PEACE AND SECURITY

LOOKING AHEAD

Geopolitical Dynamics and Scenarios for Syria in 2030

Muriel Asseburg and Salam Said (eds.)
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The scenarios presented in this volume suggest Syria's multi-layered conflict will remain unresolved by 2030.

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European policymakers should seek to influence trajectories toward greater stability by including relevant Syrian actors in conflict resolution fora, by supporting Kurdish-Kurdish and Kurdish-Kurdish-Turkish talks, and by engaging in conversations with regional stakeholders aimed at constructive engagement and long-term stabilization in Syria.

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The EU and its member states should increase their engagement for early recovery and local development initiatives across Syria, and continue the fight against the IS, going beyond purely military and repressive means.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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and Security Affairs

Content

CONCEIVABLE SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA IN 2030

Introduction, Main Findings, and Entry Points for European Policies

Muriel Asseburg and Salam Said

After more than ten years of war in Syria, a peaceful and inclusive political settlement of the conflict is still a long way off. Five foreign states (Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey, and the US), as well as a multitude of domestic and foreign militias have a military presence on the ground. In addition to the Israel-occupied Golan Heights, four de facto zones of influence have emerged: the area controlled by the government in Damascus, comprising about 70 per cent of Syrian territory; northeast Syria (NES) governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES); northwest Syria (or: Idlib province), ruled by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG); and northern Aleppo, controlled by Turkey and – formally – ruled by the opposition-led Syrian Interim Government (SIG). While large-scale military operations have been reduced significantly over the last few years, limited military operations have continued and the boundaries between the zones shifted (for areas of control and main military bases, see the map on p. 48).

The UN-led negotiation process between regime and opposition forces, which is based on UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254 and envisages power sharing and substantial political reform, has failed to bring about any agreement between the sides. Nor have the UN-led talks on constitutional reform led anywhere. And while the Astana format has provided for a balance between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, it has not managed to come up with any long-term arrangements or solve any of the underlying tensions either. The current military balance therefore remains precarious: having lost territorial control in 2019, the so-called Islamic

State (IS) remains active; there is continued infighting among opposition groups as well as between them, Turkey, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)/the People's Protection Units (YPG); Israel has continued to attack targets linked to Iran and Iran-backed militias; and the regime has not given up on regaining control over the whole of Syria and has continued its attacks in Idlib.

While the time of nationwide armed conflict is over, millions of civilians in Syria still suffer from violence, which continues to put their lives and livelihoods at risk. In 2020 in Idlib province alone, there were almost one million internally displaced people (IDPs).[1] Overall, according to the UN, about six million Syrians have fled to other countries, mainly in the region; 6.7 million Syrians remain IDPs, 2.8 million of whom live in Idlib and northern Aleppo, mostly in camps with dire and inhumane conditions. In total, 13.4 million Syrians (almost 80 per cent of the total remaining population) depend on aid, of which 6.7 million are children.[2] In addition, the large-scale destruction of basic infrastructure (hospitals, water facilities, schools, etc.) presents a huge challenge for stabilization and recovery efforts.[3] The lack of basic infrastructure and security not only leaves millions of Syrian children out of school and with no prospects for a better future, it also drives hundreds of thousands of young Syrian jobseekers to enroll in armed groups, become involved in illicit (drug) trafficking, or try to leave the country.

While the war and violence are the main reasons for this catastrophic humanitarian situation, the severe crisis the Syrian economy has been experiencing since 2019 has further increased the hardship of the country's population, especially for those living below the poverty line.[4] The main features of this crisis are: a decline in local production and exports, looming state bankruptcy and mass unemployment, as well as a huge depreciation of the Syrian pound and high inflation rates, which have led to increasing costs of living, a decrease in real wages, and a widening of the social gap. In this context, Lebanon's financial crisis has been a key driver.[5] The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in March 2020, placed an additional burden on the people and the econo-

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my. The pandemic has hit the inhabitants of densely populated areas and IDP camps particularly hard, with the most vulnerable being worst affected in the absence of efficient crisis management, adequate public health infrastructure, and means of protection against infection.[6]

Since 2011, the US and Europe have imposed a series of sanctions on the Assad regime. While these sanctions have failed to have a tangible effect on the behavior of Damascus, they have triggered a range of adverse spillover effects on Syria's economy, which has hit the population Syria-wide.[7] In combination with the war economy, widespread corruption, clientelism, and the politically motivated redistribution of income and resources by the government, sanctions have encouraged illegal trade and illicit economic activities, such as money laundering, drug trafficking, arms trade, and human trafficking. At the same time, these sanctions have made money transfers to international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), aid and humanitarian agencies extremely difficult. Sanctions have also destroyed the remaining local productive economy, as procurement costs for raw and intermediate materials have increased, resulting in complete dependence on imports to meet local demand for goods and services. Last but not least, sanctions have increased the economic dependence of the Syrian territories on the respective tutelary power, whether that be Russia, Iran, or Turkey.[8]

While negotiations over a political solution in Syria have been at a stalemate, certain players have changed their approach to Damascus. Since 2018, there has been a gradual move toward normalization of the Assad regime, driven by the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Syria's immediate neighbors. The United Nations envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, has been trying a new »step-for-step« approach toward Damascus. At the same time, early 2022 witnessed renewed military escalation, including an IS assault on an AANES prison in Hassakeh, a US operation against a leading IS figure in Idlib, a number of truck bombs in Turkish-controlled areas, and a Turkish operation in Iraq and Syria – all of which underline the complexity of this multilayered conflict. These local dynamics combined with increasing regional and international tensions (around Russia/Ukraine and the nuclear talks with Iran) do not bode well for a sustained de-escalation and progress on the political process. But what then is the likely trajectory?

CONCEIVABLE SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA IN 2030

The aim of this publication is to look beyond current and short-term developments in Syria, to understand how the interests and priorities with regard to Syria of the most relevant regional and international actors might have changed by 2030, as well as to identify plausible scenarios for different parts of Syria and the country as a whole in 2030.

The contributions provide multiple conceivable and plausible scenarios regarding the geopolitical dynamics and their implications for Syria by 2030. In other words, the authors

present a variety of possible futures, which are in themselves coherent, but which are not necessarily those we assume to be most probable, would wish for, or would be a continuation of current trajectories.

The first set of articles focuses on how the most relevant external actors' (the Arab Gulf states, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the US) interests, priorities, and approaches toward and in Syria will have changed by 2030. The second set focuses on how the dynamics between external and domestic actors will have changed in the different areas of control in Syria and what the implications on the ground are. All contributions reflect on the driving factors behind changes in the interests, priorities, and policies of the relevant actors as well as the resulting dynamics of such changes. They take into account structural and contingent driving factors, such as:

- foreseeable events, for example the outcomes of regular elections, economic trends, etc.;
- potential turning points, for example failure of »JCPOA plus« negotiations;

- wild cards, for example regime change in Iran; and

- black swan events, such as the rapid takeover of large swathes of Syrian territory by the IS in 2013/2014.

The contributions also investigate how different scenarios would affect the situation in Syria, in terms of territorial integrity, stabilization, state institutions, socioeconomic development, the humanitarian situation of IDPs, and refugee return. Lastly, the articles identify entry points for German and European policies that could influence future dynamics and trajectories in favor of a sustainable and peaceful solution in Syria.

EXTERNAL ACTORS' INTERESTS, PRIORITIES, AND APPROACHES IN 2030

In his contribution, Nikolay Surkov describes Syria as an arena for competition between the superpowers and, in that context, discusses Russia's interest in maintaining a permanent military presence via the naval and air bases it has established. Beyond this, Russia would want to see Syria become a self-sustained ally based on territorial integrity, national reconciliation, and economic reconstruction. Yet, Moscow is only willing to invest limited political capital to pressure Damascus into implementing reform steps. Therefore, while Russian foreign policy elites would favor a scenario of *decentralization*, a *frozen conflict* scenario with continued de facto partition is in fact seen as the most likely situation in 2030. A *restoration of territorial integrity and central government control* over the whole of Syria seems rather unlikely, given the current lack of state capacity and resources.

Natasha Hall stresses that while US administrations will continue to pivot away from the Middle East and reduce

their presence, developments on the ground might hold them back. However, even if the US were to maintain or *increase their engagement in NES,* the effectiveness of such a move would be undermined by a lack of trust in the US' long-term commitment among its friends and foes alike. That said, *a withdrawal of US forces* would most likely pose additional risks to stabilization, including the Assad regime using newly recovered resources for further military assaults, a resurgence of the IS, and an unimpeded flow of arms and militias into the country, driven by Iran.

Hamidreza Azizi asserts that Iran will continue to pursue its main interests in Syria, which serve its aim of establishing a deterrent against the US and its allies. In this vein, Tehran has been infiltrating Syria's military and security structures, increasingly establishing control over strategic corridors, and seeking to establish a social base in strategic areas, in particular in the border regions close to the Israel-occupied Golan Heights and in Deir ez-Zor province on the Iraqi border. Azizi envisages four main scenarios for Syria in 2030: *a Lebanon scenario*, with strong, indirect influence from Iran via loyal forces in the military and the security apparatus; a *Chinese connection* scenario, in which Iran has a strong economic influence because it profits from a privileged status in China's Belt and Road Initiative; *Syria as a battlefield* between Iran and its antagonists, which would entail prolonged violence with a negative impact on stabilization and the humanitarian situation; and lastly, a wild card scenario of *regime change in Iran*, which could pave the way for more constructive engagement of Tehran in Syria.

Sinem Adar and Huercan Aslı Aksoy hold that, even with a change in government in Ankara, Turkey's main interests in Syria will remain unchanged, in particular, preventing Kurdish autonomy under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)/YPG, warding off a new influx of refugees in Turkey, and resettling Syrian refugees in Syria. That said, Ankara might still reduce its military presence, decrease its support for the Syrian opposition, renew the peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), or seek a rapprochement with the Assad regime – whether due to a change in government, domestic (economic) constraints, or international dynamics forcing Ankara to adapt its policies. As a result, three scenarios seem plausible: a *continuation of the status quo*, a renewed agreement between Ankara and Damascus (»*Adana Agreement 2.0«)*, or, the least likely scenario, a *decentralized Syria.*

Lastly, but no less importantly, according to Cinzia Bianco, the Arab Gulf monarchies, specifically Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, all see Syria as an important stage for their geopolitical ambitions and all pursue different objectives and approaches in Syria. The UAE is pushing for *full normalization* with the Assad regime, in the hope of profiting from economic investment and establishing itself as a major transit hub. Saudi Arabia could potentially be crucial in the reconstruction and stabilization of Syria. Yet, as long as there is no sign of Damascus loosening its close alliance with Teh-

ran, Riyadh will remain hesitant to rehabilitate the Assad regime and will opt for *containment*. Doha has offered to serve as a mediator between Damascus and its adversaries, as well as non-state actors, with the aim of establishing a decentralized state system with a *degree of autonomy* in the northwest and the northeast of the country. It is not yet clear, however, which of these approaches will have gained the upper hand by 2030.

SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA'S DIFFERENT AREAS OF CONTROL IN 2030

Joseph Daher identifies the extent of the reintegration of Syria into the regional and international scenes as a decisive factor for developments in the areas controlled by the government. He envisages two main scenarios: Damascus' *continued isolation* would exacerbate current economic difficulties, reinforce instability, and lead to an increase in illicit economic activity, including narco-trafficking. Foreign powers would maintain their military presence and their zones of influence. By contrast, *normalization* of the Assad regime – in combination with the US waiving sanctions – would open the door for foreign investment, provide a boost for the economy, at least in some areas, allow for the rehabilitation of infrastructure, and lessen Damascus' economic dependence on Moscow and Tehran. It could also pave the way for returning control over the whole of Syria to Damascus (with the exception of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights) through an agreement with Turkey. However, there are still serious obstacles for economic recovery, even in a normalization scenario: Syria's rentier economy, corruption, the neglect of the productive sectors, the deterioration of environmental problems, and the effects of climate change. What is more, illicit activities, recruitment by radical groups, and migration pressures would presumably continue to be a challenge in both scenarios.

According to Ferhad Ahma and Kristin Helberg, developments in NES will critically depend on foreign powers, in particular, Turkey, Russia, and the US. Nevertheless, the performance and legitimacy of AANES will also play an important role. They see three main scenarios for NES. The first is *a consolidation of AANES* based on continued US military presence and international support for stabilization, which would allow for democratic legitimation of AANES and power sharing between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), possibly also alleviating Ankara's concerns regarding the self-administration. The second scenario is an *agreement between AANES and Damascus*, possibly mediated by Moscow, about a certain degree of autonomy. However, this is only conceivable for the Kurdish-majority areas, not for the Arab-majority provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The third scenario would be *another Turkish intervention* aimed at creating a contiguous Turkish-controlled area along the border, allowing for a resettlement of refugees based in Turkey and thus changing the demographic reality further. Whatever the circumstances, AANES will face a number of severe challenges including the effects of environmental degradation and climate change, the presence of

a large number of IDPs, and the need to deal with IS prisoners and their families as well as active IS cells.

Sinan Hatahet considers three potential scenarios to be the most plausible for Turkish-controlled northern Aleppo, with Turkey obviously being the most decisive actor. The *establishment of an autonomous administration of northwest Syria*, possibly even including western Aleppo and northern Idlib provinces, would allow the SIG and local councils to establish permanent local governance structures. However, the administration would remain dependent on outside support, primarily from Turkey, and might witness continued infighting. Today, it does not seem conceivable that either Ankara or Damascus would support such an arrangement. By contrast, a *return of the regime* and establishment of central control over the area could be triggered by a change in Turkey's approach and a rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus. It would likely prompt a major humanitarian crisis, which would be even more severe in the case of a forced military return of regime forces, as opposed to one that is agreed upon by all parties. A *continuation of the status quo* is seen as the most likely scenario. Yet, this would not offer prospects for stabilization, would leave the area with limited development, and local councils in a risk management mode.

According to Bahjat Hajjar, there are two main scenarios for Idlib province, today under the control of the SSG and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – with Turkey, Russia, the Assad regime, and HTS being the decisive players. A *consolidation of opposition rule* over the region could come about as a result of an agreement with Damascus or, more likely, due to a lack of resources in Damascus to reconquer the area. This scenario would allow the stabilization of local governance structures as well as a modicum of early recovery. The region would, however, remain dependent on outside, primarily Turkish, support. The decisive step toward a more sustainable development would be the international recognition of the SSG as de facto authority. The second scenario would be a *regime takeover* following a change in Turkey's priorities or a breakdown of Turkish-Russian arrangements. The military operations this would involve, as well as the ensuing revenge against the local population and IDPs, would have dramatic humanitarian repercussions for a civilian population already living in dire conditions. It would turn the region into a hotbed of discontent, instability, and radicalism.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

All scenarios presented in the contributions to this volume assume that by 2030, there will neither be a negotiated resolution to all of Syria's conflicts, nor a national-level agreement on power sharing involving all relevant Syrian stakeholders. The scenarios also assume that the main foreign powers shaping the dynamics in Syria today will still be doing so in 2030, and will continue to pursue their current interests in Syria. However, the means employed to achieve these objectives and the scope of the foreign powers' involvement as well as their respective weight might differ from today's balance of forces, in particular with regard to military presence, financial assistance, and economic investment, as well as support for specific local actors. Most authors come to the conclusion that a continuation of current trajectories is the most probable scenario, with the exception of the degree of military presence, the intensity of economic investment, and the form of Turkey's support for the opposition, as well as a lack of clarity regarding which one of the Arab Gulf states' approaches will prevail.

In addition to the geopolitical factors analyzed in the contributions, Syria's future will, to a considerable extent, be shaped by megatrends, i.e., global trends which will lead to a profound transformation of its environment, economy, and society. Of these megatrends, climate change and its effects – first and foremost severe water scarcity and loss of arable land – , pronounced demographic growth, and urbanization (i.e., rural-urban migration) will be among the biggest challenges facing Syria by 2030.[9] Today, Syrian authorities neither recognize the urgency of confronting these challenges, nor do they have the capacity and resources to do so. This increases the risks of adverse effects for Syria's environment, population, and economy, as well as the likelihood of climate and resources-related conflict.[10]

Not a single scenario among those presented in this volume paints a picture of sustainable stability, reconciliation, large-scale reconstruction, or refugee and IDP return by 2030. Some of the scenarios expect a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation and a rise in destabilizing spillover effects for the region. European policymakers should take note of the risks and opportunities that are linked to each of the scenarios. While they will not be the actors primarily shaping dynamics on the ground, they could and should still seek to influence trajectories toward greater stability, recovery, and an improvement in the humanitarian situation. Already today, the EU and its member states are the most important donors of humanitarian, recovery, and stabilization assistance in Syria. They are also important actors when it comes to supporting civilian activism in all areas of Syria. And they play a role in ensuring a modicum of accountability by bringing those responsible for war crimes to justice in Europe. Last but not least, the EU and its member states matter when it comes to preventing warlords and criminals from doing business unimpeded as they implement smart sanctions, focused mainly on specific individuals.

In this vein, Europeans could increase their impact on trajectories in Syria by pursuing six specific lines of action:

– Work toward the inclusion of relevant Syrian stakeholders in conflict resolution fora – whether that be in the UN or other bodies, on the national or subnational level; this concerns first and foremost representatives of AANES (from the northeast) and the SSG (from the northwest), who have so far been excluded from such talks.

