The Islamic State is crumbling in Syria, but the country is still facing a murky future. The extremist group is finally on its very last legs as a conventional force there, after almost four years of being pummeled from the air and on the ground. Driven from practically all significant urban terrain and crippled by heavy casualties, it has lost its ability to seize and hold territory in the face of the large number of forces arrayed against it. And while the group has dominated the attention of the key regional and international actors in the area, its downfall raises the question: What comes next for Syria?

The U.S. Mission
No other major player in Syria has been as singularly focused on destroying the Islamic State as the United States. In contrast to the other forces in the region, Washington largely sought to put the anti-Islamic State mission above all other considerations. It has done so by siding with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), even when this hurt its longtime strategic partnership with Turkey. And the United States further strengthened its Islamic State focus earlier this year when it cut military support for rebel forces actively fighting the Syrian government. Only briefly did Washington appeared to shift its focus, when it made a military response to the use of chemical weapons (sarin nerve agent) by loyalist forces on opposition-held areas in April 2017.

Even with the apparent decline of the extremist group, the United States will remain geared toward avoiding a resurgence of the Islamic State or a similar group. Last week, Defense Secretary James Mattis stated that U.S. forces will remain in Syria to prevent such a rebirth. The U.S. military has seen how the Islamic State's predecessor reconstituted itself in the region in the wake of a hasty U.S. departure from Iraq in 2011. But what was left unsaid by Mattis is that the U.S. presence will also help contain the growing presence of Iran in the region, especially in Syria.

Extremist groups such as the Islamic State thrive in power vacuums and in areas with high instability and low governance. Therefore, as long as the Syrian civil war endures, with its associated destruction and instability, it will continue to serve as a breeding ground for terrorism and radical groups. Beyond embedding a military force with the SDF in eastern Syria, the United States can be expected to push for a political solution to the war. This is, however, where the inherent intractability of the conflict surfaces, manifesting in all rounds of negotiations in Geneva. Not only does the U.S. vision for a post-war Syria differ significantly from those of the other key players, but the rebels and their backers also remain polarized on the political process, as do the loyalists and their supporters to an extent.

Three Points
The U.S. position in further negotiations relies on pushing for three things: a meaningful political transition, a significant role for the Kurds and a reduced Iranian role in the country. Of all the major players on both sides of the rebel-loyalist divide, these goals ironically come closest to those of Russia. Moscow has maintained that the Kurds deserve a significant say in the future of post-war Syria. And among Syria’s
loyalist backers, the Kremlin has been the most vociferous in demanding Syrian
government reforms. It has also been willing to limit the Iranian presence, seen in the
U.S.-Russian agreement for a "de-escalation" zone at Daraa, which set a 3.5-mile buffer
space between the Golan Heights and Iranian forces. Additionally, as it is in search of
an exit strategy that locks in its major gains in Syria, Moscow is the most willing of the
loyalist factions to compromise in order to reach a peace agreement. During President
Vladimir Putin's Nov. 22 summit in Sochi with Turkish President Recep Tayyip
Erdogan and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani about resolving the Syrian conflict, he
will likely encourage compromise.

Still, it is important to recognize the limits of the similarities in the U.S. and Russian
positions on Syria. These resemblances are notable only because of the extensive
differences among all the other parties involved in the conflict. A gulf remains
between Washington and Moscow on the extent of the political reforms needed in
Damascus and on the limits to the Iranian presence. In fact, with the government of
President Bashar al Assad as entrenched as ever and with far-ranging Iranian influence
in Syria, Russia faces real limits when it comes to forcing al Assad to compromise and
limiting Tehran's influence. Both Syria and Iran are eager to focus on an outright
military victory given their current advantage, and Russia could undermine its
enhanced regional position if it pushes its allies too hard and is publicly rebuffed.
Turkish Frustrations

While Turkey shares common goals with the United States in finding a meaningful political transition and limiting Iran, the Kurdish question remains a critical dividing factor. U.S. support for the SDF, which is dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG), has angered the Turks, whose first priority in the conflict remains to limit Kurdish expansionism, even at times to the detriment of Syrian rebels they also support. Frustrated by Washington, Ankara has attempted to work closer with Moscow, especially through the Astana process.

However, as was seen in Manbij and more recently with Afrin canton, the Turkish rapprochement with Russia has yet to pay off. Stymied by the United States and Russia, Erdogan noted on Nov. 13 that if both powers truly believe that there is no
military solution to the conflict, then they should withdraw their troops. What he didn't say was that the pullout would remove the forces preventing a Turkish military advance on the YPG. Ankara will again press the Russians to withdraw their blocking force from Afrin canton at the Nov. 22 summit. Given that the Russians have not only refused Turkey's demand, but have also insisted on inviting the YPG to future negotiations, they will probably continue to block Turkish moves on Afrin. That could once more fray Turkey's relationship with Russia on Syria, though a total break seems unlikely.

The **demise of the Islamic State** as a conventional force in Syria will not pave the way by itself to a settlement of the conflict there. In fact, its removal as a common enemy could even aggravate some of the deep-seated differences among the major players. While the United States and Russia are keen to end the conflict, their influence in the region is limited. And Tehran and Damascus are fully inclined to pursue a military victory, while Turkey is searching for an opening to expand its military operations against the YPG. The rebels, who are becoming increasingly hard-line, have shown no willingness to give up the fight, and Israel is threatening to ramp up its military strikes to counter the growing Iranian presence. Even the United States and Russia remain polarized on key questions such as the fate of al Assad and political reform. Together, these factors all but ensure that the ongoing negotiations are unlikely to result in any significant progress toward peace.