

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND NEW CHALLENGES AND  
RISKS IN SYRIA:  
POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR ARMENIA’S SECURITY  
AFTER THE 2020 NAGORNO-KARABAKH/ARTSAKH WAR**

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The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia released in 2020 indicates that Middle East-related issues are regional threats, as it states in the second section entitled “Armenia’s security environment” that “Armenia’s security environment is also affected by processes underway in the Middle East, which include, in particular, the expulsion of religious and ethnic minorities, the consolidation and spread of religious radicalism, internal conflicts, wars of attrition, and non-traditional and proxy warfare.”<sup>2</sup> And in the section entitled “Formation of a more favorable external environment,” the following is written: “Continuously expanding our cooperation with Middle Eastern states is among our priorities. Armenia must be involved in reforming the regional security system of the Middle East, aimed also at securing the historical presence of Armenians in the region.”<sup>3</sup>

These two quotations paint a general picture of Armenia’s interests and challenges in the Middle East region.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the conflicts of interests that will prevail in Syria and to provide a general outline of the possible trajectories for conflict settlements and what the end game is for both regional and international stakeholders. Particularly after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh war, the interconnection of Middle Eastern realities with what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh have become more obvious.

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<sup>2</sup> “National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia: A Resilient Armenia in a Changing World,” July 2020, 6, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J-IsxkqsWOJ8YhmKTnizWtu6-vKadGXe/view>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Thus, for ensuring the security of Armenia and Armenians, the overcoming of new challenges as well as the establishment of more multilateral cooperation is needed.

The Syrian conflict marks its tenth anniversary in 2021. In March 2011, it started as a peaceful protest movement among the other Arab uprisings and erupted across Syria as it evolved into the world's most complex conflict.

The conflict's decade-long trajectory provides important feedback into the complexity of the challenges and risks that lie ahead in Syria with significant implications for both the region and the broader international community. Syria is changing, and international actors will need to contend with the emergent realities and systematic issues present in a new Syria. Syria's conflict is multilayered with several components, both internal and external. The set of dynamics unfolding in the Syrian conflict should be taken into consideration for the international response. These are the following:

- Syrian society's continuously high levels of repression accompanied by increasingly conspicuous inequalities in wealth and privilege;
- An environmental crisis, especially between 2006 and 2010. Syria experienced the worst drought in the country's modern history which caused hundreds of thousands of farming families to fall into poverty, causing a mass migration of rural people to urban places;<sup>4</sup>
- From early on, the uprising and the regime's response had a sectarian dimension, as many of the protesters belonged to the country's Sunni majority (a denomination that encompassed around 80% of Syria's population as of 2011), while the ruling Assad family were members of the country's 'Alawite minority (a breakaway Shia sect whose members had accounted for less than 10% of the country's population in 2011);
- From uprisings, the situation evolved into a civil war that has turned into a stalemate international conflict;

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<sup>4</sup>Jan Selby, Omar S. Dahi, Christiane Frohlich and Mike Hulme, "Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited," *Political Geography* 60 (2017): 232-244, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629816301822>, last accessed 12 June 2021.

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□ A profusion of powerful non-state actors (such as various groups of Sunni jihadists, secular Kurdish fighters, etc.);

□ The worst humanitarian crisis/catastrophic toll since WWII: 6 million Syrians are internally displaced (at least half of them children), and over 6 million are registered as refugees outside the country. Inside Syria, a large part of the population relies on humanitarian aid, which the regime seeks to exercise control over in order to enhance its power;

□ The conflict's death toll was 400,000 in 2016, after which the United Nations ceased to provide estimates;<sup>5</sup>

□ A terrible economic downturn: A record 12 million Syrians (60% of the population) are now considered food insecure according to the World Food Program;

□ Regional proxy battles and militarized great power competition. No fewer than five foreign actors' militaries are engaged in the Syrian battle space;

□ Mercenaries from Syria are deployed to other conflict areas as in the case of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh war;

□ Since the onset of the Syrian conflict there has occurred the displacement of many long-established Christian communities or the dramatical reduction of their numbers through forced migration. In Aleppo alone, some media outlets have reported that Aleppo's Christian population fell from 250,000 to 30,000 by the end of 2016. The exact size and location of many Syrian Christians is therefore difficult to verify in the current context.

□ The increasing administrative, security landscape and geographic decentralization (as well as the fragmentation, localization and, somehow, impotence) of the Syrian state government authorities. State policy and the local operating environment vary in the different regions and communities which are tasked with broadly implementing the will of both the central government and various stakeholders (with a multitude of military branches each pursuing its own agenda);

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<sup>5</sup> John Hudson, "U.N. Envoy Revises Syria Death Toll to 400,000," *Foreign Policy*, 22 April 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/22/u-n-envoy-revises-syria-death-toll-to-400000/>, last accessed 15 June 2021.

- The mechanisms by which the Syrian government may retake control of the rest of the country;
- Local conflict stakeholders and various international actors' previous and upcoming support and activities;
- Bridging the peace process and international diplomatic efforts, etc.