- Enhance political and diplomatic engagement in support of both a Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue for a pluralistic self-administration in the Kurdish-majority areas as well as Kurdish-Kurdish-Turkish talks aimed at reaching an agreement that would reconcile Kurdish self-administration, Turkish security interests, and Syria's territorial integrity.

- Increase support for local governance structures and civil society initiatives in NES and engage with the de facto authorities of the SSG to empower civil society and marginalized groups (in particular women and youth) and improve the humanitarian situation.

- Step up discussions about more effective, needs-based engagement for early recovery and support for local rehabilitation and development initiatives, as well as humanitarian aid across Syria, in particular in the education and healthcare sectors, with a focus on heavily destroyed areas and those hosting IDPs, in view of providing prospects, in particular for young people.

- What is more, the EU and its member states should start to shift from emergency, short-term assistance to a more long-term approach in cooperation with local authorities, aimed primarily at the rehabilitation of the health and education infrastructure, social housing, building back basic (water, electricity, waste) infrastructure, as well as urban development. In particular, the (re)building of schools and universities in NES and in the northwest should be considered a crucial tool for stabilization and peacebuilding in the coming years. European Union assistance programs should also prioritize the support of self-sustaining activities in the productive sectors, i.e., agriculture and manufacturing, Syria-wide. The knowledge of local and international NGOs, active on the ground, should be considered, when designing such programs. In this context, there is an urgent need to hold discussions with US counterparts about adequate sanctions waivers in order to address the negative effects of over-compliance with the sanctions regimes.

- Engage in talks with regional stakeholders – especially the Arab Gulf states and Turkey – aimed at constructive engagement and long-term stabilization in Syria and at avoiding working at cross-purposes in Syria, particularly against the backdrop of normalization efforts by the UAE and others; try to mitigate threat perceptions in Iran and Israel in back-channel talks.

- Diminish the future IS threat in Syria and alleviate the burden on AANES through repatriation of European nationals currently in AANES detention centers; remain engaged in the fight against the IS beyond purely military and repressive means, by expanding education and awareness raising in IDP camps, particularly in those hosting IS families and children, with the aim of preventing the emergence of a new generation receptive to radical ideologies.

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10 Syria is no stranger to such dynamics: Rural-urban migration has been driven by drought and environmental degradation, compounded by inadequate state policies since the 1990s. In the second half of the 2000s, Syria experienced severe drought, which led to a loss of livelihoods especially in the northeast of the country, to a considerable rise in food prices, and to internal displacement, in particular to the peripheries of Aleppo and Damascus. Grievances stemming from these dynamics were by no means the only, but certainly one of the most decisive factors behind the 2011 uprising. Cf. Gaub, Florence and Lienard, Clémentine (2021): Arab Climate Futures. Of Risk and Readiness. Paris: EUISS, October 2021: 4; available at: https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_170.pdf (last accessed on 15.2.2022); The World Bank Group (2021): Groundswell Part 2. Acting on Internal Climate Migration. Washington D.C.: 204f; available at: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36248 (last accessed on 15.02.2022).

EXTERNAL ACTORS' INTERESTS, PRIORITIES, AND APPROACHES IN 2030

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SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA IN 2030 AND RUSSIA'S APPROACH

Great Power Competition Continues to Dominate Moscow's Agenda

Nikolay Surkov

Since March 2020, the situation in Syria has been relatively stable. Despite some tensions in the northeast and around Idlib, resumption of large-scale fighting is rather unlikely. While Russia continues to provide considerable military assistance and remains active in Syria, Moscow is adjusting its policy by shifting its focus from security to economic reconstruction in order to ease the burden on the population and ensure the survival of the government in Damascus. Russia is also investing significant diplomatic efforts to improve the international standing of Syria and to create the conditions for at least partial recognition. In considering their future strategy for Syria, Russian foreign policy elites are looking at three major scenarios – frozen conflict, return of a centralized state, or decentralization.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To gain a better understanding of Russia's approach to Syria, it is useful to take a brief look at the evolution of bilateral relations. While Damascus was a longtime ally of Moscow during the Cold War, Syria was no longer regarded as a potential ally in the 1990s and early 2000s, as policymakers in Moscow believed that Assad was more interested in developing ties with the West. However, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the increasing Western pressure on Syria, which was accused of developing weapons of mass destruction, harboring terrorists, and suppressing the sovereignty of Lebanon, drove Damascus back toward its traditional partners – Iran and Russia. In January 2005, President Assad visited Moscow seeking to resume arms sales and economic cooperation. This trend was reinforced by the international reactions to the assassination of Rafik Hariri. Russia willingly reengaged with Syria, but bilateral relations were constrained by other regional considerations, e.g., Moscow's interest in maintaining close cooperation with Israel. The Arab Spring prompted Moscow to take a more active stance in the Middle East and to counter the policy of regime change, interpreted as being driven by Western countries. However, during the initial phase of the Syrian crisis, Moscow avoided direct intervention in

the conflict, instead providing political support and military supplies to the government in Damascus. At the same time, Russian officials regularly made statements that Moscow was not trying to defend President Assad but to protect the Syrian state.

In 2014, the situation in Syria deteriorated dramatically because of the advances of the so-called Islamic State (IS), and Moscow feared Syria becoming a terrorist hub, which was an important motive for its direct military intervention in the Syrian crisis, but not the only one. As Moscow faced Western pressure over the crisis in Ukraine at that time, it saw Syria as an opportunity to improve its international standing and demonstrate to international public opinion that Russia could play a positive role and counter one of the most serious global threats: terrorism.

The Russian military deployment, which took place in 2015, was initially intended to be limited in time and scale. As of October 2015, the goal was to stabilize the security situation, ensure the survival of the legitimate government, and create conditions for a political settlement. However, by the end of 2017, despite considerable security improvements, it became clear that Russia could not completely withdraw its forces from Syria. The Syrian army was still too weak to fight armed groups on its own. In fact, at the time, there were international circumstances that encouraged Moscow to actually increase its military presence in Syria. In light of a notable deterioration of Russian-American relations, Syria became one of the stages on which the two superpowers competed. In this context, the Russian expeditionary forces in Syria became part of the outer defensive perimeter limiting US naval activity in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As a result, despite its symbolic partial withdrawal in 2017, Russia established permanent air and naval bases in Latakia and Tartus. Several battalions of Russian military police were deployed as de facto peacekeepers to safeguard so-called de-escalation zones and reconciliation agreements between the Government of Syria (GOS) and armed opposition groups, and hundreds of military advisers were tasked to re-

build the Syrian army. Private military companies also continued to operate in the country, compensating for the lack of combat-capable Syrian forces. Thus, Moscow and Damascus were drawn to each other, and became de facto close allies due to circumstances and shared interests.

THE CURRENT RUSSIAN APPROACH

Russian interests in Syria are primarily geopolitical. Involvement in Syria provides a strategic foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean and an opportunity for Russia to showcase its increased capabilities, thus enhancing its prestige. So far Russia's economic interests in Syria have been very limited, but it would like to reduce the costs of the campaign and avoid a massive financial burden. Thus, Moscow is seeking to prevent another large-scale escalation, ensure international recognition of the GOS, make it economically self-sustainable and militarily more self-reliant. Russian official discourse does not provide a detailed vision of the »new Syria«, but it insists on the restoration of territorial integrity as the principal step toward stability. Territorial integrity is understood as full withdrawal of foreign troops that have not been invited by the GOS, in particular US and Turkish troops, and the return of the whole country to the control of the GOS. At the current stage, a US withdrawal is seen as the more pressing issue, as the US presence is perceived as fostering Kurdish separatism.

In this context, the future status of northeast Syria (NES) is considered especially important for stability. Currently, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) does not possess enough strength to regain control of the Kurdish-majority areas, as it is engaged in maintaining pressure on Idlib and continuing operations against the remnants of the IS. Russia's preferred solution for NES would be for Damascus to retake control over the Arab-populated areas, with the Kurdish-populated areas being given a certain degree of autonomy. The status of the Kurdish militias in such a scenario is still uncertain, but they might be able to serve as a form of local/municipal police. However, all heavy weaponry and major military installations would have to be transferred to the SAA.

Russian officials believe that reconciliation is unlikely to happen without at least symbolic political reforms, but they refuse to exert overt pressure on President Assad. In this vein, Moscow supports reforms through the UN-led constitutional process, but is against the Western push to create a transitional government. In general, Russia demonstrates a negative attitude toward the West, which is perceived as being a potential spoiler, capable of undermining Moscow's efforts to end the crisis. According to Russian officials, Western countries have laid down impossible conditions for cooperation with the Assad government, while they essentially continue the policy of regime change by non-military means. By contrast, the current Russian approach to stabilizing Syria is based on a combination of diplomatic and military tools. Moscow believes that negotiations with moderate elements of the opposition should be accompanied by military operations against the remaining armed groups, primarily in Idlib. Reconciliation is also seen as vitally important for the international recognition of the government in Damascus because the current isolation and sanctions prevent economic reconstruction. Russia is counting on partial recognition, at least on the regional scale, which might lead to Syria's return to the Arab League and resumption of trade and investment cooperation with its neighbors.

Economic reconstruction is an important element of Russia's strategy in Syria, since Moscow aspires to turn Syria into an economically self-sustainable ally and to reduce its current dependence on Iran. In this vein, it is necessary to diminish the negative impact of Western sanctions and to secure the government's control over the whole of Syrian territory, as crucial energy resources and agricultural areas currently remain under US and Turkish control. In the coming years, economic reconstruction as well as food and energy security are likely to become the key issues in Russia's approach to Syria because of the severe economic crisis that has hit the government-controlled part of the country, which is threatening the fragile stability.

SCENARIOS FOR 2030 AND RUSSIA'S STRATEGY IN SYRIA

There are three main scenarios for Syria in the run up to 2030. Each scenario has its own advantages and challenges, but all three are acceptable for Moscow, since they do not contradict Russia's strategic goals and interests.

SCENARIO 1: FROZEN CONFLICT

This is the most feasible scenario for the period in question. The likelihood of this scenario stems from the reluctance of the Assad government to make any significant concessions to the opposition and to implement political reforms. This makes genuine reconciliation unlikely. Without at least limited national reconciliation, the country will remain vulnerable to foreign, for example Turkish, interference through the support of opposition groups. The high internationalization of the Syrian crisis means that Syria would not be able to reclaim its agency and would remain an arena for regional and global rivalries.

The distinctive features of this scenario are the following:

– A relatively sustainable nationwide ceasefire, with some lingering risk of sporadic military escalations;

– A continued de facto partition of the country, including a Turkish protectorate in the north and northwest. The US is likely to maintain its base in Al-Tanf, while the northeast would remain disputed territory;

– Idlib might be turned into a sanctuary for a number of opposition groups, but the SAA is likely to secure the M4 highway;

– A stronger Iranian influence in Syria;

– Limited international recognition of the government in Damascus;

– Absence of large-scale economic reconstruction due to sanctions;

– Further mass emigration of Syrians and brain drain caused by protracted downturn, no return of refugees.

From the Russian perspective, a frozen conflict is not the most attractive scenario, but it is considered acceptable, as it allows the achievement of relative stability, guaranteed survival of the GOS, and even initial work on early recovery. However, a prolongation of the status quo also involves considerable costs: a continuation of the US and Turkish military presence/occupation, deepening fragmentation of the country, and further deterioration of the economic situation due to international sanctions. Maintaining the status quo is also seen as requiring Russian involvement, both military and economic, and as being a potential source of tension in relations with other regional and global players.

Under these circumstances the Kremlin's strategy would remain mostly unchanged compared to 2022, especially if the confrontation with the West continues and the importance of military bases in Syria for Russia's security persists. Russia would be one of the main, though not the only, guarantors of Syria's sovereignty against foreign interventions. Moscow would continue to provide Damascus with substantial military assistance. Russia is not likely to openly attempt to muscle the unwelcome foreign troops out of Syria, since such actions might lead to more tensions with Turkey or the US. Russia would advocate for national reconciliation and support all negotiation formats, but it would not consider them a priority, and the Kremlin would not exert any pressure on the GOS to avoid alienating a valuable ally. Economic survival of the GOS would also remain a Russian priority. Considerable diplomatic efforts are likely to be invested in restoring international recognition of the GOS and achieving the easing of sanctions. Moscow might finance the reconstruction of some basic infrastructure and encourage Russian private companies to invest in Syria. It would also try to develop new mechanisms of bilateral trade that are less vulnerable to sanctions.

SCENARIO 2: A RESURGENT CENTRALIZED STATE

This is the most attractive scenario for the current GOS. It involves the restoration of territorial integrity of Syria and strong centralized government structures. Its distinctive features are the following:

– Withdrawal of those foreign troops that were not invited by the GOS, facilitated by a combination of diplomatic and military pressure;

– Reconquest of remaining opposition enclaves. Exodus of the opposition instead of reconciliation;

– Suppression of the Kurdish movement, though symbolic »cultural« autonomy might be granted;

– A leading role for the Ba'athists in all government structures;

– Continued international isolation of the country coupled with more sanctions. Strong dependence on Russian and especially Iranian support. Normalization of relations with the Arab world might reduce this dependence, but it would not be possible without US consent;

– Slow reconstruction, persistent economic stagnation.

The majority of the Russian foreign policy elite considers it unlikely that Syria would return to its pre-2011 situation, because this would demand resources that the government in Damascus does not possess, and its allies are unable to provide. That said, the US evacuation from Afghanistan showed that domestic political considerations might force opponents of the Assad government to reduce their activity or even withdraw completely.

Russia is likely to provide military, and to a lesser degree financial, support for the resurgence of a centralized Ba'athist state should the regional and international conditions for such a scenario be favorable. This scenario would be convenient for Moscow because it does not require Russia to exert any pressure on the government in Damascus on the issue of reforms. This is something the Kremlin is reluctant to do as it does not want to alienate the Syrian leadership, being aware of the importance of bases in Tartus and Latakia. In any event, the preservation of a viable Syrian state takes precedence over its political system. Much like in the first scenario, maintaining a military presence would be a priority, while everything else would be of secondary importance. In order to ease the economic burden, Moscow would try to convince regional players, such as Arab Gulf states, to normalize relations with the GOS.

SCENARIO 3: DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization is the most optimistic option, though it is also the least likely one, since it would require greater flexibility from the side of the Syrian authorities. However, if it were to become a reality, it would involve limited reform within the existing political framework. It could thus serve as an alternative to federalization, which has been completely rejected by the GOS, and allow for the reintegration of Kurdish areas. Most notably, it would open the path for reconciliation with part of the opposition through limited power sharing. From the Russian perspective, decentralization should include a transfer of authority to the provincial and municipal level, e.g., by empowering local councils to take decisions about local affairs and providing them with greater

financial autonomy. Local and municipal elections with the participation of different political parties might become a basis for gradual liberalization in the future. Yet, decentralization might also challenge national unity and internal stability, as it might encourage minorities to claim de facto autonomy.

The main features of this scenario are:

– Decentralization is likely to be based on a new constitution, which might lead to wider international recognition of the government, both regionally and globally;

– Decentralization might also provide a solution for NES because it offers an alternative to formal Kurdish autonomy. That could include a US withdrawal;

– Continued Turkish occupation – a de facto protectorate in the north. Idlib would remain contested;

– Partial lifting of Western economic sanctions. Growing trade with the countries of the region. Better prospects for reconstruction and growth. Possible economic assistance from the Gulf states and China;

– Continued Russian and Iranian presence as principal donors and security providers.

In reality, regardless of any reforms, the central government would most likely remain strong, controlling the provision of basic services and funding as some regions simply do not have the fiscal base to become financially self-sufficient. Decentralization might also be selective: the central government might choose to delegate a certain degree of power only to local elites, such as tribes, in loyalist areas.

In principle, Russia favors decentralization, but in practice Moscow is not keen on the idea of political transition, since it has other priorities in Syria and is not willing to waste political capital pushing for reforms against all odds. However, the Kremlin might attempt to convince the Assad government that some change might have a positive effect on the country's internal dynamics and, more importantly, improve the international standing of the GOS, signaling its support for decentralization. Even limited political changes might become a powerful argument that would help to ease the economic pressure and attract more reconstruction funding. Interestingly, in the third scenario, the essence of the Russian strategy would remain very similar to the first two: Moscow is likely to prioritize close cooperation with Damascus in the security domain.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE AND POTENTIAL BLACK SWANS

Cooperation with Syria is highly likely to remain important for Russia up to 2030. That said, we must keep in mind that relations with Damascus constitute only one aspect of Moscow's foreign policy and is subordinate to other issues, such as national security and relations with other major powers. In other words, the Russian approach to Syria will be shaped not only by the value of Syria per se, but more by the role it plays in the great game. From the military standpoint, in light of the renewed long-term confrontation between Moscow and Washington, naval and air bases in Syria have become increasingly important for the defense of the Black Sea coast and southern regions of Russia, given the presence of at least one US carrier strike group in the Mediterranean. Bases in Latakia and Tartus also allow Russia to project power and conduct operations in the Middle East and neighboring regions.

