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PUTTING PALMYRA INTO PERSPECTIVE

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March of this year marked the six-year anniversary of the Syrian Civil War, and in all likelihood we will witness a seventh as well. The conflict in Syria has grown more and more complex over time, with a large number of actors, many of whom have foreign backing. The multiplicity of players and agendas has muddied the waters to such an extent that the future of Syria remains unsure at best. As amongst all the actors in Syria there is little consensus about what the ideal outcome of the conflict should be. In this atmosphere, President Assad's force's victory in retaking the formerly ISIS held stronghold of Palmyra has multiple ramifications.

To understand the impact of the recent victory of Palmyra it is important to have some background context of the course of the conflict. When the Syrian civil war started in 2011 it was essentially between two groups- The Syrian state led by Assad and the Free Syrian Army which comprised of Arab Spring protestors and defectors from the army. By 2012 Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch - Al-Nusra, and the Syrian Kurds

had entered the fray. Not only did all three fight against Assad's forces but also amongst each other as well. As Assad lost ground the rebel forces dug in and carved out their own tenuous and shifting spheres of control. Matters were further complicated when Iran stepped in and provided their long time ally Assad with Hezbollah fighters and advisors and in response the Gulf States began to aid the rebels.¹ This in turn brought the involvement of Sunni Gulf States and their allies against what they likely saw as growing Shia influence in the region. They extended their support to certain anti-Assad forces by supplying arms and funding.

The conflict escalated in 2013 with gulf aligned Turkey and Jordan playing crucial roles in aiding anti- Assad forces. Before long America and Russia too found themselves being drawn into the conflict over the issue of Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons. America threatened targeted strikes against Assad's forces and only relented when Russia urged Syria to dispose of its chemical weapons stockpiles; America however did initiate programmes to fund and



arm anti Assad rebels. Assad lost even more ground in 2014 with the advent of ISIS which carved out its own “caliphate” in Syria and began fighting other rebel groups initially, but eventually against Assad’s forces as well- driving them out of key areas like the city of Aleppo. This shifted American focus from Assad to ISIS and America began to fund rebel groups fighting ISIS as well.²

Assad finally received some much needed respite in September 2015 when Russia stepped in to provide aerial support and bomb anti Assad forces in Syria. Russia and Syria have been long-time allies and Syria provides Russia with access to much needed warm water ports. Russian involvement in the region has also been attributed as an attempt to counterbalance American efforts in the region. However, regardless of her intentions it is clear that Russia is standing firmly behind its Syrian ally.

It is in this context that one needs to understand the importance of the victory in Palmyra. With Russian assistance Assad has been able to push back rebel offensives and actively retake ground. Earlier this year Syrian government forces recaptured the port city of Latakia in northern Aleppo as well as the Hama province.³

Palmyra can be seen as another example of this reversal of fortunes. Palmyra (located in eastern Syria) was taken over by ISIS forces in May 2015. Much of Eastern Syria is out of Assad’s

control and retaking Palmyra is likely to net him some strategic benefit. From a military perspective it provides him a vital foothold in the region and secures roadways leading to Damascus and Homs, which are currently held by his forces.⁴ From a tactical perspective, the ISIS strongholds of Deir ez-Zour and their “capital” of Raqqa are in striking distance now, as well this may set the stage for the next phase of military action.

The recapture of Palmyra is also of significant symbolic value to Assad and his supporters. ISIS occupation of Palmyra attracted great global condemnation over their destruction of several examples of Greco-Roman architecture dating back to the 1st and 2nd century BC. Shortly after recapturing the city, a senior Syrian government official was on the ground to assess the damage and formulate reconstruction plans. It would not be incorrect to assume that Assad wants to project an image of trying to safeguard his country’s cultural legacy.⁵

Also, this victory gives Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies much to talk about in terms of Assad’s viability in reasserting control over the whole country. It aids in building the perception that Assad is the right man for the job to secure and create a stable Syria. This is very evident in the speech he made soon after the victory. It was Assad’s first public speech since January 2016 to the Syrian Parliament wherein

he pledged to “...liberate every last bit of Syria...”⁶

Assad’s challenge will be to keep this momentum going; Raqqa, Aleppo and the nearby Deir ez-Zour still lie in ISIS hands and other rebel factions still maintain a presence in Syria. Assad has since announced that he intends to retake the ISIS capital of Raqqa soon, which if he can accomplish, would do much to keep the momentum going.

On ground the recapture of Palmyra means a definite increase in strategic presence for Assad’s forces; however, the real importance of Palmyra is in its helping create the perception that Assad is the most viable contender to secure the region. However, it remains to be seen how Assad and his allies use this victory to create a larger acceptance of Assad as the regional leader of choice.

Throughout the conflict Assad has shown himself to less of a stereotypical middle-eastern strongman and more of a strategic thinker. He has yielded ground where he thought necessary and negotiated with those factions of the rebels he felt could be negotiated with. In light of his recent victories and growing global efforts against ISIS, it will be intriguing to see how or if Assad is able to use the situation to his advantage. Conjecture aside, Palmyra is an important battle in what will be a long drawn war, one whose effects are likely to have an impact on generations of Syrians to come.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

1 “Syria Civil War key points” John Davenport, Fordham University, Department of Philosophy- <http://faculty.fordham.edu/davenport/Syria-History.html> accessed on June 11, 2015

2 “The Confused Person’s Guide to the Syrian Civil War” by Kathy Gilsnian, The Atlantic Online- <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>, accessed on June 11, 2015

3 “What Russia's withdrawal means for Syria conflict”, Mohammed A. Salih, Iraq Pulse- <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/putin-russia-withdrawal-syria-assad-turkey.html>, accessed on June 11, 2015

4 “Iran optimistic after Syrian forces retake Palmyra”, ArashKarimi, Iran Pulse - <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/iran-response-palmyra-assad-shamkhani-zarei.html> , accessed on June 11, 2015

5 “Syria civil war: Assad hails Palmyra recapture from IS”, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35906568>, accessed on June 11, 2015

6 “A confident Assad vows to 'liberate' every inch of Syria”, AlbertAjiBassemMroue, Associated Press, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/20c5e004302547329fce544d5b8d6bfc/us-backed-forces-march-toward-stronghold-north-syria>, accessed on June 11, 2015