

As war reaches stalemate, Syrians are left to mull a federal solution

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

Just a few years ago, any talk of a multistate solution for Syria was taboo for both those who supported the regime of President Bashar Assad and those who opposed it. Neither side was willing to settle for anything less than full and unconditional control of metropolitan Syria, with Damascus as its capital. This has slowly been changing – on an unofficial level, at least – even after the Russian Air Force intervened to prop up Assad's regime in September 2015 and changed the dynamics of the conflict. Behind closed doors, officials in both camps admit that a full-scale military victory is impossible for either side and so is gluing together a country shattered by nearly six years of war. Decentralisation is a must and so is a more judicious redistribution of the country's wealth.

■ All the Syrian players, whether they admit it or not, have been sleepwalking towards partition or a multistate system.

Entire regions of Syria have suffered for many years because of neglect by the central government. This has heightened separatist tendencies and weakened a sense of national identity among several Syrian communities.

Some of these territories, such as oil-rich Deir ez-Zor on the Euphrates river, were visited only twice by the Syrian head of state since the creation of the republic in 1932. Al-

though in terms of its oil resources it is the richest of all Syria's governorates, its people were among the poorest in the land.

The inhabitants of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa on the Euphrates and Idlib in the north-west felt forgotten and ignored by government and history alike – and sank into poverty and backwardness.

Much of this was due to the succession of governments in Damascus that pampered only the capital and Aleppo, Syria's largest city before the war and its economic heart, because this was where the political elite and great landowners hailed from.

Today, the ambitions of both Arab and Syrian nationalists have suffered a dramatic defeat because of the war. Instead of pushing for wider Arab unity or a more cohesive Syrian republic, Syrians are reverting to sub-national and ethnic loyalties, calling for separate states.

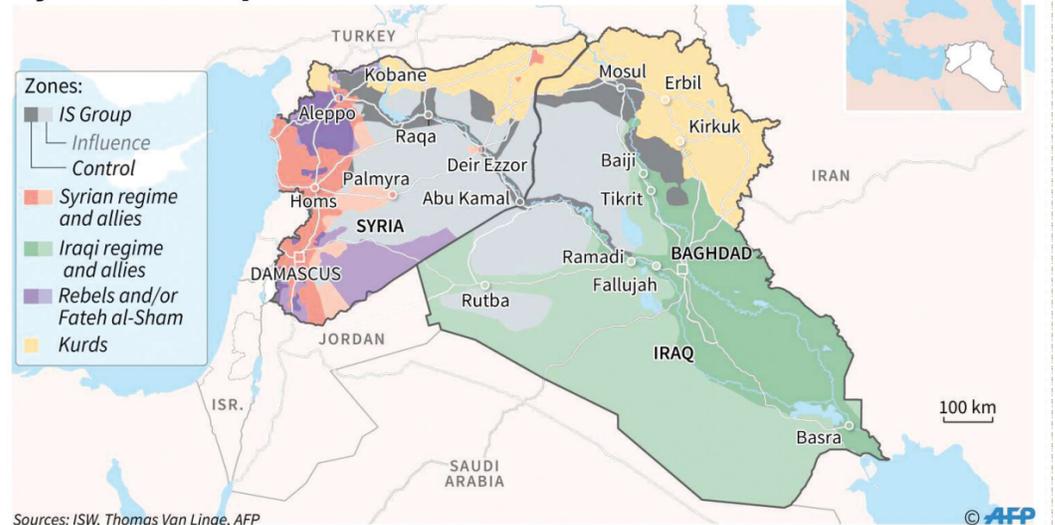
One counterproposal would be to pursue a federal system for the shattered republic, one that maintains the country's current borders but gives greater autonomy to its cities and towns, breaking the powerful grip of Damascus, which has been the focal point of centralised government since Ottoman rule ended after the first world war.

A solution being discussed entails breaking the country into four mini-states: Damascus and its environs, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, Idlib, and the Kurdish territories. There is no mention of "federalism" because this is taboo for Arab and Syrian nationalists.

This idea is not new. Such an arrangement existed a century ago. When the French took control of Syria in 1920, they divided it into six small states ruled by French appointees and linked by roads, commerce and economic interdependence.

The first, *État de Damas*, encom-

Syria and Iraq: zones of control



Sources: ISW, Thomas Van Linge, AFP

passed the ancient cities of Homs and Hama in central Syria and the Orontes River Valley with its capital in Damascus. All these cities are currently held by the Russian-backed government.

The mini-state established around Aleppo, which had been the hub for regional industry under the Ottomans and was one of the largest cities in the entire Middle East, was created in September 1920.

Aleppo proper was a magnet for traders, merchants, pilgrims and clerics of all religions, lying as it did along the Silk Road.

This statelet included the Sanjak of Alexandretta, a narrow coastal plain backed by a mountain chain on the lower valley of the Orontes river, and reached as far as the Euphrates and Deir ez-Zor. The Sanjak's main city was Antioch, a prosperous metropolis that Turkey annexed in 1939. An Alawite state was also created

with authority over the Mediterranean port cities of Latakia and Tartus and the Sanjak of Tripoli in northern Lebanon.