Thus, in 2030, US-Russia relations will in all likelihood be crucial for Moscow's policy in Syria. In the event of a further deterioration of superpower relations, maintaining and protecting the bases in Latakia and Tartus might become a top priority, irrespective of all other aspects of the Syrian crisis, and any US activity would be regarded as hostile. On the other hand, a US-Russian détente is likely to create a window of opportunity for cooperation on humanitarian issues and/or counterterrorism.

Relations with Turkey might also affect Russia's strategy in Syria. Moscow shares the Assad government's belief that in the longer term, Turkey poses an even greater threat than the US, whose intervention in Syria is troublesome but at least temporary. Ankara's policy poses several challenges, the most immediate of which is the risk of destabilization caused by another large-scale military operation against Kurdish militias and the occupation of a larger part of Syrian territory. Renewed escalation in Idlib is also a serious concern. Even if there is ultimately no major military escalation, the current Turkish approach is likely to lead to further fragmentation of Syria and the creation of a long-term Turkish protectorate in the north, which would become a permanent source of tensions. Thus, up to 2030, Russia would be forced to invest considerable effort in containing Turkey and preventing further expansion.

In addition, Russian-Iranian relations in Syria are likely to remain controversial, since both countries want to ensure the survival of the Assad government but have different long-term goals. Relations with Iran might become a major problem if Tehran decides to use Syrian territory, especially its southern areas, for operations against Israel. Russia is unlikely to risk open confrontation with Iran. Rather, it is likely to turn a blind eye to any Israeli military actions, unless they pose a direct threat to Russian military personnel or Russian assets.

By contrast, domestic developments in Russia are likely to have little influence on Moscow's foreign policy, unless we witness a crisis as devastating as the one that caused the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988. As long as Syria remains important for national security, neither elections nor economic trends will affect Russian policy there. Moreover, domestic public opinion shows little interest in Syria, which gives the Kremlin a free hand. The only developments that might change this attitude would be a large

number of casualties among Russian military personnel or a sudden increase in expenses coupled with major economic difficulties at home.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EUROPE IN SYRIA

Russia's leadership regards the current European approach toward Syria as ideology driven and excessively influenced by its regime change agenda. However, Moscow is interested in cooperation with the Europeans and believes they could be convinced to adopt a more pragmatic attitude, reduce their pressure on the GOS, and add some positive incentives to their policy toward it. There might be openings for both economic and political cooperation, at least in scenarios one and three.

This concerns the economic and humanitarian field in particular. Since 2018, Russia has been paying more attention to these issues and engaged in early recovery projects and the return of refugees. Yet, despite Russian and Iranian assistance, since 2019, the government-controlled areas have been suffering from a worsening socioeconomic crisis, which has been marked by severe energy and food shortages coupled with catastrophic inflation rates. By 2030, while the Assad government is likely to survive, the country would still be in ruins.

Russia acknowledges that the reconstruction of Syria is too large a task for any single country. Consequently, it is likely that Moscow would continue looking for partners which might either provide funding for reconstruction or at least open their markets for Syrian products. The Arab Gulf states are the most likely candidates here. But reconstruction assistance might also become an entry point for the Europeans, especially if they adopt the more pragmatic strategy of taking small steps toward the GOS. European countries might also devise exemption mechanisms or provide humanitarian assistance that would reduce the negative impact of sanctions on the population in GOS-controlled areas. The Iranian experience demonstrates that under dire economic conditions, the GOS might be ready to make concessions, and donors could gain serious leverage. However, it must be understood that the GOS is unlikely to agree to anything more far reaching than the decentralization scenario outlined above.

In the political domain, Russia would welcome European support for securing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. That would include reducing support for Kurdish secessionism and condemning Turkish military incursions. From the Russian perspective, these two issues might become sources of long-term instability or even lead to renewed large-scale fighting, causing more damage and new waves of refugees.

2

IRAN IN SYRIA IN 2030

Iran Is There to Stay

Hamidreza Azizi

More than a decade since the start of the Syrian conflict, the Assad regime has managed to survive while its ally Iran has expanded its influence throughout Syria. When Iran's leaders decided to intervene in the Syrian crisis in 2011, their primary goal was to save their Syrian ally from collapse. The rise of terrorist groups, especially the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, further increased Iran's threat perception, contributing to its active involvement in both countries. As such, Iran's role in the early stages of the Syrian crisis was essentially reactive (reacting to imminent threats) and military (direct and indirect, i.e., through proxies).

This was the case until 2016–17, when, on the one hand, the recapture of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, alleviated Iranian concerns about the fall of Assad, and, on the other, the collapse of IS' self-proclaimed caliphate reduced the threat of a potential terrorist spillover into Iranian territory. Consequently, economic and political interests also entered into Iran's calculations and shaped its approach. However, the assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, by the US in Iraq on January 3, 2020, gave rise to a remilitarized Iranian approach, not only in Syria but across the entire region. Iran appears to have strengthened its military buildup in Syria with the potential aim of targeting the interests of the US and its allies, especially Israel.[1] As a result, Iran is currently playing an active role in Syria that prioritizes military considerations, but political and economic interests nevertheless remain essential for Tehran.[2]

WHAT IS IRAN'S APPROACH TO SYRIA TODAY?

Iran's focus is on ensuring its long-term influence in the country and preventing it from being undermined by rivals. To achieve this goal, Iran's current strategy in Syria is based on three pillars:

First, infiltrating Syria's military and security structures: For several years, Iran has been trying to promote loyal elements within the Syrian army and security system, create new local militias, and integrate the existing ones, i.e., its foreign and local proxies, into the official structures of the Syrian armed forces. There are reports that Iran has been able to obtain Syrian citizenship for a significant number of its Afghan and Pakistani proxies (from the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades) and integrate them into the ranks of the Syrian army. Iran has also sought to integrate the National Defense Forces (NDF) and then the Local Defense Forces (LDF) as formal but parallel units into the Syrian Armed Forces. Besides, Iran already has loyal elements in the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, the 4th Division, and the Republican Guard.[3] At the same time, Iran's efforts to establish new local militias have been most evident in eastern Syria, where in the fall of 2021, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) formed what is known as the Hashemiyoun brigade.[4]

Second, control over strategic corridors: Since the defeat of the IS in eastern Syria in late 2017, Iran has been trying to consolidate its control over the Al-Bukamal/Al-Qa'im border crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Control over this crossing allows Iran to maintain a direct land connection to its allies, from Iraq to Lebanon. This is one of the reasons why Deir ez-Zor province has become a key area in Iran's Syria strategy over the past four years.[5] Recently, there have also been reports of Iran's »land acquisition efforts near Damascus International Airport and along the highway leading to it from the city.«[6] In the meantime, Iran has also tried to expand its presence in the port of Latakia on the Mediterranean. As such, control over land, air, and sea transport corridors has become one of the main elements of Iran's strategy. Iran's efforts to consolidate control over Aleppo airport can also be seen in the same context.[7]

Third, sociocultural infiltration in southern and eastern Syria: In line with the expansion of its presence in Deir ez-Zor, Iran has taken extensive measures to change the sectarian and social fabric of the area. These include buying land and property for the settlement of its proxy forces, as well as cultural campaigns to promote Shiism among the local

population. More recently, Iran has also taken similar measures in southern Syria, especially in the areas adjacent to the occupied Golan region. It is important to note that Iran's activities in this field are more driven by a desire to establish a long-term or even permanent social and geographical base in Syria than by messianic and ideological motives. Deir ez-Zor's strategic location and its proximity to US and allied bases in Syria, on the one hand, and southern Syria's shared border with the Islamic Republic's archenemy Israel, on the other, have probably played the most significant role in Iran's decision to concentrate on those areas.

The second and third elements of Iran's strategy suggest that Tehran seeks a more targeted presence in Syria, in which transit corridors and access to enemy positions determine the geography of Iran's influence.

WHAT WILL IRAN'S APPROACH TO SYRIA BE IN 2030?

Iran's role in Syria has become more multidimensional, complex, and far-reaching over the past decade. But to accurately assess future prospects, in addition to Iran's priorities, another set of dynamics and driving factors must also be taken into account, including:

– The future of Bashar al-Assad: The close personal relationship between high-ranking Iranian officials – including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – and Bashar al-Assad has been an important factor in expanding Iranian influence. As such, any development entailing Assad's removal from power could reduce Iran's influence.

– Russia's role and influence: Since Russia launched its direct intervention in Syria in September 2015, Tehran and Moscow have worked closely together to save Assad. That said, there has been growing competition between the two countries to achieve greater influence in the Syrian economy, as well as in military and security structures.[8]

– China's role in the future of Syria: In 2020, Iran and China signed an agreement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In this context, Iran seeks to define itself as being at the center of a land transit route stretching toward the Mediterranean via Iraq and Syria, within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

– The future of Iran-US relations: Indirect talks are currently ongoing between Tehran and Washington to revive the 2015 nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA). Restoring the JCPOA could also reduce the aggressiveness of Iran's strategy in Syria by easing tensions between Iran, on the one hand, and the US and its allies, on the other. This might also ease the confrontation between Iran and Israel, which has long been extended to Syria.

– Arab states' relations with Syria and Iran: Some believe that the process of Arab normalization with Damascus, started in 2018, is aimed, at least partly, at reducing Iran's influence in Syria.[9] At the same time, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has tried to improve ties with Iran, while Tehran and Riyadh have engaged in diplomatic talks to normalize relations. Depending on their success, these parallel trends could affect Iran's role in Syria positively or negatively.

– Domestic developments in Iran: Tehran and Damascus have had a close partnership since the 1980s, with the political orientation of different administrations in Iran having almost no impact. That said, conservative and hardline factions in Iran, which consider Syria a part of the »axis of resistance,« are promoting an even closer alliance with the Assad regime and support Iran's continued presence in Syria.[10] This is despite the fact that, due to increasing economic difficulties at home, a growing number of Iranians are skeptical of Iran's regional involvement, including in Syria.[11]

Based on these driving factors, as well as the current trends, four major scenarios can be envisaged for the future of Iran's role in Syria:

SCENARIO 1: THE LEBANON SCENARIO

The most probable scenario for 2030 is an increase in Iran's political and security influence and, at the same time, a decline in its economic influence in Syria. In this scenario, the central government in Syria, still dominated by Assad, has fully established control over the whole of Syria, and most foreign troops – except for the Russians – have left the country. Although Russia may have also reduced its combat forces, it maintains its core military bases in western Syria under the pretext of the 49-year agreement it has with Damascus.[12] Therefore, Iran will also have ended its direct military presence in Syria, most likely under a Russian-initiated arrangement that envisages mutual retreat of Iranian and Turkish forces. However, Iran's indirect influence continues through loyal forces in the military and security apparatus. Vast areas in southern and eastern Syria have become permanent zones of Iranian influence. In the economic sphere, however, Iran has mainly lost the upper hand to Russia and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

In this scenario, China's policy of pursuing balanced relations with the countries of the Middle East prevents Iranian dreams of bandwagoning China in Syria from materializing.[13] As has been the case in Lebanon so far, relations between Iran and the Arab countries in Syria are competitive rather than openly confrontational. Meanwhile, Iran and the US have reached a modus vivendi, though not a grand bargain, which alleviates tensions between the sides in Syria. The end of Iran's direct presence has also substantially reduced the level of Israeli military activity in Syria.

SCENARIO 2: THE CHINESE CONNECTION

In a second scenario, however, an increasingly fierce confrontation between China and the US has convinced Beijing to prioritize relations with Iran over Washington's traditional Arab allies. Therefore, Iran is also able to strengthen its economic influence in Syria, especially through its privileged position in China's BRI.

SCENARIO 3: SYRIA AS A BATTLEFIELD

A third scenario may happen if Tehran and Washington enter a new phase of escalating confrontation due to the failure of JCPOA talks or other reasons. In this case, with tensions rising between Iran, on the one hand, and the United States and Israel, on the other, Iran uses its presence in Syria to target US and Israeli interests. Hence, in 2030, far from being stabilized, Syria remains a battlefield between Iran and its rivals.

SCENARIO 4: THE WILD CARD SCENARIO

Finally, a wild card scenario can also be imagined, in which a major domestic political change in Iran, especially in the form of a regime change, causes Tehran to reevaluate its regional policy. In this case, by 2030, Iran has ended both direct and indirect military involvement on Syrian soil and is focused instead on playing a political and diplomatic role in stabilizing Syria. In this scenario, there could also be constructive diplomatic engagement between Iran, on the one hand, and Western and regional states, on the other, on the issue of Syria – and the broader region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

Given the current political, diplomatic, economic, and military trends, in any probable scenario – except the wild card – Iran's overall influence in Syria will increase and stabilize over the next decade. In other words, the only major difference between the scenarios is whether Iran's influence is single-dimensional or multidimensional (the first and second scenarios) and to what extent it involves military escalation (the third scenario). Europe should, therefore, formulate its long-term policy toward Syria on the assumption that not only will the Assad regime's position be stabilized over the next ten years, but that its ally Iran will be in a stronger position. Thus, if European states want to become relevant actors on the Syrian scene, they need to develop relations with current and future stakeholders, including Iran. Establishing a diplomatic framework which includes both European states and foreign actors with influence on the ground in Syria, namely Iran, Russia, and Turkey, could help achieve this goal.

Finally, even the realization of the wild card scenario, i.e., regime change in Iran, would not automatically contribute to more stability and a shift toward more inclusive, less re-

pressive governance in Syria. The reason is that a decision in Tehran to withdraw from Syria would not necessarily convince the various militias affiliated with the Islamic Republic to cease their activities. Instead, they might seek new patrons. In this case, even more problematic actors, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah may seize the opportunity to take control over those militias. In light of this, it is essential that Europe's diplomatic engagement with Iran regarding Syria include the issue of managing the Iran-backed militias in order to prevent any further instability in the future.

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3

THE US IN SYRIA IN 2030

Continued Engagement versus Withdrawal

Natasha Hall

The US has hardly been absent in the past decade in Syria. Successive US administrations have expressed their opposition to the Assad government's brutal crackdown on civilians. The US supported rebel groups, expanded sanctions on regime figures and their allies, and provided the most humanitarian assistance of any one country – over 13 billion US dollars from 2011 to 2021. Beyond the struggle against the Syrian regime, the US military spent billions more on Operation Inherent Resolve, working with an international coalition and the local Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to eliminate the so-called Islamic State (IS) group in eastern Syria. Hundreds of US soldiers remain in the country. However, as the Assad government consolidates political and territorial control and reengages with the world, American aims for Syria have become far less ambitious. Indeed, the primary goal of the US appears to be little more than to steadily deprioritize Syria.

COMPLICATED PIVOT TO ASIA

For over ten years, US presidents have tried to reconfigure their approach to the Middle East to be able to focus more on China. The left and the right of the political spectrum in the United States also have significant constituencies questioning America's role in the region. With one proverbial foot out the door of the Middle East, administrations from both parties have hedged on their presence in Iraq and Syria – countries that the US foreign policy core sees as being of diminishing strategic value. Though the United States' future role has significant consequences for Syria 2030, there is a high probability that the US will continue to try to cut its losses in Syria for the next decade.

However, events in the Middle East – notably the fallout from the Arab Spring – have stalled this pivot, and current conditions portend future challenges that might drag the US back into the region in the years ahead. American presidential elections in 2024 and 2028 or progress on potential deals struck with Russia could delay or expedite the US exit from Syria, but there are few events which would radically shift the US' long-held desire to pivot away from the Middle East. Syria's conflict has torn apart the fabric of society, shattered every norm of international humanitarian law, and given Iran, Russia, as well as the IS and other radical groups an opening to exploit Syria for their own benefit at the expense of international peace and security. But even these tragic dynamics have never produced a significant shift in the US response, despite arguments within the foreign policy establishment that deprioritizing these powers' growing influence in Syria is a strategic blunder.

Though the Biden administration has stated that the US military will stay in the northeast, local and international stakeholders sense this wavering commitment. This posture has, at once, increased the leverage of foes in the region and dampened allies' confidence in the United States, thus leading to the current trend of normalization with the Assad government.

However, the war is far from over and its destabilizing aftermath has yet to begin. Time and again, the eagerness of US administrations to rebalance its foreign policy approach has left gaping holes in the Middle East, which nefarious actors have been all too willing to fill. In 2014, the IS easily took control of 30 per cent of Syria and 40 per cent of Iraq in a matter of weeks and retained that hold for years. Today, hundreds of kilometers of border and around 70 per cent of Syria's wheat crops and oil reserves remain outside government control. Between 50,000 and 100,000 SDF troops in northeastern Syria and up to 70,000 opposition forces in northwestern Syria also remain outside the government's control, to say nothing of hundreds of US soldiers and thousands of Turkish soldiers in northern Syria.[1] Assad has not defeated the opposition as much as driven it north.

Unlike in other parts of the country, the disaffected across northern and eastern Syria will have borderlands where they can recuperate and resurge. Hundreds of kilometers of porous borders and IS cells on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border suggest this probability. The literature confirms that insurgencies where rebels have access to an international

border are twice as durable as other conflicts.[2] In addition, conflicts in regions rich with natural resources such as oil and gas reserves – like northeast Syria – last substantially longer.[3] If Assad were to take back these territories, militarily or through negotiated deals, violence and crime will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

Such a regional environment will foster existing arms, drugs, and human smuggling networks. More aid and sanctions will not stop this trajectory without a more comprehensive approach. As the Assad government and its allies master ways to circumvent sanctions and coopt aid, such policies could actually strengthen the regime and intensify destabilizing activities as sanctioned players seek alternative sources of revenue. Sanctions on Iran, Russia, and Syria would likely increase their cooperation with each other and China, impairing the sanctions' effectiveness and building an potent political and economic coalition opposing the US.