**Syria: Who controls what: main changes on the ground**

The Syrian Civil War is an ongoing multi-sided armed conflict in Syria fought between, on one side, the Ba’athist Syrian Arab Republic led by President Bashar al-Assad, along with his local and foreign allies, and, on another side, various domestic and international forces opposing both the Syrian government and each other in varying combinations.

By the summer of 2011, Syria’s regional neighbors and the global powers had both begun to split into pro- and anti-Assad camps. The United States and European Union were increasingly critical of Assad as his crackdown continued, and U.S. President Barack Obama and several European heads of state called for him to step down in August 2011. An anti-Assad bloc consisting of Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia then formed in the last half of 2011. The United States, EU and Arab League soon introduced sanctions targeting senior members of the Assad regime. Meanwhile, Syria’s long-standing allies Iran and Russia continued their support. An early indicator of the international divisions and rivalries that would prolong the conflict came in October 2011 when Russia and China cast the first of several vetoes blocking a UN Security Council resolution that would have condemned Assad’s crackdown.

Who are involved in this conflict? When and how did they get involved? What are each stakeholder’s possible endgames? These are the questions we need to answer to create the framework of the conflict’s future possible trajectory.

What we have in 2021 is a Syria partitioned and decentralized into several areas: central, southeast and southwest, the northwest with the Idlib Region and the northeast with its composition of different stakeholders, rebel groups, local governance councils and significant varied international assistance actors who decide the particular conditions of their influence

areas. As they depend on differing population compositions, outcomes in a given district or area are not likely to be replicable elsewhere in Syria. Although since 2020 the conflict has entered a low-intensity phase of armed confrontation, we will assume that, taking into consideration both local situations and international actors' changing aims and political priorities, military confrontations in different parts of Syria will probably continue into the near future.

### **Fragmented Syria:**

The Government of Syria (GoS) has militarily reclaimed **southern and central Syria**, so approximately 70% of Syria is now under the “control” of the GoS and a clear majority of the Syrian population now lives under it, though it is by no means a static entity or uniformly present throughout the areas under its nominal control.<sup>6</sup>

By 2020, three widely different models of religious governance survived outside the regime-controlled areas: the northwestern region of Idlib, northern regions under Turkish supervision, and the area east of the Euphrates River, which is under Kurdish supervision.

First, in the **northwestern** region of Idlib, the hardline Islamist faction now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS or Syria's Liberation Committee)—formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate known as Jabhat al-Nusra—was ruling through the formally civilian Hukumat al-Inqadh al-Suriyya (Syrian Salvation Government). Idlib's future is among the points of contention between Russia, Turkey, Syria and Iran. This is due to their different visions. Idlib is still probably the most dangerous place on Earth. Here, the jihadist groups co-exist uneasily with moderate opposition groups, all ringed by Russian, Turkish, Syrian-regime and Iranian-backed forces, themselves tolerating an uneasy co-existence. Since the second escalation in Idlib in late 2019, Syrians and Russians ignored the de-escalation agreement there and in December sent their warplanes on a relentless bombing campaign. The bombing continued into early 2020, causing a wave of civilians to flee northward toward Turkey. In late February, a regime airstrike hit a Turkish

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<sup>6</sup> Hourly updates about changes in the situation throughout the entire country can be traced here: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>.

military post on the borders of the rebel-held area of Idlib, killing at least 33 Turkish soldiers. Turkey's response was swift and massive, killing over 300 pro-regime fighters, destroying over 20 tanks and downing several Syrian aircraft. As escalation continued and a direct conflict between Turkish and Russian forces loomed, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin met in Moscow in early March to make another de-escalation agreement. Under this agreement, Russian and Turkish forces were to conduct joint ground patrols in Idlib, and airstrikes would be suspended.

The March 2020 de-escalation agreement, like its predecessors, is unlikely to hold fully and there exists a high probability of renewed escalation and fighting between proxy groups drawing in their state sponsors, or the Assad regime—with or without a green light from Moscow—will renew its offensive, bringing it into renewed conflict with Turkey and threatening to draw in Russia. If violence escalates again in Idlib, new waves of refugees, doubtless with jihadist fighters mixed in, will push north toward the Turkish border. Rather than deal with the problem itself, Turkey will likely open its own borders to the European Union to force its neighbors Bulgaria and Greece to deal with it, as Erdoğan did in March. As this picture makes clear, Russia's intervention has achieved much, but it has not solved the problem of Syria's territorial integrity.

Interestingly, for northwestern Syria the territory that remains under opposition control lies outside the compass of “useful Syria”—the core of the Syrian state comprising the M5 corridor and the Mediterranean coast. In a budgetary sense, for the near future the capture of northwest Syria would be a net negative taking into consideration the economic problems and the central demands of the Syrian Government.

**Northeastern Syria:** In the northern regions of Syria controlled by the Turkish army, religious institutions were affiliated with bodies that emerged from the revolutionary era, namely local councils and the Syrian Interim Government (the executive arm of the Syrian National Coalition, the largest opposition alliance, based in the Turkish city of Gaziantep). Such institutions are now operating under the supervision of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Tensions will also grow in northern and northeastern Syria between US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and pro-

Turkish groups. At present, the situation can be described as the “Self-Administration” governing in the northeast currently negotiating its reintegration with the Government of Syria.

