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A Battle to the Death in Syria

By Patrick Cockburn
August 19, 2016

Five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, his face bloody and bruised from bomb blast, stares out in bafflement at a world in which somebody had just tried to kill him. Pictures of his little figure in the back of an ambulance in Aleppo have swiftly become the living symbol of the slaughter in Syria and Iraq.

In the past there would have been more demands for spurious responses to the latest atrocity in Syria, with calls for the immediate overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad or no-fly zones – measures that sound positive but are never going to happen. This time round there is greater wariness internationally about such quick-fix solutions, opening the way for more realistic action to reduce the present horrendous level of violence.

I am always edgy about proposing anything that might mitigate the barbarity of the war in Syria and Iraq because explaining what aspects of the situation, however murderous, cannot be changed looks like justifying them. For instance, British policy since 2011 has been that Assad should go, but this was never going to happen because he controlled most of the population centres and was backed by Russia and Iran. To pretend otherwise might sound benign, but was in reality providing the ingredients for war without end.

The conflict is so difficult to end because it is half a dozen crises and confrontations combined into one: Sunni Arabs against ruling Alawite s and the minorities; better-off against poor; secular

against Islamists; city against country; Kurd against Arab; Kurd against Turk; Sunni against Shia; Iran against Saudi Arabia; Russia against – but sometimes cooperating with – the US.

The complexity of it all was well described by one commentator as being like three dimensional chess played by nine players and with no rules.

The twin sieges of government-controlled west and rebel-held east Aleppo, with the two antagonists wrapped round each other in a deadly embrace, is an apotheosis of the Syrian conflict. A cruder description might be “a Mexican stand-off” in which neither side can advance or retreat without danger. Russia has proposed a 48-hour ceasefire but, even if it occurs, this will not change the overall situation in which children like Omran Daqneesh are killed, maimed or orphaned.

All sides are terrified of each other and with good reason: Amnesty International last week published a report describing how 17,723 people, or 300 a month, have been tortured or otherwise done to death in Syrian government prisons since 2011. Most of the 4.8 million Syrian refugees come from opposition areas, many of which have been flattened by bombs, shells and bulldozers so they look like pictures of Warsaw in 1945.

Overall, the Sunni Arab communities in Syria and Iraq are facing ruin with all their cities devastated or depopulated, from Fallujah to Aleppo, and with their last great bastion, Mosul, about to come under attack.

Government supporters in west Aleppo also live in terror of a Salafi-jihadi victory by an opposition that no longer bothers to hide its sectarian agenda. The latest attack by the rebels which partially broke the siege of east Aleppo and cut the main supply road to the west was called the “Ibrahim al-Yousef” offensive. Yousef was the name of an officer in the Syrian army in 1979, who was secretly a member of a Sunni insurgent group and orchestrated the killing of 32 Alawites and the wounding of a further 54 in a notorious massacre in the Aleppo Artillery School. Jabhat al-Nusra, whose fighters led the successful offensive, has changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and formally severed its connection to al-Qaeda, but does not bother to conceal its extreme Sunni sectarian agenda.

Every community in Syria feels it is fighting an existential battle that can only end in victory or defeat. In the case of the latter there will be, as the French Algerians used to say, no alternative to “the suitcase or the coffin.” But, bad though the situation is, it is not quite hopeless and, while nobody is in a position to win a decisive victory, the political situation on the ground does develop and change and not always in a negative way.

The biggest change in the past two years is that the US and Russia have entered the war. This makes the conflict more intense and introduces Cold War rivalries, but it has the advantage that the heavy hitters are now publicly engaged in the conflict. They have influence, though they do not quite have control, over their allies and proxies and could, in theory, arrange ceasefires that are more than propaganda.

But one reason the war continues is that many participants still have a lot to gain by fighting on. For Russia, the Syrian battlefield has turned out to be a uniquely advantageous place to recalibrate to its relationship with the rest of the world. Last week it started using Hamadan airbase in Iran and is cooperating militarily with the belt of countries – Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon – in which the Shia are the most powerful political element.

The Sunni axis opposing Assad – most notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have been weakened by the failed military coup in Turkey. Earlier in August, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited St Petersburg for talks with President Putin which may modify, though not transform, Turkey's support for the rebel forces in Syria.

But Russia's gain is not necessarily America's loss and President Obama's policy in Syria and Iraq has been more successful than its critics give him credit for. It is beating back Isis in both countries, primarily by using air strikes to provide overwhelming fire power to its allies on the ground. It is not just that Isis has lost important cities and towns like Ramadi, Fallujah and Manbij, but it has been unable to launch effective counter-attacks for more than a year (except in the shape of terrorist attacks on civilians in the Middle East and Europe).

In Iraq, the war is getting close to a decisive win by the Shia and Kurds (four fifths of the population) over the Sunni Arabs (one fifth). Could the same thing happen in Syria where Sunni Arabs are 60 per cent of Syrians? Possibly, but the Baathist leadership in Damascus has always been much better at fending off defeat than winning a permanent victory. This was the lesson of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the long struggle for Lebanon in the following years.

Much the same has happened in Syria since 2011 with Assad refusing compromise with any of his numerous enemies. But because the Baathists are better at playing a weak hand than a strong one, they tend to exaggerate their own strength and lack the flexibility to conclusively win the game. They underestimate the fighting ability of Nusra and the extent to which it can draw on disaffected Sunnis in the countryside of northern Syria.

An encouraging sign might be that the 15-year-long Lebanese civil war did eventually end, but Syria is plugged into too many regional conflicts for the fighting to stop any time soon. It will only happen when more winners and losers emerge on Syria's many battlefields.