

Excerpts from article “Syria Has Effectively Ceased to Exist,” Jonathan Spyer, Foreign Policy Blog, March 19, 2017

On my last night in Damascus, some younger members of the Information Ministry-sponsored delegation in which I was taking part decided to have a drink. It was late April, and the bars and restaurants were doing good business in the cool and breezy evenings. An inebriated Russian journalist, accompanied by a uniformed Russian soldier, entered the bar opposite our hotel in the Old City where my colleagues were sitting. Words were exchanged. An altercation began.

At a certain point, the Russian journalist produced a pistol and aimed it at the forehead of one of the delegation’s participants. He then entered our hotel and threatened one of the employees there, all with his uniformed colleague silently accompanying him.

How the incident ended says much about who truly holds power in regime-controlled areas of Syria today. After the two Russians had departed, the delegation’s participants sought to contact the authorities and report the incident. The representative of the Syrian security forces asked if the armed men were Russian. When told that they were, he replied that there was nothing the Syrian authorities could do.

Six years into the Syrian war, the survival of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime is ensured – but it has become something of a facade and lacks a strategy for reuniting the country. The sometimes sharply differing interests of Russia and Iran from above, and the local concerns of a myriad array of pro-regime irregular militias from below, are the decisive factors – not the decisions of the country’s nominal rulers. This impacts the calculus of the ‘regime’ side in the war, in determining its strategy in the conflict.

The term “reconciliation” is a misnomer, of course. The regime is interested in the surrender of the rebels, not rapprochement with them. But given the balance of forces and the slow progress, there seems to be a gap between objective and method.

In other words, there is no strategy at all, but the kind of conspiracy theories that no self-respecting Baathist should be without. In fact, no evidence exists of any overarching plan to divide Syria – nor do any of the major forces in the country support its breakup. Syria’s de facto division is a result of the inability of any force to prevail over all the others, not of design.

This measured reply delineates the actual situation well. The regime cannot now be militarily defeated, a significant success for its diplomacy and arms. But neither has it any clear road to victory...

The reason for the regime’s lack of knowledge is that decisions made by Assad and those around him will not be the decisive factor in determining Syria’s future. As the fighting in eastern Aleppo showed, the government side only makes real progress when the Russians commit to ensuring its victory. So the crucial question is of Russian, not Syrian, intentions – and Moscow may well have already achieved most of what it came to Syria to achieve. It has ensured the safety of its bases in Latakia province and the survival of its regime allies, demonstrated the

efficacy of Russian arms, and guaranteed there can be no diplomatic process to settle the war without Moscow's involvement.

These are significant accomplishments. But it is also the case that a further Russian commitment to finishing off the rebellion could result in the unpleasant situation in which a cash-strapped Russia finds itself saddled with the responsibility for the reconstruction of a ruined Syria on the basis of "you broke it, you own it."

With the regime and rebels now effectively reduced to client status and no great desire on the part of the patrons to commit to absolute victory for their proxies, the diplomacy on the Syrian war should presumably shift toward arrangements acknowledging the fragmentation of the country....

As this process plays out, the Russians will continue to do as they wish by day and night in Damascus, the gap between regime rhetoric and reality will remain as gaping as ever, the rebels and the Kurds will continue to march in tune with their own patrons' wishes. Meanwhile, the stark fact will continue to remain unsaid: namely, that the state known as Syria has effectively ceased to exist.