■ Behind closed doors, officials in both camps now admit that a full-scale military victory is impossible for either side

Much of that still applies today, with modifications. The state of Damascus is still there, controlled fully by the Syrian government. If the Russian-backed state forces retake Aleppo, then it too would be put under their control, breathing life into what people are now calling "Useful Syria".

Deir ez-Zor and Idlib would remain as elements within a new fed-

eral system, one controlled by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (despite a July rebranding still seen as al-Qaeda's Syrian branch) and one by the Islamic State (ISIS), as would Raqqa, the *de facto* capital of the ISIS caliphate.

The novelty in this version of federalism would be Kurdish autonomy east of the Euphrates but that is something that neither Damascus, Ankara nor Moscow are prepared to accept.

What is becoming ever clearer is that all the Syrian players, whether they admit it or not, have been sleepwalking towards partition or a multistate system in recent months after coming to the realisation that all of Syria – geographically, politically and militarily – is too difficult for them to control.

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of *Under the Black Flag* (IB Taurus, 2015).

Iraqi and Syrian moderates must join forces to quell extremism

Viewpoint



Tallha Abdulrazaq

Numerous statements have emerged from various Iraqi quarters that indicate that extremist Shia groups with loyalties to Iran plan to move their fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) from Iraqi territory to Syria.

In a seeming attempt to reassert himself in a gambit to regain Iraq's top job, former prime minister and current Vice-President Nuri al-Maliki made provocative statements that the battle for Mosul would extend to Syria and Yemen.

While Maliki's statements may be brushed aside as bluster, the most recent to make similar comments, however, was the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella organisation of predominantly Shia paramilitaries backed by Iran. PMF spokesman Ahmed al-Asadi said the PMF will side directly with Syrian President Bashar Assad. Assad is slaughtering his own people and has tallied up a kill count of more than 400,000, according to the United Nations.

The PMF has been accused of war crimes by international human rights organisations. As such, its declared intent to

transfer its fight from homeland defence to an offensive war in a different country smacks of the same standards employed by ISIS when it bombastically declared an end to the Sykes-Picot borders between Iraq and Syria. Both ISIS, which is counted as a Sunni extremist group, and the PMF, representing various Shia extremist groups, have been responsible for atrocities and it seems their strategic vision shares many commonalities, too.

This poses an incredibly dangerous problem for moderate, anti-establishment forces in both countries.

Syrians yearning and fighting for democracy for the past six years have already had to square off against Shia militants fighting at Iran's behest, from Lebanese Hezbollah to the Iraqi Hezbollah and Afghan Shia mercenaries fighting under the banner of the Fatemiyon Division, a subordinate unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Adding to their woes, ISIS has been used as a perfect excuse to justify a Russian intervention that has inflicted severe political and human costs on the revolutionaries, now branded conveniently as terrorists.

In Iraq, a peaceful protest movement arose in late 2012 following years of Sunni Arab disenfranchisement and discrimination at the hands of the Shia-dominated, Iran-backed Baghdad regime. Maliki, who held

the reins of power at the time, was virulently sectarian in his approach and even likened Sunni protesters to the killers of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, loved by all Muslims but claimed as a religious symbol by the Shia.

Such sectarian rhetoric encouraged militias and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to use massive violence to quell the demonstrators, as the protesters were accused of harbouring terrorists. This was again used as an excuse to violently disperse protest camps. This led to Sunni demonstrators taking up arms to defend themselves, a chaotic and violent environment that allowed ISIS to find a new foothold in Iraq.

Once ISIS is defeated, it seems natural for these other factions to reappear in one form or another, as the underlying social and political issues that led to the rise of ISIS have not been resolved. When that does happen and if Iraqi officials make good on their promise to move the fight to Syria in support of the Assad regime, Iraqi and Syrian moderates need to work together.

Much as the Shia militias, Assad's regime and Iran work together across borders due to their shared interests, so too must Iraqi and Syrian moderates, who are the increasingly silenced majority in this long-term struggle for self-determination and emancipation from the grip of dictators and sectarian

Both ISIS and the PMF have been responsible for atrocities.

hegemony.

The moderates cannot allow groups such as ISIS to simply filter back and forth across their borders. If that is allowed to happen, they will always be used as an excuse to inflict enormous brutality against them and as a tool in order to co-opt the international community, primarily the United States.

Both Assad and Iran have masterfully positioned themselves as the "lesser of two evils" and the West has bought it. Essentially, they are saying that either the West deals with them, the so-called rational (if distasteful) state actors, or they deal with extremist non-state actors, such as ISIS, bombing their cities.

However, moderate forces on both sides of the border must join forces in preventing the flow of men and materiel designed to further a sectarian war that has to end now before it is too late. Shia militias cannot be allowed to move from one country to another, just as their Sunni extremist counterparts must be stopped. In many ways, they are similar to each other, and both ISIS and the Shia militias threaten the futures of the people of Iraq and Syria, who want nothing more than peace, freedom and security.

Tallha Abdulrazaq is a researcher at the University of Exeter's Strategy and Security Institute in England.

Shia militias cannot be allowed to move from one country to another.