

The threat of regional conflagration in Syria

The demise of Isis threatens yet more dangerous times to come.

The carnage caused by Bashar al-Assad's forces in El Ghouta has been of a more savage intensity even than the siege of Aleppo © EPA

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Isis has been as deadly a proponent of asymmetric warfare as al-Qaeda, with an unrivalled propaganda machine that drew extremists from across the world. Its battlefield capabilities proved greater than any terrorist group has achieved. Yet the demise of the quasi-caliphate the group set up in Syria and Iraq is proving every bit as destabilising as its original rise.

Events during the past month have borne out what regional experts long warned: that the single issue approach to the civil war in Syria — focusing exclusively on eliminating Isis, pursued first by former US president Barack Obama and more recently by the administration of President Donald Trump — was at best short-sighted.

Beaten into retreat, Isis fighters are now restricted to a few pockets outside urban zones. Yet, the past month has been one of the most deadly and dangerous in the war. Israel attacked Iranian positions and Iranian-backed paramilitaries from the sky; Russian mercenaries encroaching on US-backed Syrian rebels were killed in US air strikes; and the Turkish army pushed further into neighbouring territory in a bid to drive Kurdish militias backed by Washington further from its border.

Meanwhile, Bashar al-Assad has rained bombs, rockets and mortars on the rebel enclave of El Ghouta, a satellite of the capital under government siege since 2013. In a bid to snuff out the resistance there by insurgents, the regime has buried

hundreds in rubble, destroyed medical centres and forced civilians to cower in basement bunkers with no electricity or food. The carnage has been of a more savage intensity even than the siege of Aleppo.

Without a common enemy, rival regional and global powers sucked into the civil war have been trading blows on multiple fronts indirectly and through a bewildering array of proxies. Each clash brings with it the danger of open confrontation as competing interests are brought into irreconcilable relief.

Israel has repeatedly stressed that it will not tolerate a permanent Iranian presence in Syria that would threaten its border. Yet the Iranians, through Hizbollah and other Shia paramilitary forces, are now deeply entrenched. This is a provocation not just to Israel, but also to the Sunni Arab world.

The contradictions inherent in the US position are no more tenable. Washington originally backed Syrian Kurdish militias because they were the most effective local force in the fight against Isis. But they are seen by Ankara as a proxy for domestic Kurdish insurgents. A miscalculation on the ground could now lead to direct fighting between Nato members.

It is difficult to see how even Moscow can recoup its blood-soaked investment in this mess. Last year, President Vladimir Putin felt confident enough to declare victory, having re-established Russia as a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East. In its current state, Syria is ungovernable, and its ruler, Mr Assad, as dependent as ever on Moscow and Tehran for his survival.

In this explosive context the 30-day ceasefire, which the UN Security Council agreed to on Saturday, is welcome. But it is little more than a sticking plaster, if it sticks at all. It might provide brief respite for civilians caught in the crossfire and pause the accumulation of atrocities carried out by the Assad regime and its backers in Moscow and Tehran. In the absence of an international forum through which a longer term truce might be pursued, it will do little to resolve underlying tension. Seven years after the start of the civil war, these threaten to turn what remains of Syria into an arena for a regional conflagration.

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