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Everybody is a loser as messy Syrian civil war enters new chapter



A Turkish child has a peek as tanks and soldiers gather close to the Syrian border at Hassa, in Hatay province. Picture: AFP

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Syria's messy civil war has become even messier. As in Lebanon a quarter of a century ago, so in Syria all sides have ended up fighting themselves as well as each other.

The fight between Turkey and the city of Afrin sets an old NATO ally of the US against a new US ally in the Kurdish YPG militia; and, conversely, an old Russian ally in the YPG against Moscow's new friend, Turkey. It also sets two groups of former Free Syrian Army fighters against each other: some fighting on behalf of Turkey, others in alliance with the YPG.

The Assad regime and its backers, Iran, might be expected to laugh at this disintegration of American policy. Washington has called on Ankara to restrain itself but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan no longer has any sympathy for the US and has spat out his rejection.

The regime, though, should not laugh too hard. Turkey's stated aim is clear enough: to demolish an enclave on its border of the YPG, the Syrian affiliate of Ankara's greatest domestic enemy, the PKK guerilla group. That is insufficient

explanation when the YPG, thanks to its US backing, will continue to control large parts of the frontier further east.

Rather, by intervening now, Turkey is expressing its right not to have its interests ignored as the Syrian war reaches its denouement. And that is a denouement that while it appears to favour Bashar al-Assad, is not so clear cut as the smoke lifts.

Assad has regained control of most of the country but he needed Russian help so acquiesced to Russian arrangements for establishing the geopolitical contours of his broken state.

Russia has agreed to a “de-escalation zone” on the southern border with Jordan, securing Jordanian interest; Israel has supported a rebel group on the frontier with the Golan Heights; and the US says it is staying in the east of the country indefinitely.

If Turkey gets a foothold along the northern border, Syria begins to look rather surrounded, making the war less of a humiliation for the US and its allies than it once seemed.

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