Syria’s resource wealth is concentrated in the northeast, and some analysts note that recapturing the northeast could lift Syria’s economy as a sign of further progress towards the government’s ultimate consolidation of power. Northeast Syria includes five of Syria’s richest oil fields, and some of the most productive oil fields are in northeast Syria, so they are currently under the control of the US-led international coalition which has the explicit goal of preventing their capture by Damascus. We must stress one more aspect of Syria’s oil production. Even though it is an important source of revenue and frequent driver of conflict in local contexts, it is still modest and, even prior to the conflict, declining oil production was already being compounded by rising domestic demands.<sup>7</sup>

On 30 December 2017, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) announced the establishment of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which consists of three core corps: the Sultan Murad Corps, the Levantine Front Corps and the National Army Corps. The SNA has a unified military command for all factions in the Euphrates Shield operation areas (the northern and eastern countryside of Aleppo), which in 2020 controlled 22% of Aleppo, 10% of Idlib and 24% of Al-Raqqa. In 2020, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition coalition affiliated with the SIG, also announced the SNA’s new manpower had reached 80,000 fighters. Within the challenges to the SNA we can count the absence of a politically coherent project, an unclear command structure, a lack of cohesion, a lack of clarity regarding function when military and civilian tasks mix, the factions’ resistance to assimilation and the differing political affiliations of the factions.<sup>8</sup> From 2016 through 2020, the Turkish Army and supporting forces

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<sup>7</sup> US Energy Information Administration, “Syria, International Energy Data and Analysis, 24 June 2015,” CIA,

[https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Syria/syria.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Syria/syria.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Nawar Shaban, “The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook,” GCSP, Discussion Paper (28), 19 November 2020, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-formation-challenges-outlook>; Ömer Özkizilcik, “The Syrian National Army (The SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus,” GCSP, Discussion

affiliated with the Syrian National Army, operating under the Syrian Interim Government of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, launched four main cross-border operations resulting in Turkey gaining control over the territories.<sup>9</sup>

The northeast and northwest regions have growing parallels and an intertwined destiny with regard to the role of external actors—Turkey in the northwest and the US in the northeast, with Russia exerting influence in both areas. Both regions are also largely under the control of proscribed groups, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the northwest and Syrian Kurdish elements with ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ party (PKK) in the northeast. In the northwest, significant local autonomy is likely to persist as long as the United States maintains its presence, but if the Western power withdraws, the GoS is unlikely to allow this autonomy to continue.

Syria’s conflict has transformed the country’s **southern** border region into a zone of regional contention. Key figures and negotiators from several sides (Russia, US, Israel, Iran, Jordan, GoS, local rebel groups, etc.) are becoming critical in reaching settlements, but there were also broader factors that created these unique conditions.

In the south, Jordan’s strict policies compared to Turkey’s far more permissive approach to borders and the movement of fighters is one of the factors creating a framework of settlement possibilities for the south.

The approach taken in southern Syria, especially the Dar’aa district, is that the GoS and rebel groups have negotiated an arrangement wherein the former is able to access critical territory and the latter can retain local autonomy. This method is not likely to be replicable in the Idlib Governorate or its surrounding areas.

Another important component for settlement possibilities in the south is the military and diplomatic postures taken by Russia and Israel.

Finally, east of the Euphrates River, governance lies in the hands of actors who have historically had little interest in religion, namely, the local

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Paper (24), October 2020, <https://dam.gesp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus>, last accessed 8 July 2021.

<sup>9</sup> For more details about the operations, see the subsection below, “Turkish strategies for the northeast of Syria.”



affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This left-wing Kurdish organization from Turkey has been waging an insurgency against the state since 1984, and its Syrian offshoots control the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

### **The peace process and international diplomatic efforts: From the Constitutional Commission and Geneva Communiqué to the Astana and Sochi processes.**

All of the UN Security Council resolutions (26) on Syria since 2012 indicate the UN's high-level involvement because of its efforts to settle the conflict having been locked in a stalemate.<sup>10</sup>

Despite nine rounds of UN-mediated peace talks, known as the Geneva process, there has been little progress evident since 2014. Thus, the peace process within the framework of the Constitutional Committee cannot be expected to produce any breakthrough in 2021 and calls for a cautious step-by-step approach are prevailing. While the Kremlin is not pushing Russian initiatives or settlement plans, its endgame vision is still based on the constitutional draft proposed in 2017 and rejected by the Syrians. The diplomatic strategy from the Russian side is to not abandon any mechanisms formed in the course of the political process and to continue providing assistance to the peace process despite minimal practical results.

Most diplomats believe that the drafting of a new constitution is an inevitable "landmark" element for the future end of the war, even if it means inviting Kurdish representatives to the table and pressing for more active Syrian cooperation. However, in the areas where Assad has won, the Syrian government is not likely to be prepared to make any concessions for constitutional changes because of the lack of any positive incentives from the West in return for such flexibility. The transfer of certain authorities from Damascus to the provincial level, so, in other words, decentralization or federalization, is considered to be a useful step that would help to accommodate the new realities and minimize the likelihood of an outcome involving partition while restoring the territorial integrity of Syria.