TWO SCENARIOS FOR US POLICIES IN SYRIA

As a result of these potential complications, the current US trajectory out of the region is more likely to haltingly move ahead and may face setbacks. This puts local and international allies alike in a difficult position for predicting future scenarios. Still, two broad potential pathways for US involvement in the Syria of 2030 can be generated, each with their own possible consequences.

SCENARIO 1: ACTIVE US ENGAGEMENT IN NORTHERN AND EASTERN SYRIA

The first scenario is somewhat similar to the status quo but with a stronger US assurance to safeguard current ceasefires, shape a more effective step-for-step process with regional allies and Russia, pursue greater early recovery work in northern and eastern Syria, and enhance IS mitigation efforts. A desire to keep Syria out of the headlines in the US may actually prolong the US' military presence for fear of provoking greater IS or Iranian influence with a withdrawal. However, since the US is unlikely to provide a decade-long commitment to securing non-government controlled areas or expend greater diplomatic capital, it may fail to gain the trust needed to encourage local and international stakeholders alike to continue to invest in an uncertain status quo or achieve better outcomes.

Russia, the Syrian government, Iran, and the IS will profit from that insecurity and pull local stakeholders toward unfavorable deals. Indeed, Russia and the Assad government have already launched reconciliation campaigns in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Aleppo. This suggests that, rather than aiming for one comprehensive reconciliation deal, the Syrian and Russian governments may try to divide and conquer – making piecemeal deals with individuals and communities – as they have in the south and other parts of the country. Still,

the US maintaining a residual presence in certain enclaves could provide a modicum of stability if managed through ongoing diplomacy with friends and foes alike. It could even pave the way for a more palatable federal structure that would mitigate the potential for violence.

SCENARIO 2: US WITHDRAWAL AND FREE-FOR-ALL

The second scenario entails the US military leaving the northeast, either with some reconciliation deals in place between local stakeholders and the Assad government or without having brokered any noteworthy compromises. Though the latter is less probable, future American presidents or other domestic and international stressors could prompt a hasty withdrawal, as was partially the case during the Trump administration. For example, continuous Iranian proxy attacks on US installations could increase the costs of staying. On the domestic side, a US president or congressional members could be swayed by members of their party or constituency to further withdraw militarily from the Middle East.

However, the eventual outcome of either a partially reconciled or an immediate withdrawal would lead to a similar scenario for 2030. As in other parts of the country, the regime and Russia would most likely make deals through local and international negotiations with amenable, but not necessarily representative or legitimate interlocutors, leaving a substantial portion of the population disaffected. As with piecemeal reconciliation deals in Deraa and northern Homs, the Russians may promise local actors semi-autonomy or protection, but these guarantees will quickly disappear for much of the population.

The Syrian government's allies would gain control of most of the remaining agricultural land and energy resources in the northeast, giving it the resources to commit further violence against its population there and elsewhere. As was the case prior to 2011, it is doubtful that revenues would benefit the majority of the population in these areas. In fact, the government's gains would have significant consequences for the opposition-held northwest as pro-government forces would likely step up attacks on the area. With the government in control of aid flows, it would also be unlikely that those in formerly non-government controlled areas would reap the benefits of foreign aid as the Assad government has withheld assistance as a form of punishment and control throughout the conflict.

A US withdrawal and a regime and Russian takeover of parts or all of northern and eastern Syria would lead to further forced displacement and irregular migration patterns as traffickers take advantage of new networks and desperate migrants. For many of those living outside government control, the return of the government's security apparatus would mean death or worse, giving them only two options – flight or fight. Economic desperation would create additional push factors for emigration. As mentioned, the geog-

raphy and recent history of the territories currently outside the Syrian government's control make long-term insurgency and long-term displacement statistically probable.

ADDITIONAL RISKS

Other less predictable events increase the risks of a hands-off US strategy. The complex constellation of actors and severe instability in the region is the perfect environment for black swan events to emerge. And once the US leaves, it will be difficult to return should such events transpire. Foreign and domestic players have already shown a willingness to use Syrian refugees as political pawns (e.g., in Belarus) or Syrians as mercenaries (e.g., Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh). The IS threat, too, could simmer or gain immeasurable strength by taking advantage of a US withdrawal, weak states, insecure arsenals, and marginalized populations for many years to come. The Assad government has also resorted to freeing captive jihadists to cause chaos and destruction for American assets and allies in the past and could use such leverage in the future.

Developments with Iran could also shift the US position in the region. A US withdrawal could allow Iran to gain unimpeded access from its capital to the Mediterranean, increasing flows of arms and militias across the region. As was the case with Iraq, the extortion and corruption prevalent among Iran-backed proxy militias will have toxic effects on the economy and future development of Syria. Allies of the Assad government, like Hezbollah, are already taking advantage of peoples' desperation by recruiting those in formerly opposition-held areas in the south. So far, Iran's growing geopolitical influence and ballistic missile capabilities have not significantly altered the US military strategy to addressing perceived threats from Iran in Syria.

While a direct and sustained military confrontation between Iran and the US and/or its ally Israel is unlikely, it is possible, which would surely necessitate US military support or potential return to aid its ally. Iran is more likely to use asymmetric warfare to counter its enemies and attempt to prevent a full-scale conventional war. Using proxy militias from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon would certainly be part of this strategy. Russia may try to curb or confront Iranian ambitions, but as Russia uses Syria as a launching pad to extend its military and economic power, it may become less concerned with Iran's discreet entrenchment in Syria.

Turkey could act as a facilitator or spoiler. Once the US leaves, Russia and Turkey may agree to some middle ground by creating a buffer along Syria's northern border. Such a deal would cause further displacement but temper Turkish aggression in the northeast and stem the regime's incursion into all of the northwest. However, without this agreement, Turkey may invade the northeast again or continue to apply military pressure on its nemesis, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) in

Syria. Without greater economic and military support to secure its borders, Turkey may also, once again, open its borders to Syrians seeking refuge in Europe.

CHALLENGES FOR EUROPE

For European governments, indefinite instability, violence, and displacement has a higher cost than for the US. While the US has an ocean between it and the Middle East, Europe does not. Deprioritizing instability and violence in a nearby narco-state with access to chemical weapons is not an option. If the trend toward normalization continues, it could unlock possibilities for greater reconstruction assistance. But without more concrete reforms, it is likely that such funds would reach warlords rather than those in need. Therefore, securing ceasefires and ensuring Syrians get the assistance they need is of paramount interest to a continent that has already absorbed hundreds of thousands of refugees over the years.

More consistent diplomatic and security coordination with the United States, Turkey, and other players in Syria could increase the collective leverage to reduce violence and encourage the unimpeded flow of aid. European governments' economic and diplomatic relations with Iran and Russia also give European countries a unique opportunity to link a constructive approach to carrots and sticks beyond Syria. Sanctions and other economic levers would have a more profound effect coming from Western Europe than the US. As Europe gravitates toward renewables and other alternatives to Russian oil and natural gas, its leverage at the negotiating table will increase. European governments could also adopt a more aggressive stance in coordination with US partners to shape the step-for-step process in a way that benefits Syrians and regional stability. As major donors to the humanitarian response, European countries could insist on reforms to the current aid system, ensuring assistance reaches those in need rather than empowering the government's cronies.[4]

While a just and acceptable political solution seems more out of reach than ever before, European governments can play an indispensable role in maintaining ceasefires and humanitarian assistance. Greater cooperation around security, aid, and accountability among Western donor governments and regional allies will better mitigate the possibility of increased violence and instability before it is too late.

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4

TURKISH AMBITIONS AND PRESENCE IN NORTHERN SYRIA IN 2030

Status Quo, Decentralization, or Adana Agreement 2.0?

Sinem Adar and Hürcan Aslı Aksoy

Eleven years after its eruption, the Syrian war has left behind a fragmented country and some 6.6 million refugees, 3.7 million of whom live in Turkey.[1] Turkey's role in the conflict is indisputable. Today, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) controls territory extending from the northern Aleppo Governorate and the district of Afrin to the area east of the Euphrates River between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, thanks to Ankara's military incursions between 2016 and 2019. In these areas, Turkey provides security, health, and education services, and the Turkish lira is widely used. Turkey also has a military presence in Idlib province – the only remaining opposition-held »de-escalation zone« – under a March 2020 agreement between Turkey and Russia, an area which is home to between three and four million people, 75 per cent of whom depend on humanitarian assistance.[2]

The Turkish military presence and its administrative and infrastructural involvement in northern Syria serve three main purposes: 1) the prevention of Kurdish autonomy under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), 2) the prevention of a new influx of refugees into Turkey, and related to this, 3) the repatriation of Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey.

The extent to which future Turkish governments intend to stay in Syria, their ability to realize their intentions, and last, but not least, the postures of Russia, the US, and Turkey and the dynamics between them will to a large extent shape the future of Turkish presence and influence in northern Syria.

PROSPECTS OF TURKEY FULFILLING ITS INTENTION TO REMAIN IN SYRIA

With the popularity of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its junior partner, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), steadily declining and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's approval ratings falling, the future configuration of ruling elites in Turkey is far from certain.[3] Diminishing in- stitutional capacity, worsening elite cohesiveness, and a deepening economic crisis add insult to injury for the current leadership.[4] It is hard to predict the timing and form of the political change; but it is bound to come.

POSSIBLE OPPOSITION VICTORY IN THE 2023 ELECTIONS

The parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for June 2023 are one occasion where a change in government might happen. In the event of an opposition victory, we might see some changes in Turkey's policy in Syria – more likely to be evident in the methods deployed than in the goals. In fact, the opposition parties, except for the Kurdish, left-leaning People's Democracy Party (HDP), mostly agree that the YPG/PYD constitutes a security threat to Turkey. The Turkish parliament's two mainstream opposition parties – the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (IYI) – supported the military incursions between 2016 and 2019. Even though, in October 2021, the CHP voted against the bill to extend the deployment of Turkish troops in Syria (and Iraq) for another two years, it is unclear whether this signaled a different threat perception with regards to the Kurdish question. Moreover, the opposition parties – like the ruling elites – generally agree on the necessity to repatriate Syrian refugees once the conditions in Syria are suitable for a voluntary and secure return. They also share the view that, against the backdrop of increasing social tensions between refugees and host communities, any further refugee influx from Idlib to Turkey should be prevented.

Notwithstanding the similarities in their objectives, the opposition parties' critique of the current policy is threefold. Both the CHP and the IYI, for instance, denounce the AKP's support for the Syrian opposition, particularly the radical groups. In their eyes, such support reflects the ideological underpinnings of the AKP's foreign policy. It is also a deviation from good neighborly relations and impartiality as the essential components of Turkish foreign policy. The Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), founded by former foreign

and economy minister Ali Babacan as a result of a split from the AKP, also shares this view. Lastly, there is also a consensus among the opposition parties on prioritizing diplomacy. The CHP and the IYI advocate reestablishing diplomatic contacts with the Assad regime.[5] Both parties see such a move as necessary for a gradual withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syria. The CHP[6] and the IYI,[7] as well as DEVA[8] and the Future Party (GP)[9] (another offshoot of the AKP, led by former foreign and prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu) see resuming the Adana Agreement with Syria as essential for Ankara's counterterrorism mission against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

TURKEY'S FOREVER WAR AGAINST THE PKK

Indeed, the predicament of Turkey's own Kurdish conflict is directly related to Turkey's priorities and interests in Syria. The Turkish military has been at war against the PKK since the 1980s. Yet, the 2003 Iraq war and the rise in 2013/14 of the YPG/PYD as a military and political actor in the US-led coalition's operation against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria meant the Kurdish question acquired an increasingly regional character. The collapse of the peace process with the PKK in July 2015 and the subsequent suppression of Kurdish political actors within Turkey; Turkey's military, infrastructure, and demographic measures to establish a loyal Sunni constituency in northern Syria; and, finally, its intensified airstrikes and operations in Iraq since 2018 are all components of Turkey's forever war against the PKK.

In the case of an opposition victory, whether or not the opposition parties choose to shift from this highly securitized approach to a political resolution of the conflict remains to be seen. Currently, an opposition victory is numerically impossible without the support of HDP voters, giving the latter a kingmaker role but at the same time making it the Achilles heel of the opposition due to the prevailing anti-Kurdish climate in Turkish politics. Should a new political elite agree on a compromise with a view to a political solution, a new peace process might ensue, as happened between 2013 and 2015, which might in turn soften Ankara's red lines regarding the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES). This would imply a shift from a militarized approach to a diplomatic one.

PROSPECTS OF TURKEY BEING CAPABLE OF STAYING IN SYRIA

If Turkish decision-makers' intention is one factor shaping the future of Turkey's presence and influence in Syria, their ability to realize these intentions is another. For instance, if the current configuration of ruling elites were to remain in power beyond 2023, despite likely intentions to remain in Syria, they might, for various reasons, be compelled to reduce their presence or withdraw. Take the apparent discontent among Turkish military officers deployed in Syria: between 2019 and 2021, eight senior officers were reported to

have requested early retirement and another resigned.[10] In addition, the fragile situation in Idlib has increased the political cost of maintaining a presence in Syria for the government, because it endangers the lives of troops (approximately 10,000 soldiers) on the ground, as Turkey needs to maneuver between the Russian and the US military presence. The security situation in the SNA-controlled areas, particularly in Afrin and the area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, is also volatile.[11]

Similarly, given Turkey's deepening economic crisis it becomes more difficult to justify the economic costs of its Syria policy. Against the backdrop of President Erdoğan's insistence on keeping interest rates low, in January 2022, annual inflation climbed to 36 per cent – the highest level since the AKP came into power in 2002.[12] In addition, foreign policy is already overstretched,[13] rendering the sustainability of the Turkish presence in northern Syria questionable.

Moreover, the diplomatic outreach of Arab countries to Assad and Syria's potential return to the Arab League might put pressure on Ankara and challenge its resistance to direct contact with the Syrian regime. Ankara's rapprochement efforts with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia since the election of US President Joe Biden attest to the limits of Turkey's confrontational foreign policy, which is an amalgamation of (at times incoherent) tactical moves responding to conjunctural changes. This suggests that Ankara might well consider rapprochement with Bashar al-Assad even in the absence of a political solution in Syria.

TURKEY: BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE US

Still, if we take the words of decision-makers in Ankara at face value, it is safe to assume that another military operation in northern Syria is not completely off the table. In fact, in October 2021, following the killing of two Turkish policemen, allegedly by the YPG, Erdoğan threatened to mount a new incursion.[14] Meanwhile, Turkish drone strikes targeting senior Kurdish figures aim to consolidate Turkish gains in the northeast.[15] Even though Ankara certainly wants to connect the two Turkish-controlled zones in northern Syria, a new military operation cannot occur without the approval of Russia and/or the US, as Turkey's earlier incursions clearly demonstrate. While Russia and the US both benefit from the Turkish presence in northern Syria, neither seems to have the appetite to see the existing territorial arrangement change in favor of Turkey.

Yet, the outcome of the 2024 US elections, and a subsequent hasty US withdrawal from Syria similar to that in Afghanistan, might encourage Turkey to take a more aggressive posture. Even then, however, given Turkey's asymmetric relations[16] with Russia, on the one hand, and the differences of opinion between the two when it comes to Idlib and the Syrian regime, on the other, the winners of such a US withdrawal are more likely to be Russia and the Assad regime than Turkey.

Even without a hasty withdrawal, given the US shift in geopolitical priorities toward the Indo-Pacific, Washington is determined to prioritize diplomacy over military engagement in the Middle East. In this context, US talks with Russia on a political settlement in Syria would be inevitable. The future of AANES would be at the center of such negotiations. For Russia, a reconciliation between YPG/PYD and the Syrian regime is crucial. A possible agreement between the US and Russia (at the very least) on the recognition of Kurdish rights in the Syrian constitution would have direct implications for Turkey's ability to prevent YPG/PYD-led autonomy in the northeast, regardless of who is in power.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

There are several possible scenarios, which might emerge from different constellations of the three variables mentioned above by 2030.

SCENARIO 1: CONTINUATION OF THE STATUS QUO

One strong possibility when it comes to Turkish presence and influence in Syria is the continuation of the status quo, that is, a de facto fragmented Syria and recurring violence, particularly in Idlib (but also in Afrin and the area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain). Such a scenario would be likely if the current ruling elites were still in power in Turkey, or the country's new political elite were unable to come to an agreement with Damascus and the US did not completely withdraw troops, or against the backdrop of failed talks between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Syrian regime, and Russia.

SCENARIO 2: DECENTRALIZATION

Another scenario would be a decentralized Syria with a certain level of autonomy granted to the SDF in the northeast and to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the SNA in the northwest. Unlike the first scenario, the second assumes a territorially intact but decentralized Syria. This suggests an agreement between the US and Russia on a decentralized Syria, pushing Turkey to accept the Kurdish entity in the northeast, while, in return, agreeing to the presence of Turkish-backed groups in the governance of northwest Syria. This scenario is, however, the least likely – not only because it requires that the Syrian regime agree to share sovereignty, i.e., the monopoly of power, the national resources, the border crossings, with opposition actors, but also because it requires Turkey to accept an autonomous AANES.

