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Are We About to Witness the Last Battle of the Syrian War?



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Will it be the Last Battle? For three years, Idlib has been the dumping ground for all of Syria's retreating Islamist militias, the final redoubt of every combatant who has chosen to fight on, rather than surrender to the Syrian army and the Russian air force – and to [Hezbollah](#) and, to a far smaller degree, the Iranians.

Brigadier general [Suheil al-Hassan](#), the “Tiger” of Syrian military legend and myth – who can quote the poet Mutanabi by heart but prefers to be compared to Erwin Rommel rather than Bernard Montgomery – will surely take his “Tiger Forces” with him for the final reckoning between the Damascus regime and the Salafist-inspired and western-armed Islamists who dared to try, and very definitely failed, to destroy [Bashar al-Assad](#)’s rule.

Thanks to [Donald Trump](#), it’s all over for the “rebels” of Syria because they have been betrayed by the Americans – surely and finally by Trump himself in those [secret discussions with Vladimir Putin](#) in Helsinki, perhaps the most important of the “unknowns” of that translators-only chat – as they have by the Gulf Arabs.

Three weeks earlier, the Americans had told the rebels of southwestern Syria below the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights that they were on their own, and could expect no more military assistance. Even the [White Helmets](#), the first-responder heroes or propagandists of the rebel war (take your pick, but be sure they will soon be described as “controversial”) have been rescued with their families from the rebel lines by the Israelis and dispatched to safety in Jordan.

The Israelis are a bit miffed that they weren’t thanked by the White Helmets’ civil defence units for their humanitarian assistance – but what do they expect when they spent their time attacking Iranian, Hezbollah and Syrian forces during the war, supplying medical aid to the Nusrah Islamist fighters who came to their lines and never – ever – bombed Isis? Do the White Helmets want to be associated with Israel right now?

But the Israelis got what they really wanted: a Russian promise that the Iranians will stay far away from the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan plateau. It’s all a bit odd, since there are precious few Iranian troops in Syria – and you can forget the humbug from the Washington “experts” – but it fits in with Benjamin Netanyahu’s morbid and theatrical conviction that Iran is “a noose of terror” round Israel’s neck. In any event, Putin knows a thing or two about the Syrian war: bombs talk, but so does cash.

For why else has Putin just announced a \$50bn (£38bn) dollar Russian investment in Iran’s oil and gas industry? Isn’t this simply a downpayment for Iran’s past investment in Syria’s war? A “thank you but you can go now” gift from Moscow in return for a, no doubt, triumphal march-past in Tehran of Iran’s returning “victorious” forces, back from their Islamic revolutionary duties in Syria?

After meeting Putin in the Kremlin less than two weeks ago, Ali Akbar Velayati, “Supreme Leader” Khamenei’s senior adviser on foreign affairs, agreed that their talks “focused on Russian-Iranian cooperation ... as well as the situation in the region,

including developments in Syria”. And there you have it. Iran’s economy is propped up, but it’s got its Syrian marching orders from Putin.

None too soon for the Iranians, no doubt. It was quite a shock for me to see the rich and wealthier middle class Iranians flooding into Belgrade this past month, bringing their cash and treasures to the west through one of the few European countries still permitting visa-free entry for the sanctioned Iranians. Cheap flights from Tehran and other Iranian cities are landing daily in Serbia, and Belgrade’s hotels are packed with Farsi-speaking guests, all set – presumably – for new lives in the west. The European Union, needless to say, is threatening the Belgrade president that if he doesn’t block the profitable Iranian “tourists”, it will end the no-visa travel which Serbian citizens enjoy in the rest of Europe.

Meanwhile the Syrian army, fighting the last no-surrender Islamist groups around Deraa, will also return to the edge of the United Nations buffer zone on Golan where it was based before the civil war began in 2011. In other words, the “Southern Front” will be resolved, leaving only the Idlib Redoubt and the city of Raqqa which remains in the hands of militias who are still loyal – if they can be expected to be much longer, given the fact that Trump is ratting on them – to the US. Putin can probably solve this problem, if he hasn’t already done so in his Trump pow-wow.

But Idlib is a bigger deal. No doubt, we shall see further Russian-sponsored “reconciliation” talks between the Syrian authorities and the rebel groups inside the province. There will be agreements, private and public, whereby those who wish to return to government-controlled territory may do so. But given the fact that Idlib contains those Islamists and their families who earlier rejected such offers in other cities – many of them were bussed from Ghouta and Yarmouk in Damascus and from Homs and other towns where they surrendered, directly to Idlib province – their future looks pretty bleak.

We all like wars to have a “final battle”, of course. Jerusalem and Baghdad – strangely enough – were the only enemy “capital” cities invaded by the Allies during the First World War. And we know that the fall of Berlin to the Russians ended the European bit of the Second World War. We’ll leave out the fall of Saigon for obvious reasons (the wrong side won), and the various Middle East “capital” conquests (Jerusalem in 1967, Beirut in 1982, Kuwait in 1990, Baghdad in 2003), because they all left bloody legacies which continue to this day.

But we should remember one thing. The Syrian army is used to pitch battles. So is the Russian air force. Certainly, Nusrah’s siege of the government-held Jisr al-Shugour military hospital in Idlib – and the massacre of many of its army defenders and their

families three years ago – is unlikely to be forgotten when the last battle begins. Moscow is not going to welcome any Islamists “home” to Chechnya. And Ankara will not want to scatter Idlib’s veterans across the plains of Anatolia – especially when Erdogan is still obsessed with an attempted “Islamist” coup two years ago, tens of thousands of whose alleged supporters still languish in Turkey’s luxurious prisons.

The west is certainly not going to help. There’s the old UN donkey, I suppose, which could be led into Idlib on a “temporary” peace-keeping mission – but that will not commend itself to a Syrian president who intends to return every square kilometre of the country to the regime’s exclusive control. An even tinier dumping ground might be available if the rebels of Idlib are shunted into the northern enclave of Afrin – already largely controlled and populated by Turkey’s erstwhile friends from Isis. Certainly, the west won’t want the detritus of the Islamist army which it helped to arm. Political asylum for the White Helmets is likely to be the full extent of its generosity, along with the usual aid to refugees.

But we must also remember that those nations which have so long sought the overthrow of Assad will now be trying – ever so slowly – to reestablish some form of relationship with the regime in Damascus. French diplomats, speak it not, have been taking tourist trips in and out of Syria from Lebanon for almost a year. So have discrete envoys from other European nations. The Americans will want to play their own little role – Trump-like and weird as it may be – and there, at this critical moment, Putin will be on hand.

But what of the five million Syrian refugees whose host countries – European, of course, but also Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt – would dearly love them to go “home”. And therein lies, perhaps, the clue to this “end of war”.

The Russians are ready to supply guarantees of safe passage home to refugees – what these promises are worth remains an open question when many thousands of the homeless are fearful of the regime – and Moscow’s men are reported to have already arrived in Lebanon, which hosts up to a million and a half Syrians, to chat about the logistics. Gulf Arabs – particularly Qatar – are said to be interested in financially rebuilding Syria. So if they won’t surrender militarily, can the Idlib “rebels” be bought off? Not least by the Arab nations which supported them in the first place. These are early days. But all wars come to an end. And that’s where history restarts.