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<sup>10</sup> UN Documents for Syria, including Security Council resolutions, are available here: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/syria/>.

The potential impacts of the Biden administration on multilayered cooperation in a future endgame for Syria is still insufficiently clear. If the new administration provides massive support to the Kurds, this will strengthen the Kurds' aspirations for independence while leading to an open conflict with Turkey and a stand-off with the GoS, not to mention a confrontation with Russian policies in Syria. After the Biden administration started its revision of Syrian policies, Brett McGurk's appointment as the Middle East and North Africa Coordinator on the National Security Council sends a message to both Ankara, with unfriendly and negative connotations, and to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), fueling hopes for more excessive support.

### **The Astana and Sochi Processes**

Russia, Iran and Turkey have set up parallel political talks known as the Astana process. The Astana format provided an opportunity to reduce escalation and establish ceasefires in most parts of Syria in the mid-2010s. In this regard, the Astana process was able to provide a delimitation of zones of influence belonging to the conflicting parties. This means that Russia, Turkey and Iran have often managed to routinize interaction with each other over critical issues. However, practically, the Astana format can provide no productive path forward in the medium to long-term. In order to reach political decisions for a Syrian settlement, the Sochi format holds more promise of success, as the involved parties underscored the importance of making progress within the framework of constitutional reform. The Astana process failed to acquire a global dimension and remained a local forum aimed at addressing immediate local needs. While certain strategic long-term issues were agreed upon through the Astana process (usually in the format of bilateral dialogue), it has still been a struggle to make any headway. For example, in December 2018, the three countries failed to meet a deadline to form a committee to draft a new constitution after the UN had said that a list of participants submitted earlier was not credible or inclusive.

However, these two processes—the Geneva and the Astana/Sochi processes—can be bridged to bring greater stability to those areas of Syria still beyond the Assad regime's control, serving as a building block for

sustained de-escalation until a lasting longer-term settlement is negotiated through improved humanitarian access and the enhancement of local governance structures.

### **Russia's presence and involvement in the Syria conflict, coping with new challenges**

Russia has been conducting a continual military operation in Syria since 30 September 2015, when it launched its first airstrikes against targets in Rastan, Talbiseh and Zafaraniya in the Homs province. This was the first military operation Moscow launched far from its own borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, Russia is not only militarily involved but is deeply invested in the conflict as it seeks to shape the course of the negotiation process and the post-conflict socio-political developments of Syria. Since the start of its military intervention in Syria in 2015, the Syrian regime's territorial control has increased from less than 20% to more than 70%.

The Russian engagement in Syria is a component of Russia's projection of its power abroad via an expansive and increasingly aggressive posture of air and sea patrols and the use of "private" military companies. Another one of Russia's goals is to exert control over current and potential energy deposits and shipping routes as well as gain greater control over maritime regions.

The mutual accusations between Russia and the United States of illegal deployment in Syria and violations of the de-confliction processes are one of the main features of the Syrian conflict and have been especially obvious in 2021. Russia's accusations against the United States are based on the fact that Russia's own presence in the country was requested by the Syrian regime. For example, the Russian Embassy in Washington Tweeted on 6 May 2021 that "The U.S. does not have any right to criticize the legitimate actions of the Russian Armed Forces." This Tweet came two days after Sean O'Donnell, the acting inspector general of the U.S. Defense Department, claimed in a report that Russian military operations in northeastern Syria constitute a breach of de-confliction processes. The report alleged that during the first quarter of 2021, "Russia continued to violate the

de-confliction processes that the Coalition and Russia established in northeastern Syria to prevent inadvertent escalations.”

The Russian Federation has an airbase in Syria at the Hmeimim airfield and a naval base in the port of Tartus. Russian Aerospace Forces aviation supports the ground operations of the Syrian army. It was officially reported that special operation forces of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation are operating in Syria. The Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria, officially known as the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic, founded on 23 February 2016, states that it is a “peace monitoring center and information office” whose stated aim is to facilitate the peace negotiations between the Syrian Arab Republic and opposition groups.<sup>11</sup> It is a joint Turkish-Russian government enterprise founded in agreement with the U.S.-led coalition and headquartered at Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia. It is also reportedly tasked with coordinating humanitarian missions and organizing localities to sign up to ceasefire agreements. For example, in May 2017, the reconciliation center was able to deliver 4.7 tons of humanitarian aid in ten missions within twenty-four hours, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Russia’s goal of controlling transit roads indicates that any attack will be focused on the aim of controlling the main transit road and imposing security in the area to the north of the road at a depth that may exceed six km. At the same time, it is important to recall that for various political reasons the Bab al-Hawa crossing is now the main entry point for cross-border humanitarian aid under UN Resolution 2533 (2020), which stipulates that aid conveyances be permitted for a one-year period that ends on 10 July 2021. The main threat to Russia’s goal of securing the area north of the road is that if Russian forces block the roads, this could lead to an ISIS blockade on the oil and gas field in Deir al-Zor, while the phosphate mines in Khunayfis and al-Suwana will remain under the constant threat of ISIS attacks, which will disrupt its already slow operation.

