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Steven ERLANGER

Itamar, one of the things I have asked you to talk a bit about is Syria, because it hangs over the region in a very depressing way. You have written at least two books already on Syria and are now finishing a third, so over to you

Itamar RABINOVICH

Thank you. I was also the peace negotiator with Syria at a different time. The Syrian crisis was actually the focal point of Middle Eastern politics for several years and not just the Middle East. Waves of refugees rattled Europe in 2015 and 2016, and affected elections in Europe and Brexit, and the shockwaves reached all the way to the American elections at the end of 2016. Refugees, terrorists, thousands of Isis recruits who were European citizens trained in Syria and Iraq, fought there and came back to Europe and some of them are actually in sleeping cells of terrorism. I hope we will not hear from them again the way we did in Paris and Brussels, but they are there. It is not a local crisis, it was a major international crisis and a terrible humanitarian tragedy with half a million killed, many wounded and maimed, almost six million refugees out of Syria and almost half of the population displaced inside Syria.

One of the explanations for the complexity of this crisis was the fact that it was not one crisis, but three in one: domestic; regional; and international. The conflict between the regime and the opposition; the regional conflict between the camps supporting the regime and those supporting the opposition; and an international one. The domestic crisis, the civil war itself, was resolved in December 2016, when the regime with Russian and Iranian help captured Aleppo. That was the end of the civil war itself. The opposition practically does not exist, neither political nor military. There are still thousands of opposition fighters in the area of Idlib, but they are not operating out of Idlib.

We mean the civil war, we do not mean the normalisation of Syria as a state. The regime controls maybe 60% of the national territory. There is the Idlib area I mentioned. There is an area that has actually been conquered and managed by Turkey and the Kurds and the Syrian Democratic Front dominate at least 30% of the east and north east. It will be a while before a unitary Syrian state exists and exercises sovereignty over the national territory. There is also the question of reconstruction, a very costly project. Where will the money come from? Some of those who can offer the money, the United States, European countries, will not offer the money without the return of the refugees. However, the regime is not particularly interested in the refugees and apparently the leadership is quite happy with the situation that Syria is now a more homogeneous country, with fewer Sunnis and proportionately more Alawites, etc. The country is very far from normalisation. Furthermore, the end of the domestic conflict, meant an exacerbation of the regional and international conflict. Originally, Iran together with Russia actually dominated Syria. Bashar al-Assad remained in power, but he is not fully an independent ruler, he is very much under the boots of the Iranian and Russians. Turkey is a major interested actor. Largely the Kurdish question, the preoccupation, not to say obsession of Mr Erdogan, is not to have an autonomous area in Syria, certainly not to have a Turkish contiguity along the Turkish border and possibly connected to Iraq. This is the main motivating force in Turkish policy now. After making this massive investment in keeping Assad in power, Iran wants to benefit, and it has whetted the appetite of the Iranians who want to use the presence in Syria in order to continue to build their regional hegemony, in an effort to build a second Lebanon against Israel. In Lebanon, there is Hezbollah and there are more than 100 000 missiles and rockets, and they are now trying to build a military infrastructure in Syria. It is sort of an offensive/defensive attitude towards Israel. Of course, if Iran is making that investment, Israel is determined to prevent it.

Internationally, the two major actors are Russia and the United States. During most of the Syrian crisis, the United States was absent, with President Obama's determination not to be drawn in, to play a secondary role and Russia



came to play the major role. Under President Trump there is a change and more recently, a new team was given charge of implementing a policy, the essence of which is to deny President Assad money for reconstruction and to continue to exert pressure on him and through him on Iran and Russia. Russia is now the dominant actor in Syria. It has not only a naval base, but also an air base and with a very small investment in fact, has actually made substantial gains in Syria.

Assad is left with these two patrons, the Russians and the Iranians. He is actually more comfortable with the Russians, because they have limited ambitions. They do not want to manage, penetrate the society or expand Shiite influence. They are only interested in the hegemony and the projection of power and influence on the rest of the Middle East. It is likely that Assad will try to play-off the Russians against the Iranians.

Where does it leave us? It leaves us with a situation whereby the Syrian crisis, as distinct from the Syrian civil war, is far from being over. The normalisation of Syrian life, statehood, and politics will take several more years and the region and the world will have to continue to live with a Syrian problem that needs to be better managed in the future, than it has been in the past. Thank you.

Steven ERLANGER

Thank you, Itamar, very much.