SCENARIO 3: ADANA AGREEMENT 2.0

The third possibility would be complete withdrawal of Turkish troops and the signing of an Adana Agreement 2.0 between Ankara and Damascus. This would mean a deal similar to the 1998 Adana Agreement, according to which Syria promised not to allow any PKK activity on its territory and Turkey had the right to pursue PKK suspects up to five kilometers into Syria should Damascus fail to fulfil its promises. Adana 2.0 would be based on Syria's commitment to preventing YPG/PYD activity in exchange for Turkey's withdrawal from northern Syria. This scenario is probable either in the event that there is a power shift in Ankara, or that the ruling elite remains but the structural (high economic and political costs of military presence) and geopolitical dynamics (full normalization between Syria and Arab states, a full US withdrawal, and emergence of Russian domination) force it to adopt this approach.

OPTIONS FOR EUROPEAN DECISION-MAKERS

These scenarios suggest that Turkey will continue to strive to shape Syria's future in line with its own interests, even without direct military presence. For Europe, ending the violence in Syria and improving living conditions of Syrians should be the top priorities. To this end, the EU should support Turkish economic and political stabilization efforts in the country's northeast (Aleppo and Idlib) to prevent new refugee movements to Turkey (and to Europe). Against this backdrop, in cooperation with Turkey, Europe can establish mechanisms for providing humanitarian aid and early recovery in the northwest. In exchange, it should insist that Ankara lift its veto on the stabilization of AANES and agree to the representation of the SDF in the Geneva Process (or other international fora aimed at conflict resolution).

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5

THE GULF MONARCHIES IN SYRIA IN 2030

Between Containment and Embrace

Cinzia Bianco

Of the Gulf monarchies, three have been particularly involved in the Syrian conflict since it began: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Bahrain and Kuwait have maintained marginal involvement in the conflict itself, while Oman has occupied an outlier position – being the only monarchy not to have cut off diplomatic ties with the regime of Bashar al-Assad – but has been substantially less proactive than its neighbors in making policy.[1] The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have regarded Syria as an important stage for their geopolitical ambitions, and are likely to continue to do so over the coming decade.

As soon as the Arab Spring spilt over into Syria, Qatar and Saudi Arabia assumed that Assad would be toppled and thus extended their support to armed opposition groups. These groups were often in competition with one another, as were Riyadh and Doha, for the role of the regional patron of the opposition.[2] Qatar mainly supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, as well as brigades linked to Jabhat al-Nusra. Saudi royals used personal and tribal ties to create links to several groups and then took the lead in establishing the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), a diverse umbrella organization including political formations, militias, and independents. The UAE also backed opposition groups – especially, in coordination with the US, the Free Syrian Army – but less resolutely, as it feared that the Muslim Brotherhood, which it loathed, would emerge victorious from the conflict.

The perspective of the Gulf monarchies when it came to Syria changed dramatically between 2013 – when the US administration backtracked on its commitment to intervene against the Assad regime after it had used chemical weapons on the population – and 2015, when Russia joined the war on the side of the regime. Since then, Gulf capitals have come to the conclusion that the regime, with the support of Iran and Russia, was likely to wipe out the opposition. The final turning point was the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020, signaling the start of the US disengagement from the region that had been discussed for so long. This accelerated a process of rethinking and adaptation in the Gulf, driven by the desire to balance interests and priorities with their perceptions of which of the future scenarios were actually realistic.

SCENARIO 1: THE EMIRATI STRATEGY IN SYRIA: A NORMALIZATION SCENARIO

The UAE is working on the assumption that the most likely scenario for Syria in the coming decade will be a full normalization of the Assad regime. The UAE does not want to just cope with this eventuality, but to thrive on it, based on a pragmatic, dynamic, and ambitious strategy. The Emirates assumes that its financial and economic weight, as well as the role it can play in reconstruction, could give it some leverage in a future multipolar Syria, where no global or regional player has hegemony.

In this vein, in 2021, the UAE de-escalated tensions with regional rivals, Iran and Turkey, and is now willing to work around their influence in Syria, while counterbalancing it with renewed Emirati and Arab engagement with Damascus. In this context, the UAE is a staunch advocate of readmitting Syria into the Arab League. Abu Dhabi made its first move, formalizing its acceptance of the rehabilitation of the Assad regime, in December 2018, by reopening the UAE embassy in Damascus. In a telephone conversation with Bashar al-Assad in March 2020, the UAE's de facto leader, Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, offered to provide Damascus with aid to help the country in its fight against COVID-19. In October 2021, Syria's economy and foreign trade minister Mohammad Samer al-Khalil met with his Emirati counterpart Abdullah bin Touq Al Marri at the Dubai Expo 2020, while foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan met Assad in Damascus a month later.

This approach to Syria is in keeping with the wider Emirati neo-mercantilist strategy to promote trade and energy connectivity: the UAE wants to capitalize on its position at the crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe, and is now investing in becoming a transit hub for the economic and en-

ergy flows between the continents. Acquiring direct stakes in other critical transit infrastructures beyond its borders is part of this strategy, and in this context, the Eastern Mediterranean is particularly relevant. Already in early 2019, Dubai-based world leader in port terminal operations DP World established a 2,500 km long transport corridor, fast-tracking commerce between Jebel Ali Port in Dubai and the Naseeb-Jaber border crossing between Jordan and Syria.
The Emiratis do not expect these projects to generate competition with other regional players, such as Turkey or Qatar, which do not have the same geo-economic strategies, and they are open to cooperation with global players, including Russia or China. On the other hand, the UAE's appetite for strategic economic engagement in Syria has been met with reserve and suspicion in the US, where the 2020 Caesar Act imposed sweeping sanctions against the Syrian regime. At the same time, Washington seems to have acknowledged the reality of the war's outcomes and has never indicated that it would actively and forcefully prevent regional investment in Syria.

A serious escalation involving Iran, either linked to the collapse of the nuclear talks or a more direct confrontation between Iran and Israel, would put the UAE's strategy under immense pressure, and probably lead to a tactical retreat.

SCENARIO 2: SAUDI ARABIA'S SYRIA POLICY: A CONTAINMENT SCENARIO

In fact, Saudi Arabia's posture in Syria closely reflects the country's perception of the threat posed by Iran's expanding regional influence. Disappointed by the decline in US interest in the Syrian dossier, and unable to team up with Turkey due to strained relations at the leadership level, after 2017, Riyadh tried – unsuccessfully – to encourage Russia to increase its own influence to the detriment of Iran's. Having now accepted the impossibility of eliminating Iran's influence from Syria, Saudi Arabia is still seeking ways of containing it.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia has so far hesitated to join the ranks of the countries rehabilitating the Assad regime, because it fears that doing so would amount to a legitimization of Tehran's privileged posture in Damascus. However, there are signs that Riyadh might be willing to reconsider its policy. In May 2021, a Syrian delegation visited Saudi Arabia for the first time since 2011. In November, Saudi intelligence chief Khalid bin Ali Al Humaidan met with his Syrian counterpart Hussam Luka in Cairo.[3] These meetings took place on top of the efforts made by the UAE and Egypt to persuade Saudi Arabia to reestablish formal ties with Damascus. The Saudi leadership has used these opportunities to signal some openness to the idea, while trying to tease out whether the promise of a Saudi reengagement would be interesting enough to persuade the Assad regime to reposition with slightly more distance from Iran. The repatriation of Javad Ghaffari, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria, to Iran, in No-

vember 2021, encouraged some players in Saudi Arabia to think that a weakening of the IRGC's grip over Damascus might, at least, be a possibility.

In this context, Saudi Arabia could offer to take the lead on persuading the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to readmit the regime. Riyadh would also be able to provide considerable capital to support the reconstruction of Syria, and significant investment to spur economic growth and inject some stability in the government's finances and currency.

A potential wild card to consider in this scenario would be a more serious détente and rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This process, which is already underway, may lead to further geopolitical coordination between the two regional capitals in 2022 and even to the two countries teaming up to contain Iran. This would give Riyadh greater confidence, and likely harden its posture again vis-à-vis the Assad regime. In such a scenario, Riyadh would be especially inclined to support the continuation of current territorial divisions in Syria, with administrative autonomy for the northeast and northwest.

SCENARIO 3: QATAR'S MEDIATION: A POWER-SHARING SCENARIO

Qatar worked hard to topple Assad, and constitutes an exception in the general trend toward normalization of relations with the Syrian regime. In November 2021, Qatari foreign minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani announced that Doha was not considering normalizing ties with Syria and hoped other countries would be discouraged from doing so as he did not »see any serious steps by the Assad regime showing his commitment to repair the damage that he made for his own country and people.«[4]

First, Doha does not believe the regime will inevitably regain power over the whole of Syria, as non-state actors still administer large swathes of territory, such as the Kurds in the northeast and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib and the northwest. In this context, the most plausible scenario in Syria, from Qatar's point of view, is a political process between the Assad regime and different non-state actors. The aim would ideally be to draft a new constitutional framework, allowing for some autonomy of both the northeast and the northwest. Qatar specifically supports an autonomous northwest under the influence of Turkey, its main ally in the region.

As far as regional and international players are concerned, especially those that do not support the Assad regime, Qatar believes they should focus on encouraging such a process. This would not necessarily lead to a power-sharing system – as Doha acknowledges that the political power is in the hands of the regime – but it would keep the door open for some sort of pluralism and dynamism in the country.

Doha is therefore ready to position itself as a mediator and intermediary, building bridges with all the local, regional,

and international actors involved. Doha would be especially keen to mediate on behalf of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the US, while it would probably be less enthusiastic about enabling the UAE to pursue its own strategy. In fact, in Syria, Qatar would like to replicate the strategy it put in place in Afghanistan, where the Qataris are the only intermediaries brokering talks between the international community and the Taliban. In order to strengthen its leverage, Doha would likely deploy its substantial capabilities as a provider of humanitarian aid and development cooperation, with positive implications for the socioeconomic situation on the ground in Syria. Other economic and energy interests that Qatar harbored before the war in Syria, including the establishment of pipelines through Syrian territory toward the Mediterranean, would probably take a backseat, with projects postponed until a more complete international rehabilitation of the Assad regime has been achieved, if that ever happens.

Qatar's strategy would be thrown into chaos by the wild card of renewed Turkish military operations against the Kurds, which would see Doha aligning with Ankara and likely undermining its ties with other relevant actors.

WHITHER EUROPE?

Whether they have backed the opposition or supported the normalization of the Assad regime, the Gulf monarchies have demonstrated over the past ten years that they can have a significant – albeit not game-changing – impact in the Syrian context. And yet in Germany, as well as in wider Europe, policymakers still struggle to accept a reality in which the Gulf monarchies are no longer just payers, but also players in the region. A more forward-looking approach would be if Europe were to seek to better understand how Syria fits into the Gulf monarchies' strategies for the wider Mediterranean, considering the geopolitical cross-border connections and even the implications for Europe itself. What is more, Europeans should keep in mind that Syria is, for many regional capitals, an important litmus test of what form a post-American Middle East might take. A productive coexistence of the different approaches currently preferred by the Gulf monarchies is not really feasible. In all likelihood, one will prevail, and that will be the one facilitated by the dynamics on the ground and the posture of global players, including, if they can act together, that of Europeans.

In this vein, Berlin should work to make sure that Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean feature in the European Union's ongoing discussions about a new Gulf strategy. A realignment of the European Neighbourhood Policy would be an important opportunity to link the EU's approach to Europe's southern neighbors with their policies toward the extended neighborhood, the Gulf.

In this context, Germany would be well placed to build a coalition with France, the only EU actor to have a geopolitical approach toward the Gulf. However, given the uniquely forceful position of the French on Syria, Germany should

also join forces with other EU members – especially those with positions that differ from that of France, such as Italy – aimed at crafting a consistent and coherent European position. This position should be geared toward influencing the policies and behavior of the Gulf monarchies in Syria, and based on an assessment of how these policies might coincide with fundamental European interests in the wider Mediterranean and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Keeping in mind the monarchies' red lines and non-negotiable priorities when it comes to Syria, Europeans should embrace a mix of critical engagement and active diplomacy, for instance seeking an active role in the redrawing of the geo-economic and energy map linking Syria with the wider region.

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SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA'S DIFFERENT AREAS OF CONTROL IN 2030

6

DYNAMICS IN AREAS CONTROLLED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA IN 2030

The Pivotal Role of Normalization versus Isolation

Joseph Daher

With the assistance of its Russian and Iranian allies, Syria's regime has continuously proven its resilience since the eruption of the popular uprising in March 2011, which turned into a war with the involvement of multiple regional and international actors. However, Damascus is still a long way from achieving any political and economic stability. Moreover, some territories have remained outside its control, and, with the support of foreign states, local power structures have been consolidating. The severity of the war's impact on the economy is reflected in the decline of Syria's GDP from 60.2 billion US dollars in 2010 to around 21.6 billion US dollars in 2019, while total economic losses during the conflict are estimated at several hundred billion US dollars.[1] The Lebanese financial crisis since 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic have further compounded the country's socioeconomic problems, with the poverty level estimated to be over 90 per cent in early 2022. In February 2022, the UN estimated the number of Syrians suffering from food insecurity at 12 million (55.3 per cent of the population) and those in need of humanitarian assistance at 14.6 million people (67.3 per cent of the population), an increase of 1.2 million from 2021.[2] In this context, what can we expect for Syria in 2030? What are the plausible scenarios? The assumption is that political and economic developments will not be rooted in any kind of political agreement, on the basis of, for example, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254. Rather, they will mostly be connected with the reintegration, or continued isolation, of Syria in the regional and international political scenes, which, depending on how quickly this happens and what trajectory its takes, will have different consequences.

WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIA?

SCENARIO 1: NORMALIZATION.

A normalization and relegitimization of the Syrian regime with regional and international actors, alongside the progressive relaxing and/or lifting of sanctions, would open the door for foreign investment in various economic sectors in the country, especially in real estate and construction projects, transport, and trade. Foreign investment would represent a boost for specific areas of the country, including the main cities Damascus and Aleppo, and help stabilize the Syrian pound by reconsolidating foreign reserves. Financial transactions between Syria and the outside world would be improved in this context, bringing in foreign currency and facilitating trade. Tourism could potentially expand once again, while, with sanctions, production costs for the productive sectors would fall to some extent. Some Syrian businessmen in exile would be encouraged to reengage in the country. This could potentially diminish the significance of illicit activities (such as narco-trafficking) by providing additional employment opportunities and legal inflow of foreign currencies. The role of Russia and Iran will remain dominant. But with other regional actors being able to play an increasingly important economic role, the Presidential Palace in Damascus would gain more autonomy from Moscow and Tehran. Moreover, a relegitimization of Damascus would open the door for agreements and collaboration with regional and international actors to rehabilitate Syrian infrastructures, similar to the agreement concluded in August 2021 to transport Egyptian natural gas and Jordanian electricity to Lebanon via Syria with Washington's approval and in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

SCENARIO 2: CONTINUED ISOLATION.

In contrast, sustained isolation of the Syrian regime and preservation of the sanctions will only exacerbate the problems and shortcomings of the country's economy and reinforce political instability. The value of the Syrian pound will most probably continue to fall. In addition, no significant recovery would be expected in the majority of economic sectors as there could be no public investment because of insufficient funds. The Syrian population and economy would become even more dependent on international humanitarian assistance and on remittances. Moreover, the

volume of informal and illicit activities would continue to grow, including narco-trafficking. In this context, the drug Captagon could remain one of Syria's most important sources of foreign currency.[3] Syria's central role in the supply of this narcotic to neighboring countries and beyond, including in Europe, would therefore most likely continue and potentially represent another obstacle to the normalization of relations Damascus. The inability to achieve any form of economic recovery would also make it even harder to reintegrate and pacify territories that were previously outside the control of the regime but have been reconquered since 2016. This is likely to trigger local protests among marginalized populations. Frustration with the socioeconomic circumstances as well as an authoritarian order and practices could potentially provide fertile ground for groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) to expand, reconsolidate, and engage in terrorist actions.

While continued isolation of Damascus would represent a significant obstacle for economic recovery, *rehabilitation of the Syrian regime on the regional and international scene* would not automatically lead to sustainable economic development and stabilization due to a number of serious stumbling blocks: Damascus' political economy, which is based on the dominance of the trade and services sector and accompanied by a rentier-type management of resources (including non-natural resources) and corruption, is likely to remain the same in the near future, regardless of which of the two scenarios becomes reality. This economic orientation reflects the significant political and economic influence of business networks close to the inner circles of the regime, which mostly operate in the trade, real estate, and service sectors. At the same time, the economic role of Tehran and Moscow and their level of investment in Syria will remain limited,[4] although Damascus' dependency on Russia and Iran will continue for certain areas of the economy.[5] The significant economic challenges in both Russia and Iran, as well as weak private sectors in the two countries, are likely to persist and prevent them from playing a more important role in the Syrian economy and in a potential reconstruction phase.