Russia’s official diplomacy and its practical perspectives are in divergence from time to time. On the one hand, Moscow must take into

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<sup>11</sup> The center’s official website is available at [https://syria.mil.ru/split\\_eng.htm](https://syria.mil.ru/split_eng.htm).

consideration the UN Security Council decisions and documents. But, on the other hand, it must also deal with its own operational understandings as well as its political partners' positions, which it must occasionally relay to Damascus. Its strategy is challenged by the strategy developments of the United States, Europe and the Arab governments supporting several forces opposed to Bashar-al-Assad's Syrian government, as well as by Turkey's, Iran's and Israel's main objectives and goals in the region. For an ongoing conflict scenario, Russia needs to keep its gains: forces loyal to Moscow must be preserved; guarantees of free passage through the waters of the Mediterranean Sea which connect to the Black Sea and the world's oceans must be protected; and an open clash between the interests of the most important external players in the Syrian conflict must be postponed further. A comprehensive meeting with the UN Security Council members is thus the broadest international platform, and the Geneva process is the most effective way for Russian diplomacy to propose a long-term settlement scenario.

### **Iranian influence and presence in Syria focused on the southern region**

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Iran has found different approaches to increase its military, security and economic influence in Syria. Iran has several interests in Syria that drive at the heart of Iran's self-perception of its role as a major regional power and patron and protector of the region's Shi'a Muslims. Iran is permanently searching for new ways to enhance its control and influence in different Syrian provinces and has focused on the southern regions, starting with directly working with foreign militias and recruiting local ones, successfully infiltrating the regime's army and security apparatus and strengthening its relations with Syrian economic circles. We will not go into the details but will reveal the map of the core influence areas. The transformation of Iranian influence from the indirect influence of the Iranian military via the presence of Lebanese militant groups (especially Hezbollah) has developed into an Iranian plan to spread its influence through nearly all parts of Syria using a combination of local and

foreign militias.<sup>12</sup> Complicating Tehran's efforts to stabilize a zone of influence from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon is among the secondary purposes of the activities of the United States and anti-ISIS coalition.

The Iranian presence will remain the "mother of all challenges" for the 8th Brigade (the local fighters' brigade of the Russian backed 5th Corps) for the foreseeable future in the Dar'aa district.<sup>13</sup> The ongoing rivalry between Iran and its proxy forces on one side and the 8th Brigade on the other would be the main factor currently underlying the significant increase in the level of violence in the district, which has become a defining characteristic of Dar'aa since 2018 and can be expected to continue. Without further collaboration between local armed actors to fill the security vacuum and end the current state of lawlessness in the south, cyclical patterns of retaliations could re-emerge, offering an opening for the Syrian regime to reassert itself in the south.

### **Israel's main viewpoints and national security calculations vis-a-vis the events in Syria**

Developments in Syria are of an intense and vital national interest to Israel. Israel has several principal objectives in the Syria conflict, including minimizing Iranian and Russian influence in the country, blocking the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, preventing Syria from posing a credible military threat to Israel or permitting Iran to do so, undermining the legitimacy of Syria's claims to the Golan Heights and preventing Sunni militants from establishing infrastructure or operational bases along Israel's border. Interestingly, the main source of concern for the U.S. and Western anti-ISIS coalition efforts, which is to eliminate the ISIS and Sunni extremist groups in Syria, is not the main priority for Israel. The main sources of

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<sup>12</sup> Navvar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria," 5 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>, last accessed 15 August 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, Syria Transition Challenges Project, Research Project Report, 1 December 2020, 2020/17," <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69176/Abdullah%20Al%20Jabassini%20-%20The%20Eighth%20Brigade.%20Striving%20for%20Supremacy%20in%20Southern%20Syria%5B12%5D.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, last accessed 15 July 2021.

concern for Israeli leaders are Bashar al-Assad's strong and empowered regime dominating throughout the country and its Iranian backers' extensive influence both through the deployment of Iranian troops and through Tehran's extensive support to Hezbollah.

However, Israel has little ability to influence events on the ground in Syria, giving it few tools for advancing its goals directly. In the long run, Israel would like to see Syria led by a moderate central government that controls its own territory and resists Iranian interference but remains too weak to threaten Israel militarily.<sup>14</sup>

### **Turkish strategies for the northeast of Syria**

Turkey's Syrian policy has been under significant transformation since the Syrian uprising erupted in the spring 2011. In the early stage of the crisis, Turkey's main objective was to peacefully support the settlement of the political crisis in Syria; however, Turkey had to adopt a security-oriented strategy to prevent the potential spillover effects of the civil war into its borders. In the post-2016 security and strategic landscape, Turkey has been choosing a two-dimensional military strategic approach: to minimize the terrorist threat in the Northeast Syria and to support the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Syrian Interim Government in establishing a sustainable local order.

