. Israel comes under pressure to formulate a strategy based on pre-emption, deterrence, attrition, or a combination of all three.

### *Likelihood*

This scenario is more likely than 'Status Quo Ante'. Judging from Iran's sophisticated proxy strategy, significant resources and deep military commitment to Syria, it seems destined to play a large and perhaps dominant role in Syria's strategic affairs. This scenario includes Iranian control of such critical territory as the approaches to Damascus, overland supply lines between Iraq and Lebanon, and southern border with Israel. Iran and

Hezbollah rather than Russia control the military effort that saved Assad. Iran has also shown strategic opportunism, exploiting circumstances that allow it to establish new equities in important geographies. It and Hezbollah could set up a security architecture in southern Syria as part of a deliberate anti-Israel strategy or simply out of necessity to preserve their war gains. As the insurgency is weakened elsewhere in Syria and ISIS is defeated in Iraq, Iran will have more resources and manpower to commit to consolidating key territory in Syria.

### *Implications*

This scenario would be locally and geopolitically destabilizing. In the long run, a coalition of Iranians and foreign Shia militias would be even less likely to secure popular support or acceptance than the regime. There would be occasional violence and repression, though this could be more likely to involve Iranian-backed Shia militias than Iran or Hezbollah

directly, both of whom would be preoccupied with larger strategic issues.

The most obvious new fault line would involve Israel and Iran, but the likely form and intensity of a new conflict are difficult to forecast. Israel has lived in relative peace with a Hezbollah military buildup on its border in Lebanon for 11 years. It is not a foregone conclusion that Israel would violently oppose Iranian attempts to repeat that experiment in southern Syria. Yet Israel and Hezbollah spent decades refining 'rules of the game' in Lebanon. This has given them a better (albeit still imperfect) understanding of one another's red lines, whereas the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation on a new front in Syria is higher. Additionally, Israel may well draw the line at yet another Iranian controlled neighbor – one reason why it has attacked Iran and Hezbollah in Syria more harshly and preemptively than in Lebanon. Israel may aggressively cultivate local proxies drawn from the Sunni

and Druze populations to deter and confront Iran and its proxies, in addition to taking kinetic action against Iran and its allies.

'Iranian Dominance' would be a volatile but perhaps a durable scenario, carrying the risk of US involvement on Israel's behalf, Iranian targeting of US interests, proxy war between Iranian and Israeli-backed groups, and/or escalation between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Indeed, Iranian dominance of southeastern Syria in particular would place it in close proximity to US troops and their Arab and Kurdish allies. While the United States is under less pressure than Israel to react to what is to it a marginal threat in a non-critical geography, incidents at al-Tanf demonstrate that there is already a high risk of US-Iranian escalation (although the United States seems to have backed off from a confrontation there).

## Scenario: A Rebel Territory

### *Description*

In this scenario, various insurgent groups including elements of the US and Jordan-backed Southern Front resist regime encroachment and consolidate contiguous territory. Rebels capture the regime's salient to the northern Golan Heights and Deraa city, and sever its supply lines to Suweida province. They reach an agreement with the Druze population on the province's neutrality. Insurgents also defeat the IS-affiliated Jaysh Khalid ibn Walid in southwest Daraa. They thereby destroy or drive out all hostile parties in mostly contiguous territory stretching from the Golan Heights in the west to Al Tanf in the east. The United States and possibly Israel provide strong material support for operations and to consolidate a rebel-held 'buffer zone' on the border aimed at preventing Iranian encroachment.

### *Likelihood*

It is difficult to gauge this scenario's likelihood with certainty, as it depends heavily on US priorities and commitments that are still unclear. Yet it seems increasingly unlikely. Rebels in the south rely on US material support and occasionally direct protection, both of which are definitely receding. Without substantially greater support, they will probably lose their current territory to the regime or Iranian-backed militias, which would rule out this scenario. The Trump administration's rhetoric has attacked Iran and emphasized the importance of allies such as Israel and Jordan. There are persons in the White House that favor a more offensive posture against Iran and the regime in Syria, while the military and particularly CENTCOM are more risk-averse, preferring to focus only on fighting IS. Israel and Jordan alone do not have the will or capability to protect a rebel zone in open-ended opposition to Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime. The

southern insurgency's fate will therefore be determined by US policy, which has shifted from equivocation to explicit abandonment of the covert mission to support rebel forces. 'Rebel Control' is a low probability but high impact scenario.

### *Implications*

This scenario would constitute the most dramatic break from the pre-war status quo, placing a critical region of Syria in the hands of Western-backed forces that may co-exist with Israel. Although it is very unlikely to form a strong, cohesive unitary state with the ability to project power, rebel-controlled southern Syria would nonetheless be a vulnerability for the regime and Iran due to its enduring belligerence and alignment with hostile Western powers. Iran and the regime would rightly view it as a potential jumping off point for a US-backed offensive on their remaining territories, and the insurgents themselves as proxy groups for foreign enemies. This scenario

would leave the regime, Iran, and Russia worse off than Israel, the United States, and the Syrian opposition – the latter all ending up in a better position than they started. Unless the insurgents secure protection from air attacks through foreign intervention or acquisition of anti-aircraft weapons, however, they would come under constant regime (and possibly Russian) bombardment and could not govern effectively. This only further highlights the centrality of US and to a lesser extent Israeli intentions and commitment in this scenario.

## **CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT**

On July 9, 2017, a ceasefire brokered by the United States, Russia, and Jordan covering Southern Syria went into effect. Shortly thereafter, the United States announced it was ending its support for anti-Assad rebel forces. Fighting has decreased for now, but it is far too early to know whether this will reduce violence over the long term, much less contribute to an

overall political settlement in Syria.

Although it is not a party to the ceasefire, Israel is clearly an interested and active observer. Indeed, with the combination of Jordanian fears of another mass refugee wave from the greater Daraa area and Israeli hostility to a new Hezbollah and Iranian front on its border it is in the US interest to continue pressing for a ceasefire that would stave off both these eventualities.

Russia was reportedly reluctant at first to agree to a ceasefire on any basis other than the Russian-dominated Astana peace talks, from which the United States is effectively excluded. Apparently, Russia concluded that opposing a ceasefire that furthered both Jordanian and Israeli interests would not be worth the ensuing diplomatic cost. Perhaps Russia believes Iran and the regime would be more useful exploiting US gains against ISIS in Eastern Syria than fighting in the south. That would increase

the appeal of a ceasefire, especially as it does not ban attacks on HTS which can always be used as cover for attacks on the opposition.

Southern Syria's fate will be a reliable indicator of US and Russian intentions and capabilities. Russia seeks to preserve the Assad regime but also find a way to fold the opposition willingly back into the state's control. Sustaining a ceasefire in the south that allows the US-endorsed Geneva talks to proceed would be a reliable measure of Russian intentions and influence.

For its part, the Trump administration has yet to develop or communicate a clear objective or strategy for the Syrian conflict as a whole. It is tempted to declare victory over ISIS and discard long-term US interest or influence in Syria. This approach would certainly facilitate Hezbollah and Iran's long-term plans for deepening a strategic presence in the country. Unfortunately for the United States, that is likely to threaten key allies, prevent any serious

reconciliation between Syrians, and lay the grounds for more political violence in Syria's future.

Southern Syria is, in short, a test case for the balance of intentions and capabilities in Syria. Can Russia restrain the regime and Iran from trying to retake the area? Will the United States play an active role to that end? The answers will help determine Syria's fate for the foreseeable future.

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