Therefore, the Syrian economy will remain almost exclusively consumption oriented, with a level of production that is insufficient to satisfy local needs, not least because of the continuous neglect of the productive sectors (agriculture and manufacturing). These sectors are also generally not targeted by foreign investment in Syria,[6] and Damascus has not put forward any serious plans to develop them. This will have a negative effect on the balance of payments, which will mean continuous pressure on the Syrian pound. In addition, the prospects of significant foreign investment in Syria are likely to remain low if the lack of economic and political stability in the country persists. Dependency on foreign aid and remittances would then also remain a feature, as would local protest and the potential for extremist movements. What is more, the economy will also be impacted by the worsening of environmental problems and climate change as a result of state policies and the effects of war.

WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS FOR SYRIA'S TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY?

The *relegitimization scenario* could open the door for the return of full sovereignty of Syria. In this context, Syria and Turkey could reestablish diplomatic relations and seek to collaborate on several issues, especially border controls and the Kurdish question. Ankara and Damascus would most probably attempt to come to a general agreement, possibly with the help of Russian mediation, which would allow Damascus to regain sovereignty along the Turkish borders and would guarantee Turkish national security. In this scenario, Ankara would agree to withdraw from its zone of influence in the northwest and stop supporting armed opposition proxy groups, such as the Syrian National Army (SNA), which would permit the return of Damascus's troops to this area. This would be in exchange for Damascus's collaboration to end the experiment of the Autonomous Administration in North and East of Syria (AANES), dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and affiliated groups, such as the PYD, will most likely continue to be considered a national threat by Ankara. This will be the case regardless of the party in power as the two dominant parties in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Republican People's Party (CHP), are anti-PKK. Therefore, a sort of return to the framework of the Adana Agreement7 could be envisaged, which would lead to the repression of the activities of the PKK and groups affiliated with it. Control over the northeast would also represent an economic boost for Damascus, as Syria's main oil reserves are located in these regions and they are considered the country's breadbasket, producing more than 70 per cent of the country's annual wheat supply.[8]

In this scenario, the US would withdraw from the northeast in the face of a relegitimization of Damascus and a deal between Syria and Turkey. Syria would continue not to be a US foreign policy priority – such an arrangement would therefore present an easy way out for Washington. Following the reintegration of territories outside the control of the regime, Damascus would also focus on strengthening its capacity to reimpose complete political and security control over those areas which had gained a limited degree of autonomy during the war as a result of the weakening of the central authority in Damascus (although the latter's institutions continued to operate there), for example in the governorate of as-Suwayda. The Syrian-occupied Golan Heights would, however, stay under Israeli authority as the Syrian regime would have even less capacity to pressure Tel Aviv or provide security assurances to maintain calm in the border area to serve Israeli interests. This is likely to be case, particularly given that Iran and/or its proxy forces would remain in the country, as neither Damascus nor Moscow have the ability and/or the will to push them out. Israeli military operations and bombing in Syria against proxy Iranian forces will nevertheless diminish in the case of Syria's relegitimization, though they are unlikely to halt entirely. The normalization of Damascus would indeed allow Tehran to reduce its military staff on the ground and even partially withdraw a great number of them, while maintaining its influence within the country through its proxy forces.

In the *scenario of continued isolation* of the regime, on the other hand, foreign powers, i.e., Turkey and the US, would likely keep their troops in the country without the agreement of Damascus, and would continue their support for specific local forces, thus preventing Damascus's complete domination over the country. Syria would remain divided in various zones of influence and this would be accompanied by conflict of varying intensity. This would also lead to a continued consolidation of local power structures to the detriment of the central authority of Damascus. Local communities, for instance in as-Suwayda, might be able to maintain a small degree of relative autonomy, with the regime's security forces unable to control the governorate completely, allowing local movements and groups critical of Damascus to continue to operate. At the same time, Israel's raids against military actors and/or sites considered to be affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah would persist – and might even increase if tensions rise between Iran and Israel. This context would also give more space for the IS to operate, increasing instability even further.

Regardless of the plausibility of either of these two scenarios, the general trend toward the consolidation of a form of authoritarian stability in the region of the Middle East and North Africa will most probably prevail, which favors the Syrian regime's sustained resilience. While rivalries are likely to persist among various regional states, there will be general agreement on return to an authoritarian order, as was in place before the uprisings in 2011.

CONCLUSIONS AND ENTRY POINTS FOR EUROPEAN POLICIES

Syria's prospects for 2030 are generally not positive, although some scenarios are worse than others for the population. In particular, economic recovery is difficult to imagine in the near to medium term. On the contrary, what we are likely to witness is the further weakening and continued underdevelopment of productive sectors, the further impoverishment of large sectors of society, and massive rates of unemployment and underemployment. All this will be accompanied by extremely high rates of migration among young graduates, as well as a lack of work opportunities for former and/or current fighters and members of the militia. In this context, the return of refugees, and to some extent IDPs, is hardly realistic.

At the same time, the objectives of the Presidential Palace and its networks of powerful actors, including businessmen and militiamen turned businessmen, will remain the same in both scenarios: to consolidate their power throughout the territories under their control and strengthen their hold on the economy, to augment their sources of capital accumulation, and to maintain a form of passive hegemony over the population (i.e., the population's acquiescence to Damascus's control), which in turn will guarantee authoritarian stability. However, sustained isolation of the country will prevent Damascus from reassuming sovereignty throughout the country as prior to 2011.

In the current context, the ability of German and European policies to influence the trajectory of Syria's future and to improve living conditions of Syrians is rather limited. There are, however, small windows of opportunity, mainly at the micro level, where Europeans could, for instance, support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in agriculture and manufacturing. They could also take the lead in elaborating a framework of conditions (such as respect for human rights and property rights) for future international funding for the revival of microprojects in neighborhoods and small localities.[9]

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7

THE IDLIB REGION IN 2030

Opposition Stronghold under HTS Rule versus Regime Takeover

Bahjat Hajjar

At the peak of the territorial expansion in the north, between 2018 and 2019, the Syrian opposition controlled an area that included the entire Idlib province, western and southern Aleppo, northern Hama, and parts of Latakia, i.e., what we refer to as »the greater Idlib region.« Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which developed out of Jabhat al-Nusra, among others, was one of the last armed groups to carve out a presence for itself in the region. Following a series of bloody confrontations with other local opposition factions, the group was able to consolidate its authority over the majority of the region, taking control of the major roads, the border crossings with Turkey, as well as the frontlines with the regime.

The Russian intervention in September 2015 bolstered the regime's capacity to regain key areas and large swathes of land in the greater Idlib territory. Gradually, and with Russian military and diplomatic support, loyalist forces pushed back the opposition forces until they occupied just one-third of the area they had previously controlled. The regime's military progress against the opposition in Idlib was also made possible by the de-escalation agreements negotiated between 2018 and 2020 in the framework of the Astana process led by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Damascus used the periods of calm to consolidate territorial gains and reorganize military forces in preparation for new assaults, then breaking the calm and conquering more territory. Thus, the de-escalation agreements proved fragile and unsustainable due to the regime's resolve to reclaim its authority over the whole of Syria. At the same time, its action was legitimized by the presence of HTS, internationally designated as a terrorist organization and regularly excluded from all ceasefire arrangements.

Nowadays, all that is left of the opposition's presence is a strip along the Syrian-Turkish border from Jisr al-Shughour in the west to Darat Izza in the east, and to Mount al-Zawiya to the south. Frontlines have remained unchanged since March 2020 based on a Russian-Turkish-backed ceasefire. While the March 2020 agreement halted regime advances in Idlib, the Russian air force and regime artillery have not completely stopped targeting the region. The periodic bombing of hospitals, schools, markets, and key infrastructure north of the frontline serves as a reminder of the regime's intention of carrying out a ground assault.

SCENARIOS FOR IDLIB IN 2030

The fate of the Idlib region greatly depends on the actors mentioned so far. First, there is Turkey. Even though the country's military presence in Idlib is now confined to observation posts, an unofficial non-aggression pact with HTS, and an entente with Russia, it still plays a dual role as guarantor and mediator. A change in the Turkish position, role, or objectives – first and foremost, keeping civilians and IDPs away from Turkish-controlled areas along the border and maintaining Idlib as an advance line of defense – would significantly change the course of events in the region. Second, the region's future depends on HTS, which, unlike the Syrian opposition groups in northern Aleppo, has agency and is the de facto authority governing the area. The degree of pragmatism it demonstrates, its capacity to convince more regional and international actors to engage with it, and its adherence to the status quo in northern Syria will impact the evolution of the region. Third, what happens to the region will depend on the regime and Russia. Even though both want to eliminate the opposition's territorial control completely, their sensitivity toward Turkey's security concerns could curb their appetite for territorial expansion.

Consequently, two main scenarios can be envisaged for the area controlled by HTS today: first, the consolidation and normalization of opposition rule over the region, and second, a military takeover by the regime of the whole of Idlib, or large areas of the province. In the following paragraphs, we investigate the conditions under which the two scenarios would come about, and the impact they would have on the local population, the national political order, and the region's relationship with foreign state actors.

SCENARIO 1: CONSOLIDATION, NORMALIZATION, AND SELF-DETERMINATION

In this scenario, the opposition forces, including HTS, are able to establish a stable governance structure with the support of Turkey and possibly the international community. The acceptance of such an administration could be acquired through a negotiation process with Damascus, or based on a fait accompli as the regime would lack the resources to regain control of the region. The entity might comprise the current territorial configuration, including northern Aleppo, or a variation thereof, excluding the M4 highway connecting Aleppo to the coastal region, or what is left of eastern Latakia province.

This scenario could play out under the condition that HTS can solve the terrorism/extremism issue. Despite previous and continued attempts to soften its public image at home and abroad, the HTS leadership and its association with Al-Qaeda are still highly controversial and will remain a major hurdle to a normalization of the status quo in Idlib. A possible strategy to tackle this concern could be for HTS to become an even more integral part of the local social fabric. This would not only necessitate a more inclusive approach toward the existing grassroots and mainstream movements, but also a unification of institutions with the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) as well as a partial retreat of the current HTS leadership. Even though it is difficult to imagine Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and other well-known figures stepping down from their leading positions in the group, previous experiences and episodes have demonstrated a high level of pragmatism in HTS to secure survival and expansion. For instance, al-Jolani was pragmatic enough to assume a second-in-command position in Jaish al-Fatah, relinquishing its command to his allies, despite his being the stronger and larger faction within the coalition. Al-Jolani could take a similar step again, provided that he believes he would maintain influence behind the scenes. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham pragmatism has also manifested itself in other forms. For instance, the group has gradually removed foreign fighters from its ranks. Moreover, it has also made efforts to counter more extremist groups, such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Ansar al-Din, in an attempt to gain a reputation as an anti-terrorist actor.

The main challenge the group will face if it decides to pursue such a strategy, is its ability to convince other relevant actors of the genuineness of its efforts. Russia and the regime, for instance, would remain suspicious. The US and the international community might be persuaded of the group's intentions, but much like their stance on the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that this would translate into a formal recognition of HTS. That said, other actors, including Turkey, the Arab countries, and the local community, could come to terms with such a transformed HTS.

From the viewpoint of the local population, this scenario would have its advantages. First, such an arrangement would guarantee the preservation of the communities' autonomy from Damascus. The local population already established its own governance structures at an early juncture during the uprising and has successfully achieved greater popular participation in local government. Second, it is reasonable to assume that HTS' grip on security and key governance functions would loosen with time as the local population's participation and agency grow. Faced with a lack of resources and a vibrant civil society, HTS is unlikely to maintain its hegemony. Third, international donors, the Syrian diaspora, and civil society would be encouraged to invest in the rehabilitation of local infrastructure and production capacity once a form of stability persists, and in this context, HTS would be recognized as the de facto authority. Investment in early recovery programs and projects would provide the foundation for more sustainable local development and thus gradually reduce the region's reliance on humanitarian assistance.

Nevertheless, and regardless of how this scenario were to play out, doubts about the true intentions of HTS would not just disappear. Also, and most importantly, the region would remain dependent on foreign, i.e., Turkish, backing to prevent potential attacks from Assad or his allies. Yet, relying on continued Turkish support would be risky because Turkey's presence in Idlib is more vulnerable to renewed conflict with the regime and with Russia and more disputed domestically than its presence in northern Aleppo. If the opposition in Turkey were to win the 2023 presidential elections, Ankara's relationship with HTS would be placed under scrutiny and may even break down completely, which could lead to a reconfiguration of the Turkish army presence in Idlib.

SCENARIO 2: A REGIME TAKEOVER

A second scenario would see Turkey's entente with Russia coming under pressure, or Turkey's priorities in Syria changing after elections. The Turkish army would eventually withdraw from most of Idlib, maintaining its military presence in the border area of northern Aleppo only. Consequently, Turkey's deterrence would no longer be as effective, and a regime assault on Idlib would be the next logical step, provided Damascus can muster the necessary resources. Loyalist forces would start by attacking the plain south of the M4 highway, applying a scorched earth tactic to seize Jabal al-Zawiyeh and driving all opposition forces away from the highway. After conquering the elevated positions again, regime forces would oversee all territory up to the Syrian-Turkish border, giving it a clear advantage and enabling it to advance further.

While HTS as well as other minor mainstream armed opposition factions could decide to resist an onslaught from the regime, similar events in the past suggest a different outcome. In line with its pragmatism, HTS would probably avoid fighting a losing battle, withdraw, and preserve its forces, while the mainstream opposition would resist, lose their fighters and equipment, and eventually abandon their hometowns and lands. The consequences of such a scenario would surely further empower HTS vis-à-vis the rest of

the opposition and might even tempt it to break through to northern Aleppo, where the Turkish army has thus far prevented it from gaining access. In such a scenario, the non-aggression pact between the Turkish army and HTS would be put to the test, and an uncalculated escalation could endanger Turkey's physical presence in northern Syria as the probability of terrorist attacks in Turkey itself and in northern Aleppo would increase.

The most dramatic impact of this scenario would be on the lives of millions of Syrian civilians in Idlib, who already live in horrific conditions today. In an apocalyptic scene, we would see crowds of women, children, and elderly people facing inhumane conditions on the border. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham would not even try to prevent the tens or even hundreds of thousands of civilians, IDPs, and local inhabitants seeking refuge from the regime's advances from trying to break through to the other side. This would be an additional burden for Turkey, and possibly also for Europe. Unlike in Dara'a where regime redeployment was negotiated, a return of the regime to Idlib would most likely be bloody. The international community's reaction could lessen regime violence, but the humanitarian conditions would still deteriorate dramatically. Moreover, we should expect the regime to inflict collective punishment on the remainder of the local population and IDPs in the years to come. In all likelihood, the region would thus remain a hotbed of trouble and insecurity. Avoiding such a disastrous outcome should be a top priority for all actors involved in the Syrian conflict.

CONCLUSIONS AND ENTRY POINTS FOR EUROPEAN POLICIES

The stalemate in the UN-led negotiations and the failure to implement United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254 have resulted in a lack of any useful political engagement over the future of opposition-held territory. Fully aware of these dynamics, the regime has been perpetuating the status quo, waiting for the right opportunity to reclaim its authority over all of Syria. The sense of looming threat has also been sustained by periodic bombing and targeting of civilians in Idlib, thus preventing any implementation of forward-looking development plans and stabilization. While armed groups have been profiting in different ways from the instability and insecurity, it is the civilian population that suffers the most.

In the absence of a negotiated solution, there are no encouraging scenarios for Idlib. Europe should therefore not stop its engagement in favor of implementing UNSC Resolution 2254. At the same time, the local population would definitely suffer greatly under the second scenario described above. In this vein, Europeans should adopt a bottom-up approach to intervention, starting from local community needs, and support grassroots and women's empowerment initiatives that also counter the ideology of HTS. Programs should focus on projects that cross conflict lines and those that contribute to strengthening cross-community networks.

At the same time, Europeans should engage in dialogue with local authorities and the Syrian Salvation Government and advocate for its international recognition as a de facto authority.

8

NORTHERN ALEPPO IN 2030

Autonomy versus Return of Regime Control

Sinan Hatahet

The northern Aleppo region, better known as the Turkish-controlled area, stretches over 4,114 square kilometers, bordering Turkey in the north, the Euphrates from Jarablus to al-Maghayer in the east, and the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) and regime-held areas in the south. Its current population is estimated at between 1.1 and 1.5 million civilians, including around 400,000 internally displaced people (IDPs). The presence of the Turkish army since 2016 has established a de facto no-fly zone, eliminating thus far the threat of regime ground assaults and indiscriminate shelling of civilians. Northern Aleppo has enjoyed a relatively secure environment, access to the outer world, and stable territorial delimitation.

In theory, this territory is run and governed by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), but the SIG actually remains the weakest actor on the ground, despite its official mandate from the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC). By virtue of its military presence, Turkey is the supreme authority in the area. It relies on the Syrian National Army (SNA) to maintain the region's security and address any threat emanating from AANES, as well as on local councils to govern the area. The SIG's role is thus mostly symbolic despite its efforts to coordinate actions between the different local actors.

So far, northern Aleppo's governance structures are best described as disorganized. They have been crippled by factionalism and a lack of Turkish interest in promoting a central authority; local armed groups and civilian actors alike are consumed by competition and conflicts of interests. This has prevented the emergence of effective strategies for stabilization or sustainable autonomy. Hence, the future of northern Aleppo is highly dependent on the evolution of Turkey's role and approaches. At the same time, the local actors' capacity to act as spoilers is largely contained, as their agency to determine their own course has greatly been diminished over the last five years.