The main Turkish concerns are border security, terrorism/counterterrorism, geopolitical challenges from other regional and international actors, and, last but not least, the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity.

The primary security issue arising from the Syrian conflict for Turkey's national security is the refugee crisis. The number of Syrian refugees in Turkey has increased over the past ten years from 14,237 in 2012 to 3,655,067 in 2021. There are seven temporary accommodations set up mainly for Syrians located in five provinces—Adana, Kilis, Kahramanmaras,

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<sup>14</sup> Larry Hanauer, "Israel's Options and Interests in Syria," RAND Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND\\_PE185.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND_PE185.pdf), last accessed 18 August 2021.

Osmaniye and Hatay, hosting a total of 58,204 Syrian refugees—and there are others scattered throughout the country.<sup>15</sup>

The new foreign policy strategy of Turkey’s AKP government includes military power projection, reaching out to new countries for long-term economic relations and forming new alliances. In June 2020, Turkey’s National Security Council issued a statement that, for the first time, referred to the “Mediterranean” instead of the “Eastern Mediterranean”, which also reveals this new understanding.<sup>16</sup> One of Turkey main aims is to show clearly that the maritime boundary delimitation issue in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be settled without its consent, and its long-term strategy is to set new negotiation rules to resolve the issue.

Turkey’s engagement in several armed conflicts from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean raises the issues of overstretching and operational sustainability, which creates for Turkey serious difficulties in translating military gains into diplomatic ones. Interestingly, the humanitarian aid distribution process is extremely important and provides a possible framework for multilateral cooperation. Military over-participation in different parts of the world has the potential to create new risks for Turkey becoming further isolated or even facing military escalation.

On the one hand, Turkey’s leverage on the ground for the de-escalation of the situation in Syria in terms of military dominance has increased; but, on the other hand, this increase in leverage may also narrow the space for diplomatic solutions. Multilateral frameworks are needed in order to facilitate diplomacy in dispute resolution.

Each of Turkey’s military operations in Syria has the aims of territorial control and a unilateral framework. They are the following:

□ Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Area (Al-Bab region), Target (ISIS)

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<sup>15</sup> “Migrant Presence Monitoring for Turkey,” ReliefWeb, Quarterly Report, April-June 2021, 8, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Q2\\_quarterly-Apr-May-Jun-21.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Q2_quarterly-Apr-May-Jun-21.pdf), last accessed 10 July 2021.

<sup>16</sup> NSC June 2020 Meeting Statement: “Our country’s rights and interests on land, at sea and in the air will continue to be protected without any concession.” Available at <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/120359/national-security-council-convenes-under-president-erdogan-s-chairmanship>, last accessed 16 April 2021.



This was a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and Turkey-aligned Syrian opposition groups which led to the Turkish occupation of northern Syria. Operations were carried out in the region between the Euphrates River to the east and the rebel-held area around Azaz to the west. The Turkish military and Turkey-aligned Syrian rebel groups, some of which used the Free Syrian Army label, fought against the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as well as against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) starting on 24 August 2016. On 29 March 2017, the Turkish military officially announced that Operation Euphrates Shield had been “successfully completed”.

□ Olive Branch (2018), Area (Kurdish majority Afrin Region), Target (PKK/PYD)

On 20 January 2018, the Turkish Army and supporting forces affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA), operating under the Syrian Interim Government of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, launched the Operation Olive Branch offensive against Syria’s Kurdish-majority region of Afrin. This cross-border military operation was conducted against the Kurdish People’s Protection Units or the Democratic Union Party (YPG/Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat PYD)—which are perceived to be controlled by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and which are the primary component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—and had the stated aim of eliminating the Daesh terrorist presence in Syria’s Northern Afrin district. As a result of this offensive, by 24 March 2018, Turkey was occupying Afrin and its surrounding areas. Immediately following the operation, military groups began extensively and systemically looting the properties of Kurdish residents, and the SDF insurgency in Northern Aleppo began.

□ Operation Peace Spring (2019), Area (region between Ras al-Ayn and Tal-Abyad), Target (PKK/PYD)

On 9 October 2019, the Turkish Army and allied armed groups affiliated with the SNA attacked the districts of Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn following the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from the region in a new assault into Syria termed “Operation Peace Spring”. The assault involved serious

abuses of human rights against civilians and gave Turkey and its allies full control over Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn on 27 November 2019.

□ Operation Spring Shield (2020), Area (Idlib region), Target (Syrian Army)

This was a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) against the Syrian Armed Forces and allied militias in the Idlib Governorate of northwestern Syria, which began on 27 February 2020 in response to the Balyun airstrikes. Turkey's National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said that the purpose of the operation fell within the framework of the Astana talks and involved the aims of ensuring a ceasefire agreement in the Second Northern Syria Buffer Zone and preventing migration from Idlib towards the Turkish border. On 5 March 2020 Turkey and Russia signed a ceasefire agreement in Moscow.

