

International Center for Enterprise Preparedness (InterCEP)

The Next Four Years: Update on Syria

Web Forum

On January 10, 2017, **Mathew J. Burrows**, who serves as the director of the Atlantic Council's Strategic Foresight Initiative in the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, discussed the current situation in the Middle East, with a focus on Syria. The web forum was titled *The Next Four Years: Update on Syria*, and the discussion addressed some important drivers of change in the region. A summary of the web forum is presented below.

The Middle East is one of the fastest changing regions in the world. In Syria there have been major changes in the last few months. The Assad regime now seems to be almost impregnable, having won a big prize with Aleppo. Assad's survival—under question just a few months ago—is assured, although it is still uncertain if he can reestablish his rule over all Syria. Developments in the Middle East in the near term will depend on many factors, including changing relationships between Turkey and Russia, the growing influence of Iran, oil prices, and U.S. policy under the Trump administration.

Russo-Turkish Rapprochement: Russia is involved in Syria in order to prop up the Assad regime. Although Russia and Turkey were at odds before, there is a growing convergence with respect to the interests of the two countries, including in attacking ISIS targets in the area Northeast of Aleppo. There could be further cooperation against some of the Kurdish positions in the region. This has geopolitical implications. Erdogan has been heavily criticized for his government's reaction after the recent coup attempt. This has strained EU – Turkey relations. Turkey may now be turning to Russia as a principal ally to address concerns over ISIS and the Kurds.

Iran's Influence in the Middle East: Iran is expanding its influence in the Middle East, and this includes their support of Houthis in Yemen. Assad's recent victory in Syria is significant for Iran as it means that their support for Hezbollah is assured. Iraq has also come under the influence of Iran and the Shia-led government is wary of doing anything that upsets Iran. These developments mean that the power structure in the region has changed. The Iranians have the upper hand with Sunni states increasingly concerned about growing Shia influence.

This is a historic shift in the Sunni-Shia balance in the region and Syria is a key test of that. There are a lot of reports that Hezbollah's resources have been strained by its fighting alongside Assad. Israeli analysis sees that as a good thing in the sense that they will be so occupied in Syria that they won't be working against Israel and Lebanon.

Another significant issue is that Iran will face elections soon. Hardliners could come back into power which would support Iranian militancy. But the new government will have to worry about growing economic discontent among the broader public.

Syrian Conflict after Aleppo: The Syrian Free Army and other rebel forces south of Aleppo are still in a position to fight. A lot of military analysts believe that Assad can take on and defeat those rebel groups in a piecemeal way. Turkish forces are currently operating in part of northern Syria and they want to stay to ensure that no Kurdish entity develops there. Turkey will remain there or will have an ability to reoccupy the area again if Assad fails. It's not clear at this point that Assad will be able to regain control over all the other areas controlled by rebels, and many analysts believe the country will remain divided in the near future. It will be impossible to reconstitute the economy without a significant number of refugees returning. One possible outcome is that Assad will be the strongest leader in Syria but there will be pockets of insurgents or rebels in various areas. The long-term risk that this scenario poses is that the country will continue to provide a haven and nursery for terrorists.

Trump's Strategy in the Middle East: There is little detail about Trump's Middle East strategy. He is interested in developing strong ties with Russia and possibly conducting joint operations with Russia to defeat ISIS. At this point he doesn't seem interested in major support for the rebels. The Gulf States have supported the rebels. That support may continue. But there hasn't been much success in getting the rebels to work together to recapture what has been lost. The big question is whether Trump will work with Russia and Turkey on a peace settlement for the Syrian conflict and other conflicts throughout the region. It is unclear how his administration will deal with Iran, and this complicates things because Iran is important in the region. If Trump tries to undo the nuclear arms agreement, then he will hand a gift to the Iran hardliners who always have contended that the US isn't trustworthy.

Oil Prices: If oil prices remain low that will limit the power of countries in the Middle East to wage war over the long term. Currently, the Gulf states are among the world's biggest arms buyers. Saudi Arabia is still trying to reform its economy. They are waging a very expensive war in Yemen against Iranian-backed Houthis. Oil prices may not support that level of investment in war year-after-year.

A major challenge for economies in the area is how to diversify their economies and how to deal with falling revenues from oil. This is not going away any time soon. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been more serious about how to diversify their economies than other countries in the region, but this issue remains critical.

Turkey and the European Union (EU): The other question for the near term is whether the deterioration of EU-Turkey relations will result in Turkey backing out of their current agreement to deal with the flow of refugees to Europe.

Germany, France, the Netherlands and potentially Italy will have important elections this coming year, and migrants are a big issue for the electorates in those countries. Migration concerns are reinforcing populist movements. A victory by National Front leader Marine Le Pen in France—still seen as unlikely—would completely reshape European politics, raising even higher barriers to refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and elsewhere.

In Europe, the concern is that the threat of terrorism is increasing, as evidenced by the recent Turkish club bombing and the Christmas attack in Berlin. The terrorist groups in Europe and Turkey seem to be very savvy in terms of their timing and where they are setting off bombs to get the most reaction and fear level. With elections coming up there may be increased attacks to drive their agenda. A series of terrorist attacks in France, for example, on the eve of the April/May presidential elections would dramatically increase the odds of a Le Pen victory. With a lot of terrorist groups the bloodiest attacks often take place after they've begun to decline and ISIS is being squeezed in Syria and the region.

Takeaway points:

The terrorist threat is still there, even if ISIS is gradually squeezed, there are other terrorist groups active in the region and that is unlikely to end any time soon.

Current developments in Syria and Iraq will not lower the feelings of alienation in Sunni neighborhoods, or among Syria's Kurdish communities, and this may lead them to think of terrorism as their only viable option.

Additional Resources:

- Atlantic Council - Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/brent-scowcroft-center>
- Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP): <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>
- Center for Strategic and International Studies: <https://www.csis.org/>
- Georgetown University - Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies: <https://ceres.georgetown.edu/>
- Johns Hopkins University – School of Advanced International Studies: <https://www.sais-jhu.edu/>
- Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/>
- World Bank – Commodity Prices Outlook: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/143081476804664222/CMO-October-2016-Full-Report.pdf>