

New Borders between Syria and Turkey

The war and crisis that has been continuing in Syria for the last six years have exhausted local and regional powers, particularly Turkey. Regional powers which have got involved in the crisis one way or another have had a hard time managing it and finding common ground to their conflicting interests.

The Geneva Conferences on Syria held in 2012, 2014 and 2016 have been the most ambitious attempts at bringing representatives of the opposition and regime together. The **first Geneva meeting** was concluded with the Geneva Communique, a plan of six articles including, such decisions as the declaration of a ceasefire by all parties, delivery of humanitarian aid throughout the country, and assignment of watchdogs for prisoners. However, neither the opposition groups nor the regime implemented this agreement. At the **Geneva II Conference** in 2014, discussions came to a standstill and concluded unsuccessfully, as the regime which had started to gain leverage on the field insisted on talking only about terror. **Geneva III** in February 2016 was held in a period in which none of the parties had had superiority on the field, and the conflict had come under the control of international powers rather than local actors. Although the issue of ending air attacks and facilitating humanitarian aid became prominent, no concrete result was accomplished. Thus, **Geneva IV** to be held in February 2017 will probably be held with an agenda that takes into consideration these previous experiences. In this sense, the Astana meeting held on January 23 was a strategic step to prevent the situation from worsening until Geneva. The summit, where it has been decided to establish a triangular mechanism to make the truce permanent under the guarantee of Turkey, Russia, and Iran, was concluded with a strong sense of resolve in preparation for Geneva.

Turkey's role and image during the Syrian crisis have followed a variable course. Its attitude supporting the democratic change during the Arab Spring in 2011 was highly welcomed and judged positively by the people of the region. Particularly, Turkey's efforts to reach a solution with dialogue by listening to people were highly appreciated by the people on the street at the beginning of the crisis, as the people also sought a solution with dialogue. However, as events turned into gun battles and people started to lose their lives, Turkey had to adopt a harsher attitude. Turkey's discourse which is openly against Bashar al-Assad's administration gave the movement on the Syrian streets moral support at the beginning. The Syrian people had expectations that this discursive support would be supported with concrete aid. Despite this expectation, Turkey wanted to ensure collective responsibility and air operations together with an international coalition, as was the case in Libya, rather than embarking on a venture alone. However, the fact that the USA reduced the entire Syrian policy to the fight against Daesh and cooperated with the PYD instead of paying attention to the opposing majority in Syria showed that the White House did not have a good intention.

Similarly, Operation Euphrates Shield, carried out by Turkey, had very positive reactions, and the tactical change to expand this operation to the east of the Euphrates river was considered very important. Many Arabic tribes in the region state that Daesh and the PYD could easily be eliminated from the region if Turkey were to provide them support instead of putting itself at risk with its own army. There is a strong view that Turkey should create and strengthen an army consisting of Arab tribe members as a balancing factor in the region.

There is no doubt that the regime will not have that much leverage in the meetings. Everyone is aware that the Assad regime has no chance to bargain without the support of Russia and Iran. But, although they agree on protecting the integrity of Syria, Russia and Iran have different solutions for the post-war period. Even though Iran needs Russia's air force, and Russia needs Iran on the ground, these two countries currently have different opinions on the form the new Syrian administration will take after peace is established. Russia wants a more participative political structure for its long-term interests, as it knows that the Syrian regime contemplated by Iran will not work as there will be no representation for the people regarding religious sects. In such a parting of ways, Turkey could manage the transition period by acting closely with Russia.

As the ceasefire led by Turkey is a righteous approach, the Ankara administration should maintain its "process-oriented" approach rather than a "solution-oriented" approach, and use its best efforts to extend the ceasefire. If the environment that Turkey is struggling to maintain can continue, civil initiatives will gain strength when the Syrian people become reassured of the end to bombings. The power of the different parties to continue this war has completely decreased. Therefore, it is seen as important for now to extend

and maintain the ceasefire, as an immediate solution does not seem possible.

Normalization will also open the presence of foreign militant forces in Syria to question. Once the foreigners have left, the Syrians will have more chance to come to the bargaining table. Turkey will have more importance in terms of clearing and pushing foreigners from the region and strengthening such local players as the FSA hierarchically within this period.

But while doing this, Turkey should be aware of the fact that there are efforts to pull Turkey into the war in Syria. At this point, the risk for Turkey to be confronted with Al-Nusra is increasing. Turkey should first guarantee its security without feeling a necessity to satisfy the security expectations of the West.

It should reinforce its secure regions policy and be prepared for external threats in such a chaotic period where all international actors are trying to draw a new map of the Middle East. Turkey should realize measures to avoid the rapid foundation of new small countries.

It should keep in mind that the problem in Syria should be solved together with the people of that country and in accordance with their expectations. Therefore, eyes should be kept open for any presentations of a *fait accompli* by Western countries. During the peace processes, Turkey should have regard to the balance between the expectations of the regime and the people.

Syria is disintegrated de facto, but not legally. Turkey should not send its own soldiers but establish a Syrian army and strengthen it for future operations outside of the areas where Turkey has secured its safety. It should not carry out any more military operations in Syria.

The PYD is a problem for the Kurdish people in Syria as well, as it tyrannizes them and does not give any rights to any people other than themselves. If Turkey wants to restrict the activity of the PYD, it should provide other Kurdish groups and tribes with support and reach out to the Kurdish society at the north of Syria. While doing this, the activity of the Haznevi sheiks should be considered in particular. Turkey should strengthen its local partners to prevent the Canton-style politics the West tries to impose on the region.