Depending on Turkey's future policies in northern Syria, there are three main scenarios, each of which involves the area having a different degree of autonomy from the central government in Damascus. The first scenario consists of an arrangement that would lead to the formal establishment of an autonomous administration in northern Aleppo; the second comprises a return of regime forces and control of the area by a central Syrian national authority; and the third is the persistence of the status quo.

SCENARIO 1: THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTHWEST SYRIA

Inspired by the autonomous administration created by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its allies to the east of the Euphrates River, the region's civilian and military forces could pursue a similar path, seeking and proclaiming legal status and thus preserving a degree of autonomy from Damascus. Such an agreement would rhetorically end the armed opposition groups' claim to the rest of Syria, a quest that has never officially been abandoned despite the cessation of all military offensives in regime territory in 2016. Moreover, as political forces in northern Aleppo would seek reciprocal recognition from both the regime and the PYD, they would also have to at least implicitly recognize the legality of AANES.

In this scenario, the territory of the new autonomous region could also include western Aleppo and northern Idlib, which are currently under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). It would then host a population of 5 to 5.5 million inhabitants, accounting for nearly one-quarter of Syria's population and making it the second largest region in terms of human capital.

Such a scenario would grant the SIG and local councils the possibility to establish their own legal, fiscal, and government structures. Also, in this scenario, armed opposition groups might retain their arms rather than being disarmed or reintegrated into the Syrian state apparatus. In this endeavor, the SIG and local councils would be required to put in place a representational framework for citizens, including IDPs, as well as to establish an efficient and effective administration.

Yet, their capacity to invest in such efforts is very limited. It is thus safe to assume that such a scenario would necessitate international or regional institutional and financial backing, most probably from Turkey, making it dependent on Turkey's benevolence. Nevertheless, attempts to achieve a status of autonomy would run into a number of challenges: first, a growing risk of fraternal infighting, and second, the definition of its legal status vis-à-vis Damascus and whether the latter would accept that status.

So far, Syrian armed opposition groups have developed and nurtured their own sources of income, in addition to funds received from Turkey or other regional backers. Their economic portfolio varies from trading to investments in retail, services, agriculture, and real estate. Yet, these opposition factions are also in direct territorial competition with one another over the control of key strategic resources, such as border crossings, trade, construction, olive production, and ultimately also water. In the scenario where northern Aleppo becomes an autonomous region, the competition between these forces would increase, as their profit margins would gradually shrink once formal governance institutions reduce their room for maneuver. Such dynamics have already been witnessed over the last five years with occasional infighting breaking out among the armed groups present in the same area.

The likelihood of widespread infighting in the struggle for local hegemony would certainly increase if HTS territory were to be included in such a scenario. Indeed, as well as being stronger, larger, and better organized than other militia, HTS tolerance toward any sort of local competition is very low. Despite being the last armed group to seek a presence in Idlib, HTS was able to dominate and gradually eliminate all other factions, with the exception of some minor, marginal groups, within just three years of its first appearance in the area. Thus, it is safe to assume that if such a scenario were to play out, the area would witness a complete HTS military takeover, including them taking control of the major cross-border points with Turkey.

Yet, such a scenario – which would require not only the persistence of the military balance in northern Syria but also a drastic change of approach with Damascus accepting autonomy – is not very likely. Primarily, Turkey's support for such a rearrangement is far from certain, the main reason being that the establishment of an autonomous administration in northwestern Syria might at least tacitly recognize AANES. This is definitely not a move that Ankara is ready to take today and is one it would most probably remain opposed to. Moreover, there is little evidence of Turkey being interested in enabling a Syrian local administration beyond its current marginal and reduced authority. The SIG's role has not evolved or strengthened since Turkey's military intervention, and local councils continue to individually answer to multiple Turkish authorities instead of to a single Syrian (or even Turkish) authority.

Moreover, the structure of the local economy is unfavorable to the development of the autonomy of the region. Unlike the territory to the east of the Euphrates, northern

Aleppo does not have an abundance of natural resources or even a large territory to exploit. In terms of energy, the region is dependent on imports of both fuel and electricity. The mushrooming of IDP camps, and the high cost of agricultural inputs have also reduced food production. Hence, without a comprehensive development strategy for both the local infrastructure and production capacities, local inhabitants and IDPs alike will remain highly dependent on foreign assistance. This also means that the area does not command enough resources to sustain a governance structure on its own. It would thus rely completely on international and regional intervention. Only in the long run, if a sustainable and supportive fiscal and financial environment were to be established, would it be conceivable for the Turkish and Arab private sectors to invest in the region's infrastructure in exchange for long-term returns.

SCENARIO 2: THE RETURN OF THE REGIME

Propped up by Russian military support and an agreement with Turkey, Damascus could be inspired to break a deal similar to the regime forces' redeployment in Deraa. In this scenario, loyalist forces would retake the area and control all the major roads between the towns as well as the border crossings with Turkey. The buildup for such a development would most probably include a partial or full Turkish military withdrawal from northern Aleppo, as well as negotiations with the main armed opposition factions on handing over heavy artillery and weapons, in exchange for either an amnesty and/or a reduced security presence in major towns and cities.

Based on the current state of affairs, it is difficult to envisage this scenario becoming reality, as neither Turkey nor its local allies have any reason to agree to such an arrangement. For Turkey, a military withdrawal would be synonymous with relinquishing an advanced position to counter the PYD/Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) outside its own territory. As a result, southern Turkey could find itself increasingly vulnerable. Moscow could attempt to alleviate Ankara's security concerns by activating the 1997 Adana Protocol between Turkey and Syria, thus allowing the Turkish army to conduct military operations on Syrian soil in the event that a genuine threat arises. Even then, numerous details would need to be negotiated in order to guarantee Turkey a level of freedom of maneuver comparable to that which it is currently enjoying.

Additionally, if Turkey was to agree to such an arrangement, the position of local armed and civilian actors would remain a major obstacle to the realization of this scenario. While some local factions would prove to be pragmatic and ready to engage with the Syrian regime and/or Russia, some of the largest groups would oppose it. Among them is the Levant Front, a group essentially composed of local inhabitants, with a large social constituency and a history of fighting the regime since 2012. Military resistance would be backed by smaller armed groups evacuated from other are-

as in Syria, and might also be supported by civil resistance from IDPs and activists. These groups would only yield if subject to excessive force.

On the other hand, this scenario could gain momentum under specific conditions. First, a change in Turkey's political landscape could trigger a shift in the country's priorities in Syria. If a new government in Ankara demonstrates more of an appetite to engage with Damascus, the Syrian regime could be ready to accommodate Turkey's security concerns, even if its capacity to implement agreements would remain questionable. Turkey could then abandon the Syrian opposition and focus on its own interests. Second, if the competition between the Syrian armed opposition factions persists, it is not implausible to envisage several rounds of infighting that would diminish their force, and thus weaken their resolution to resist a return of the regime. In such an eventuality, civilians, regardless of their political orientation, could favor a return of normalcy even under regime control over a continuous deterioration of security conditions.

A forced military return of the regime to the area, even if limited, would result in a humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands of civilians would attempt to flee to Turkey. Security and living conditions in the border area would gravely deteriorate as Turkey would prevent those fleeing from entering its territory, and no other safe haven would be available. If, on the other hand, the regime was to return gradually, the shock would be cushioned and the local population could adapt to the new security and governance conditions. In any case, a return of regime control would take years as well as substantial efforts to rebuild not only military capacities but also the state apparatus. The region would thus remain dependent on international humanitarian aid for some time to come.

SCENARIO 3: THE CONTINUATION OF THE STATUS QUO

In the face of the persistence of the military balance of power and the inability to find a compromise for the region, the status quo will most likely be sustained. In this scenario, the local administration and governance structure could incrementally consolidate their authority. However, their sustainability would largely remain subject to political circumstances and they would continue to lack international recognition as well as the institutional and financial backing essential to their development. While Ankara would continue to try and deter a regime takeover, sporadic attacks executed from territories held by the regime and the PYD would persist, maintaining pressure on the local opposition and increasing the cost of the Turkish military presence.

The lack of a clear path forward would discourage Ankara from engaging with the region on a larger scale, whether in backing the institutionalization of the local authority or in investing in the infrastructure beyond current levels. Even though the preservation of the status quo would allow Turkey to continue to target the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),

it would also prevent it from seeking long-term commitments in northern Aleppo for fear of losing its investments. Indeed, Turkey's entente with Russia, the other guarantor of de-escalation in the region, is quite volatile and largely dependent on the latter's good will. In the same vein, Turkey would refrain from actively trying to put an end to the opposition's factionalism as well as unifying the civilian authorities governing the region.

The armed opposition would see the lack of a long-term Turkish strategy as an opportunity to maximize their exploitation of the available resources, thus perpetuating the zero-sum game they are engaged in. Moreover, the continuous threat of a regime assault would push them to try and fill their coffers even more. Their financial ventures would stay focused on quick and large gains, mainly trade, smuggling, and illicit trafficking, with no substantial investments in production.

In such an environment, local councils' agency would fail to grow. Instead, they would remain transactional, with no strategic depth to institutionalize their governance structure, and stuck in a risk management mode focused on daily challenges. Moreover, technocrats and individuals with merit, knowledge, and experience would continue to be more attracted by the private and NGO sectors for their higher salaries, and thus refrain from working in local councils. In the absence of stability, the necessary tasks of legal unification, taxation, urban planning, and service delivery, which require a collective effort from all involved parties, would be extremely difficult to fulfill.

The international community, Turkey, and other regional actors could be tempted to support the maintenance of the status quo in Syria, thus avoiding having to engage in compromise with their foes. However, the perpetuation of the status quo will prevent sustainable long-term solutions and complicate rather than alleviate the humanitarian and security deadlock the region is suffering from.

CONCLUSION

The scenarios discussed here for northern Aleppo are by no means exhaustive; others could unfold, in particular if major disruptive events occur. For instance, a power vacuum in Damascus or changes within the regime could trigger different reactions from local forces and Turkey. Also, a revival of UN-sponsored talks under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254, albeit unlikely, could facilitate a smoother transition to a reunited government and security structure. What is more, a change in Turkish-Russian or Turkish-US dynamics might lead to an unprecedented military escalation in the north, or even to a rapprochement between forces on the east and the west of the Euphrates to create a unified anti-Assad front. The scenarios presented here are therefore merely possibilities. Nevertheless, in all of the three scenarios described, international involvement is expected, either in enabling the outcome of the scenario or in maintaining a lifeline for civilians.

Preserving a certain level of autonomy from Damascus would lessen the probability of another major humanitarian crisis, and could create a better environment for local development and stabilization. For the European Union, this would provide the basis for enhanced engagement vis-à-vis the local administration in northern Aleppo. In addition to financial backing, significant capacity-building measures to establish good governance, transparency, and accountability would increase the efficiency of these institutions and eventually reduce their dependency on foreign funds. This autonomy would also allow for a more effective working relationship and cooperation with Ankara. By virtue of its physical presence on the terrain, Turkey could massively reduce humanitarian aid costs, enhance the delivery of aid, and accelerate the transfer of knowledge and expertise to local actors.

In contrast, a sudden and rapid regime return would lead to a deterioration of humanitarian conditions in northern Syria and increase the risk of regional security spillover. In the absence of a comprehensive and credible political transition, the international community should assess which scenario would be costlier and which would promote more stability – and then act accordingly.

9

NORTHEAST SYRIA IN 2030

De Facto Autonomy, Agreed Decentralization, or Turkish Invasion

Ferhad Ahma and Kristin Helberg

When the Syrian regime began to withdraw from northeast Syria (NES) in 2012, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its allies gradually filled the administrative vacuum. After a transitional period, the Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava was formed in 2016, encompassing the regions of Afrin, Kobani, and Cezire. During the war, not only the name of this administration changed, but also its territory and size. Thus, the areas of Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê) were lost to Turkey, while Raqqa and parts of Deir ez-Zor were incorporated after the victory over the so-called Islamic State (IS). In 2018, the administration was renamed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Officially, it does not see itself as a Kurdish project, but as a grassroots self-government within Syria. Its military units, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), are the local allies of the international anti-IS coalition.

Potential developments in NES depend on a variety of factors: the performance and legitimacy of AANES; its international acceptance and support, especially by the US and Europe; a possible agreement between the Syrian regime and AANES; the resurgence of the IS; and the interests of other involved foreign powers, above all Turkey. As in other parts of the country, internal and external dynamics are deeply intertwined. Turkey, the US, and Russia have influenced and shaped events in NES in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Therefore, the different roles and aims of these actors must be taken into account when considering possible future scenarios.

SCENARIO 1: A LITTLE BIT OF HOPE AND A LOT OF BARBED WIRE: STABILIZATION OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

There are several indications that the US will remain in NES, at least for the duration of the Biden administration, and that their moderate military presence (900 soldiers) will prevent the situation from escalating, either with Turkey or regime forces. In this case, AANES would be inclined to maintain the status quo and expand its structures as the de facto

governing body. This would be further encouraged by financial grants, development cooperation, and investment from the US and Europe, provided that the latter realize that their interests – namely preventing refugees from coming to Europe and jihadists from regrouping, while gaining some leverage in the Syrian conflict – will be better served by stabilizing NES than leaving the region to Turkey, Russia, and the Assad regime.

This scenario would offer AANES a chance to increase its legitimacy and acceptance among the local population. Having previously only held elections in NES at the communal (September 2017) and regional (December 2017) levels, AANES plans to hold elections for the 70-member General Council, which was formed in 2018 but has not been democratically approved. Once the new social contract – a kind of constitution drafted by a committee formed by the self-administration – is approved by the General Council, AANES has one year to organize these supra-regional elections. An observation mission with foreign observers could help make sure that these elections meet democratic standards. At the same time, the self-administration could expand the possibilities for participation of citizens and political rivals, in particular the Kurdish National Council (KNC), as well as the space for independent media and civil society involvement.

However, in this regard, skepticism is called for. The committee formed by AANES to review the text of the social contract and propose changes could easily be a sham. Before fair elections can be held, AANES would need to create the conditions, i.e., a level playing field. Pressure on civil society and harassment of political opponents would need to stop. Sham elections and meaningless reform would just lead to more frustration and undermine the legitimacy of self-governance.

As the international reluctance to engage with AANES stems from the fact that it is dominated by the PYD, the ideological offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria, the nature of the relationship between AANES and the PYD will be crucial. This would not have to imply a radical change

of course, though. As the autonomous government is based on the idea of »democratic confederalism« developed by PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan during his time in prison in Turkey, it cannot be expected to renounce Öcalan as its spiritual father. What will be more decisive is the specific influence that the PYD exerts on government affairs in NES and the extent it is willing to share power. For this to happen, those in charge of the administration would have to think more strategically, act more pragmatically, and overcome the prevailing party logic.

Lessening the Turkish threat to the AANES project through a long-term US presence could also affect the intra-Kurdish dialogue between the KNC and the PYD. The KNC, which has been composed of more than a dozen Kurdish parties since 2011, forms a political counterweight to the ruling PYD. Since it has joined the Syrian opposition in Istanbul, the KNC has been under the influence of the Turkish government. This is why observers describe the dialogue between PYD and KNC as a de facto Turkish-Turkish dialogue between the PKK and Ankara.

A power-sharing agreement between the two would serve both actors by allowing the KNC to participate in the administration and by giving the PYD and AANES more political legitimacy. Provided that Ankara plays a limited role in the negotiations, the two parties could more easily build on their common political grounds, as they share similar visions for a decentralized or federal Syria. An agreement between the PYD and the KNC would therefore not only enable the two political rivals to share responsibility in the region, but also help overcome the rift with Turkey, an important yet simultaneously dangerous neighbor.. At best, Ankara would feel reassured by a power-sharing agreement between the various political parties in NES, including their allies in the KNC, which would break the PYD´s dominance.

On the other hand, the dialogue could also falter as there would be no compelling reason to continue the talks. The most recent negotiation process began during the last Turkish intervention in October 2019 and the occupation of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê). The PYD and, behind it, the self-administration, see the dialogue as tantamount to indirect negotiations with Turkey. However, the PYD may not feel under pressure to reach an agreement as long as it can maintain the status quo with the help of an American presence.

SCENARIO 2: THE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE PATH: AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN AANES AND THE REGIME

Both the self-administration and the regime have expressed interest in discussions on the future of NES on many occasions. Although the visions of the two actors regarding the political and administrative development of this region differ starkly, they know that an agreement would be advantageous for them both. The regime would not only benefit economically from access to the region's resources, but also

politically, as control of the northeast, even symbolic, would be an important milestone along the road to restoring its rule over the entire country. And AANES needs a settlement with the regime as a first step toward international recognition.

According to everything we know about the talks between the regime and the self-administration so far, an agreement is still a long way off. The regime continues to treat the Kurdish question as a security problem rather than a political issue. This is why the negotiations are being conducted by high-ranking members of the security apparatus. Damascus seems willing to make only minimal concessions and rejects any form of local self-government. Moreover, the regime demands the integration of the SDF into the army and rejects the idea of these Kurdish-Arab military units having special status.

Therefore, an agreement seems unattainable without Russian involvement. For President Vladimir Putin, an agreement between the regime and AANES could pay off, since Russia has already contractually secured oil production in NES. The only obstacle along the way is American military presence. Moscow could therefore press the Assad regime to make concessions regarding a federal reorganization of the country or a special status for NES. The self-administration would then have largely asserted its interests and could dispense with US soldiers as a security guarantee.