### **US objectives in Syria: Does the United States have an end game in Syria?**

From the historical overview of US-Syria relations, we can assume that U.S.-Syria relations were severed and became complicated since the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>17</sup> Syria has been on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism since its inception in 1979. Syria is subject to legislatively mandated penalties, including export sanctions under the Syrian Accountability Act and the ineligibility to receive most forms of U.S. assistance or to purchase U.S. military equipment. Since the conflict erupted in Syria in March 2011, subsequent executive orders have been issued in response to the ongoing violence and human rights abuses taking place in Syria. In 2019, the U.S. government authorized a new sanctions program under Executive Order 13894 that allows for sanctions to be levied on those preventing, disrupting or obstructing a political solution to the Syrian conflict, which includes both Syrians and any foreign enablers. In June 2020, the sanctions provisions of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act came into full effect, allowing the U.S. government to sanction regime financiers, officials and senior

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<sup>17</sup> "U.S. Relations with Syria, Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, 20 January 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/>, last accessed 18 July 2021.

government figures around Bashar al-Assad and their enablers, as well as military leaders who perpetuate the conflict and obstruct a peaceful, political resolution of the conflict as called for by UNSCR 2254.

Upon examination of the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria, it is clear that the objective of the United States in Syria is to support the full political transition from the criminal, terrorist rule of a family and its entourage to a consensual, legitimate system featuring the rule of law by 2021. Absent this transition, other important goals—the enduring defeat of ISIS, the neutralization of al-Qaeda, the liquidation of Iran’s military presence, an end to armed conflict, the protection of civilians from state and Islamist terror, the return of over 6 million refugees, sustained tranquility and the country’s reconstruction—will be very difficult or impossible to achieve. Since the Syrian conflict started, the United States has supported the UN-facilitated, Syrian-led process mandated by UNSCR 2254. From the point of view of the United States, there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Since the rise of ISIS in 2014, the U.S. government has worked closely with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to achieve a lasting defeat of the terror group. Working by, with and through local partners, the coalition achieved the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria in March 2019. The coalition remains committed to ISIS’s enduring defeat through stabilization support to liberated areas, facilitating the return of displaced individuals, finding long-term solutions for detained foreign ISIS fighters and promoting justice and accountability efforts in Syria and Iraq. The anti-ISIS coalition, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), remains in control of this third of Syria’s territory, which is rich in agriculture and oil. U.S. forces also control the al-Tanf military garrison in southeastern Syria, which is astride a land route important to Iran. Moreover, the U.S. garrison at Al-Tanf still rankles Damascus and Moscow and complicates Tehran’s efforts to establish a zone of influence from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Despite Turkey’s operations against the SDF and the subsequent agreement of the SDF to allow Russian and regime forces into part of its zone of control, eastern Syria is still largely not under government control. Neither the problem of Al-Tanf

nor the problem of eastern Syria can be resolved without the acquiescence of the United States, and Moscow seems to have little idea how to gain it.

Despite the success of the de-confliction arrangements aimed at preventing conflict between the United States and Russia so far, the potential for mistakes and miscalculations will continue to exist as long as both militaries are operating in Syria and its skies. The August 2020 incident, where four U.S. service members were injured after an altercation with Russian forces in northeast Syria, demonstrates this risk.<sup>18</sup>

After taking office in January, the Biden administration began a review of American policy in Syria and the ongoing civil war there, especially after Trump's controversial policy settings. This review sought to turn the page on the Trump administration's policies, which shifted U.S. priorities in Syria from the narrow goal of fighting the Islamic State to expanding the mission to counter Iran and safeguard Syrian oil from Bashar al-Assad. U.S. interests are now linked to two twin aims: increasing humanitarian assistance and retaining a U.S. military presence to combat ISIS.<sup>19</sup> Despite the Biden administration's wish to end "forever wars", U.S. troops remain in Syria. (Roughly 900 U.S. troops, including a number of Green Berets, will remain in Syria to continue supporting and advising the Syrian Democratic Forces fighting the Islamic State.) Even Trump, on 29 October 2019, stated that they decided to stay there as "we are keeping the oil", which has also the explanation of "securing the oil fields" against ISIS.<sup>20</sup>

Another important dimension of the U.S. presence and influence in Syria is the major assistance provided to Syria. The United States is the largest single donor to the humanitarian response in Syria, providing over

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<sup>18</sup> "Russia's War in Syria, Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned," FPRI, edited by Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller and Aaron Stein, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/russias-war-in-syria.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Aaron Stein, "Assessing the Biden Administration's Interim Syria Strategy," FPRI, 15 June 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/06/assessing-the-biden-administrations-interim-syria-strategy/>.

<sup>20</sup> Conor Finnegan, "'We're keeping the oil' in Syria, Trump says, but it's considered a war crime: The Pentagon said the U.S. would use force to protect troops securing the oil," ABC News, 29 October 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/keeping-oil-syria-trump-considered-war-crime/story?id=66589757>.

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US\$13 billion in humanitarian assistance for more than 13.4 million vulnerable individuals inside Syria and over 5.6 million displaced persons in the region (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt) since the start of the crisis. This also includes US\$141 million in support of the COVID-19 pandemic response in Syria and the region.

Moreover, from 2012 to 2018 the United States provided different types of non-humanitarian assistance to bolster the Syrian Opposition (Free Syrian Army and Free Syrian Policy) in the northwestern, northeastern and southwestern areas.<sup>21</sup> (The southwest fell under the control of the GoS in July 2018.) In northeast Syria, the United States is working with its partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to support the enduring defeat of ISIS through stabilization efforts in liberated areas. To date, the United States has been the largest provider of stabilization assistance in northeast Syria, providing over US\$350 million in funding since late-2016 for stabilization and early recovery programs.

### **Humanitarian crisis as a possible emerging framework for peace process diplomatic developments**

The UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi has called Syria “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause for suffering”.<sup>22</sup> Syria has endured the most catastrophic humanitarian toll since WWII.

With regard to the humanitarian crisis, priority is given to deliberations at the United Nations Security Council and the mandate governing cross-border aid delivery to opposition-controlled areas. The 2014

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. stabilization and early recovery efforts have focused on various types of restoring essential programs like water and electricity; supporting local governance and civil society to meet citizens’ needs; improving and supporting the education sector to help children return to school and provide vocational training; supporting independent media to provide locally-relevant and accurate information to citizens; removing the explosive remnants of war; generating economic activity; providing support and training for community security providers; supporting transitional justice and accountability; reconciliation and reintegration efforts at the community level; building local capacity to support longer-term sustainability, etc.

<sup>22</sup> “Syria Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>.

agreement allowed for four crossings, but that number has decreased to one, owing to Russian and Chinese opposition.<sup>23</sup> The mandate for the final crossing point expires on 10 July 2020 and, without an extension, Syria's northwest risks getting cut off from the last crossing with Turkey.

The UN Security Council must reauthorize the UN's cross-border access at Bab al-Hawa and reinstate other UN border crossings before the current authorization expires in July. Bab al-Hawa is the sole remaining UN crossing and a vital lifeline for the UN to ensure it can deliver life-saving aid to Syrians. Each month, about 1,000 trucks carrying aid for millions of people in northwest Syria cross through Bab al-Hawa.

Unfortunately, controversies prevail even in the processes of providing and supplying humanitarian aid. The Russian position is that Damascus is the sovereign government of Syria and, therefore, the United Nations should only deliver assistance through the country's capital. The Biden administration has sought to take advantage of this relationship, particularly on the stabilization assistance issue and finding a compromise on aid deliveries between areas controlled by the Turks and the Assad regime. The basic formula, it appears, is to offer "more aid for continued access". This formula would increase total U.S. assistance to the UN, which would necessarily include more aid delivered via Damascus. This compromise would satisfy some of Russia's desires without compromising U.S. efforts in the northeast and northwest of the country.

There is no viable alternative to UN cross-border assistance to meet the scope and scale of aid required in Syria, where humanitarian needs are at the highest levels ever seen, stemming from a decade of conflict and compounded by COVID-19 and an escalating economic crisis. Interestingly, the humanitarian aid distribution process is extremely important and provides a possible framework for multilateral cooperation.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>23</sup> "UN renews Syria aid via Turkey but one of two access points shut," Al Jazeera, 12 July 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/12/un-renews-syria-aid-via-turkey-but-one-of-two-access-points-shut>.

The Syrian conflict is an ongoing multi-sided armed conflict in Syria fought between, on one side, the Ba’athist Syrian Arab Republic led by President Bashar al-Assad, and its local and foreign allies, and, on the other side, various domestic and international forces opposing both the Syrian government and each other in varying combinations. The Syrian regime is fragile and incompetent, but it has the backing of Russia and Iran. It has also withstood the opposition-led rebellion for ten years. The regime does not control the entirety of the country, but the opposition is too weak to mount offensive operations to take back territory. Moreover, the country is faced with an economic catastrophe stemming from the collapse of the Lebanese banking sector and the impact of COVID-19, as a “multiplier of humanitarian needs”, in addition to the American sanctions, a severe drought that has reduced agricultural yields and the destruction of infrastructure.

The situation is evolving in a way that the lack of a powerful internal or local actor makes the regional or international powers involved dominant in terms of creating frameworks for the settlement of the conflicts in several districts of the country. Even though the conflict has entered a low-intensity phase of armed confrontation since 2020, we will assume that, taking into consideration both local situations and international actors’ changing aims and political priorities, the military confrontations in different parts of Syria will likely continue into the near future. Thus, considering the types of interests and challenges of the foreign actors (mostly Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran and Israel), the situation will find resolution according to one or another player’s interests and challenges. Interestingly, for the near future, the humanitarian crisis, aid distribution and the goal of the final defeat of ISIS serve as the main frameworks for multilateral cooperation.

The Syrian conflict zone is increasingly enmeshed in an expanding series of interlinked conflicts stretching from Libya to Nagorno-Karabakh, and even to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Reflective of wider regional and global disorder, these overlapping conflicts often reverberate across geographic zones, introducing potential “wild card” elements into the already complex Syrian conflict. For example, Russian and Turkish competition in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh has found its echo in the Syrian arena with its destabilizing effects and vice versa.