At the same time, an agreement with the regime could, under certain circumstances, severely weaken the position of the self-administration and the SDF. The regime would accept AANES only as a Kurdish entity and as a representative of Kurdish demands, and in no way as representing the Arab provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Thus, if AANES were to accept such an approach, it would not only weaken the position of the SDF, but, more importantly, undermine the political project of a joint Kurdish-Arab self-administration in NES.

Depending on how much Kurdish autonomy is granted, Turkey could support an agreement between Assad and AANES, as Erdoğan prefers a regime-controlled northeast to a PYD presence along the Syrian-Turkish border.

SCENARIO 3: THE NIGHTMARE: A NEW TURKISH INTERVENTION

Turkey strongly reiterates that it will not accept Kurdish autonomy in Syria. After occupying Afrin in 2018 and the region between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê) in 2019, President Erdoğan has, at every opportunity, emphasized that he would bring further areas both west and east of the Euphrates under Turkish control. Ankara´s priority is the Manbij and Ain Issa region, with the aim of occupying Kobane. Should it succeed, Erdoğan would achieve several strategic goals. First, control of Kobane would create a contiguous Turkish-occupied area from Afrin to Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê). Second, with Kobane, AANES would lose another highly symbolic Kurdish enclave after the loss of Afrin.

As a result, most of the Kurdish areas known as Rojava would be occupied by Turkey and its allies, the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA). This would draw fierce criticism from Syria's Kurdish population. Third, Ankara could continue its plan to deport predominantly Sunni Syrian refugees from Turkey and settle them in the area, changing the social fabric and demographic reality of NES. As with other Turkish interventions, massive human rights violations are likely to be committed, and tens of thousands of residents displaced in the process.[1] Fourth, a further loss of territory would weaken AANES' position in possible negotiations with the regime.

The Biden administration has confirmed that it will leave its troops in the region for the fight against the IS. This may slightly reassure the self-administration, but after the experience with the Trump administration it is well aware that the US can quickly change its policy and give Turkey the green light for another intervention. Under certain circumstances, Turkey could decide to intervene even without US approval, especially if Russia signals its consent.

For both Turkey and Russia, the future of NES is closely linked to developments in Syria's northwest. The two main players could therefore cut a deal that serves the interests of both countries equally. If Turkey were to withdraw from Idlib, clearing the way for a reconquest by the Assad regime, Ankara could in return be given the go-ahead by Russia in NES. This would likely lead to a confrontation with Syrian regime forces, which could result in them taking control of not only the border area but the entire northeast, meaning the gradual end of AANES.

CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES OF AANES

Regardless of how events unfold on the ground, AANES will face several critical issues, including the effects of climate change, environmental degradation, the presence of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the remnants of the IS.

The region has been plagued by drought for years. In addition, the scarcity of water in the region and the decline in the water levels of the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris are causing significant losses in agriculture. According to local data,[2] yields in 2021 were not sufficient to meet the local population's needs for flour and bread.

In addition to the water problem, there is also an energy-environment problem. In recent years, primitive crude oil processing has permanently damaged the environment in the region. Many of the best soils around the oil wells can no longer be cultivated because of heavy oil pollution. In the long term, these environmental problems will drive thousands of people to flee inland or abroad.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians from different regions have sought refuge in NES. Many of them live in one of the 17 refugee camps. Providing for IDPs is a major economic challenge. In addition, their presence often triggers social tensions, for example due to competition in the labor market or the search for housing. The closure of the Al-Yarubia border crossing at the beginning of 2020 aggravated the already poor supply situation in the region.

Lastly, AANES is struggling with the remnants of the IS caliphate. Thousands of fighters, supporters, and relatives must be guarded, cared for, tried, or reintegrated into society. Many of them live in Al-Hol, with 62,000 inhabitants the largest camp in the region,[3] while others are held as criminals in prisons. Since most countries of origin refuse to take back their citizens, the self-administration has to cope with this security problem on its own, with no end in sight. Moreover, the IS is gaining strength again. The massive armed attack launched by the IS on a detention center in Hassakeh in January 2022 illustrated the scale of the challenge.[4] The jihadists are regrouping within the Al-Hol camp and recruiting new supporters in Deir ez-Zor province. Most of them are joining for economic reasons as the IS offers a monthly salary. Once again, poverty is proving to be a breeding ground for extremism.

CONCLUSIONS AND ENTRY POINTS FOR EUROPEAN POLICIES

The future of NES depends critically on the approaches taken by the foreign powers involved. The international community, including the EU and Germany, can make an important contribution to improving the situation in NES by increasing investment in self-sustaining activities, economic recovery, and long-term development projects. Better living conditions are crucial for any stabilization effort in the region. International actors could invest in infrastructure and support the professionalization of the administration. Foreign expertise is also needed to repair environmental damage and promote agriculture. In addition, international donors should improve the quality of life of IDPs through long-term programs. Since the processing of international aid through Damascus is not working, it should be organized cross-border from Iraq again. This would simultaneously reduce the self-administration's dependence on the Assad regime and strengthen its position. Germany and the EU must also realize that the fragile situation in NES provides fertile ground for a resurgence of the IS and can thus endanger the security of the EU.

Europe and the US should urgently engage with Turkey to prevent any further military intervention, taking into account Turkey's domestic interests without legitimizing its military occupation of parts of Syria. This requires strong and clear political positions, such as unequivocally classifying Turkey's presence in Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê) as an illegal occupation. Furthermore, the EU should remind Turkey of its responsibilities as an occupying power and work to hold Ankara accountable for the alleged war crimes committed by the SNA, given that these mercenary forces are controlled and sponsored by Turkey.[5]

Last but not least, Europe should commit to ensure that AANES can participate in the political process regarding Syria. The more the international community includes AANES, the greater its influence on the self-administration´s performance as a local government and the more sustainable political development and social stability in NES will be.
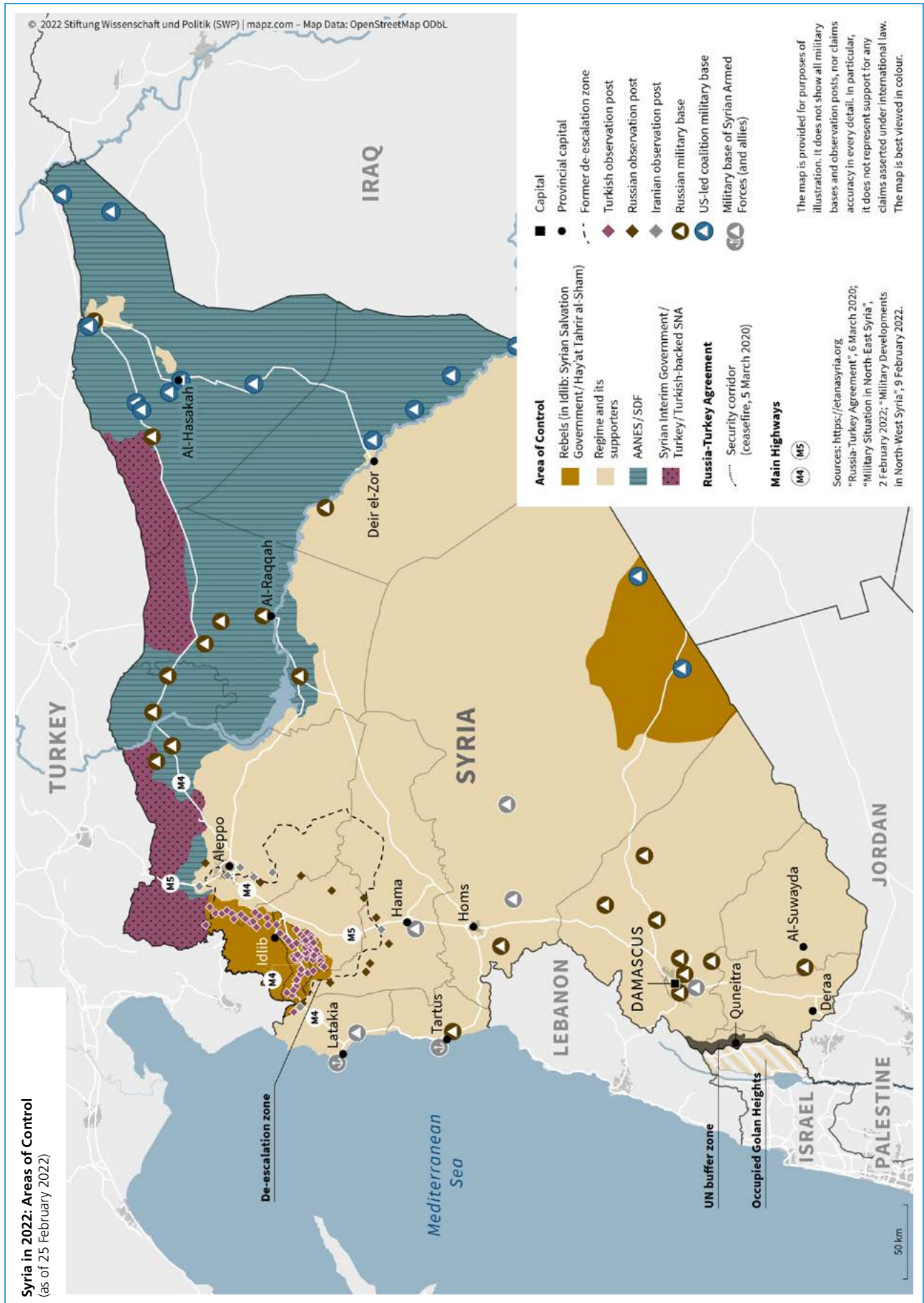
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ABBREVIATIONS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
BRI	(China's) Belt and Road Initiative
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkey)
DEVA	Democracy and Progress Party (Turkey)
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
GOS	Government of Syria
GP	Future Party (Turkey)
HDP	People's Democracy Party (Turkey)
HLP	housing, land, and property
HNC	High Negotiations Committee (Syrian opposition body)
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IDPs	internally displaced people
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGOs	international non-governmental organizations
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
IS	Islamic State (Islamic State in the Levant; Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)
IYI	The Good Party (Turkey)
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015 nuclear agreement with Iran)
KNC	Kurdish National Council
LACU	Local Councils Coordination Unit (Syrian opposition body)
LDF	Local Defense Forces (Syrian militia linked to the Government of Syria)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHP	Nationalist Action Party (Turkey)
NDF	National Defense Forces (Syrian militia linked to the Government of Syria)
NES	northeast Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish party)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (Syrian militia linked to AANES)
SIG	Syrian Interim Government (Syrian opposition body based in Turkey)
SNA	Syrian National Army (Syrian militia backed by Turkey)
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (Syrian opposition body)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government (linked to HTS)
SWP	Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs)
UAE	United Arab Emirates
YPG	People's Protection Units (Syrian militia linked to PYD)

MAP OF TERRITORIAL CONTROL

Syria in 2022: Areas of Control
(as of 25 February 2022)

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Area of Control

- Rebels (in Idlib: Syrian Salvation Government / Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham)
- Regime and its supporters
- AANES / SDF
- Syrian Interim Government / Turkey / Turkish-backed SNA

Russia-Turkey Agreement

- Security corridor (ceasefire, 5 March 2020)

Main Highways

- M4 M5

■ Capital
● Provincial capital
Former de-escalation zone
◆ Turkish observation post
◆ Russian observation post
◆ Iranian observation post
◆ Russian military base
◀ US-led coalition military base
◀ Military base of Syrian Armed Forces (and allies)

Sources: https://etanasyria.org
"Russia-Turkey Agreement", 6 March 2020;
"Military Situation in North-East Syria",
2 February 2022; "Military Developments in North-West Syria", 9 February 2022.

The map is provided for purposes of illustration. It does not show all military bases and observation posts, nor claims accuracy in every detail. In particular, it does not represent support for any claims asserted under international law. The map is best viewed in colour.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Sinem Adar is an Associate at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP) in Berlin. Her work at CATS focuses on Turkish domestic politics and Turkey-EU relations, particularly on migration cooperation and Turkish diasporas in Europe.

Ferhad Ahma is a translator and co-founder of PÊL – Civil Waves. Ahma focuses on the internal dynamics of dialogue between the social, ethnic, and religious groups in Syria and is also working on documenting violations of housing, land, and property (HLP) rights in northeastern Syria. Ahma previously worked in the media and on voice-overs for documentaries.

Dr. Hürcan Aslı Aksoy is Deputy Head of the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP). Her work at CATS focuses on political transition processes and state-society relations in Turkey, as well as Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa.

Dr. Muriel Asseburg is a Senior Fellow in the Africa and Middle East Division of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP). Her current research is focused on conflict dynamics and peacemaking in the Levant (Israel/Palestine and Syria, in particular), German, European, and US Middle East policies, as well as questions of state building, political reform, and security in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Dr. Hamidreza Azizi is an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow in the Africa and Middle East Division of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP). He has also been an Assistant Professor of Regional Studies at Shahid Beheshti University (2016-2020) and a Guest Lecturer for the Department of Regional Studies, University of Tehran (2016-2018). His research interests include security and geopolitical issues in the Middle East and Central Eurasia, Iran's foreign policy, and Iran-Russia relations.

Dr. Cinzia Bianco is a Research Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, where she works on political, security, and economic developments in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region and relations with Europe. She is also a Non-Resident Scholar with the Middle East Institute's Defense and Security Program.

Dr. Joseph Daher is a Visiting Professor at Lausanne University (Switzerland) and a part-time Affiliate Professor at the European University Institute, Florence (Italy), where he is actively involved in the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project. He is the author of Syria after the Uprisings, The Political Economy of State Resilience (Pluto, 2019) and Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God (Pluto, 2016).

Bahjat Hajjar has served as the Executive Director of the Local Councils Coordination Unit (LACU) since early 2014. His work focuses on capacity-building for local councils in opposition-held areas regarding good governance practices. Working in partnership with swisspeace, he has contributed to a research project on the experience of local administrative councils, developed a document on a range of future decentralization options for Syria, and has engaged with the London School of Economics on a number of on-the-ground research activities and sectoral needs assessments across Syria.

Natasha Hall is a Senior Fellow with the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C.. Natasha has over 15 years of experience as an analyst and practitioner in complex humanitarian emergencies and conflict-affected areas, with a specialty in the Middle East.

Sinan Hatahet is a Senior Research Fellow at the Sharq Forum, Omran for Strategic Studies and a Research Associate with the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project within the Middle East Directions program at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (EUI). Hatahet's research interests include the dynamics of Syria's national and local economies, non-state actors, the Kurdish political movement, and the emerging regional order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Kristin Helberg is a journalist and political scientist. For seven years she reported from Damascus for German, Austrian, and Swiss media. Today she lives in Berlin where she works as an author and Middle East expert. Helberg has written three books on Syria and the Syrians (all published by Herder) and researched the Syrian diaspora in Germany as a Fellow of the Mercator Foundation.

Dr. Salam Said is a Policy Adviser at the Africa and Middle East Department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Berlin. Said has worked as a researcher with the FES and the Centre for Syrian Studies at St. Andrews University (Scotland) and has lectured at different German universities, currently at the Karlsruhe Institute for Technology (KIT). Her work has focused on Arab economies and foreign trade relations, the political economy of the Arab region, as well as the Syrian conflict and economic reconstruction.

Nikolay Surkov is a Senior Research Fellow for the Center for Middle East Studies at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO). He is part of a team that analyzes regional conflicts and security problems. His own work focuses on the Syrian crisis and Russian policy in the Middle East.

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LOOKING AHEAD

Geopolitical Dynamics and Scenarios for Syria in 2030

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In 2030, Syria's multi-layered conflict will remain unresolved. Sustainable stability, reconciliation, large-scale reconstruction, and refugee and IDP return all seem very unlikely. The main foreign powers shaping the dynamics in Syria today will still be doing so in 2030 and will still be pursuing their current interests in Syria. However, the means employed to achieve these objectives and the scope of the foreign powers' involvement, as well as their respective weight, might differ from today's balance of forces.

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European policymakers will not be the main actors shaping dynamics on the ground. Still they could influence trajectories toward greater stability, recovery, and an improvement in the humanitarian situation. In this vein, they should work toward the inclusion of relevant Syrian stakeholders in conflict resolution fora, first and foremost representatives of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG); enhance support for both a Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue and Kurdish-Kurdish-Turkish talks; engage in debate with regional stakeholders—especially the Arab Gulf States and Turkey—aimed at constructive engagement and long-term stabilization in Syria.

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The EU and its member states should also step up needs-based engagement for early recovery and support for local rehabilitation and development initiatives across Syria, in particular in the education and healthcare sectors; move away from short-term emergency assistance to a longer-term approach in cooperation with local authorities; prioritize the support of self-sustaining activities in the productive sectors, i.e., agriculture and manufacturing, across Syria, and address the negative effects of over-compliance with the sanctions regimes. Finally, EU member states should diminish the future threat of the IS in Syria and alleviate the burden on AANES by repatriating European nationals currently in AANES detention centers, and remain engaged in the fight against the IS, beyond purely military and repressive means, by expanding education and awareness raising in IDP camps.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
https://www.fes.de/referat-naher-mittlerer-osten-und-nordafrika

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