

COVID-19 AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND THEIR STRATEGIES

- The three international actors that have most decisively shaped Syria's war trajectory in recent years - Russia, Turkey and Iran - are also among the countries most affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Given the major interests that Russia, Turkey, and Iran perceive in Syria, they have all remained strongly invested in the conflict, and the pandemic has not changed their overarching strategies. Nonetheless, certain adjustments in their behaviour on the ground may be observed. In this respect, COVID-19 constitutes another factor bolstering already-existing dynamics of the conflict in Syria; neither worsening the situation on the ground, nor improving it.

About the Author:

Dr. André Bank is Senior Research Fellow at the GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies in Hamburg. His main areas of research are political rule, violent conflict and regional order in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Syria and Jordan. From 2016 to 2018, he led a research project on the effects of the Syrian war in Jordan, funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research. From 2014 to 2019, he served as the speaker of the Leibniz foundation research network on “International Diffusion and Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes” (IDCAR). Dr. Bank regularly advises political decision-makers and provides expertise to various media, among others on the Syrian conflict.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
P.O. Box 116107 Riad El Solh
Beirut 1107 2210
Lebanon

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a truly global phenomenon. All countries are affected by, and struggling with, the direct medical and health-related problems, as well as the foreseeable social, economic, and political consequences. Of particular concern is that the pandemic will further escalate existing violent conflicts, leading to the death and suffering of even more people. Against this backdrop, on 23 March and 3 April, 2020, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire to “help create corridors for life-saving aid. To open precious windows for diplomacy. To bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to COVID-19.”¹

One of the first countries mentioned by Guterres is Syria: the stage of the most brutal war of the 21st century. By spring 2020, nine years into the violent conflict, the oppositionist Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported between 384,000 and 586,100 casualties (SOHR 2020). The number of Syrians injured in the war is even higher, and around eleven million people – more than half of the country’s pre-war population – have been either internally or externally displaced. Large parts of Syria’s infrastructure have been destroyed, especially in (former) rebel-held areas. A military victory is on the horizon for the dictatorial regime under President Bashar al-Assad, which, together with its allies Russia and Iran, has violently regained control over more than two-thirds of the territory.

It was during this stage of the conflict that the Syrian government confirmed the first official COVID-19 case on 22 March 2020. This was a relatively late announcement, given the much earlier outbreaks in neighboring states, such as Iran (19 February), Iraq (22 February) Lebanon (22 February). Moreover, Syria has strong ties to Iran – the initial epicenter of COVID-19 in the Middle East – in terms of the military personnel, businesspeople, and Shi’ite pilgrims that travel between the two countries (Woertz 2020). Three months later, on 22 June, 2020, the Syrian Ministry of Health put the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Syria at 219, with seven people having died.² These very low figures should be taken with a pinch of salt, given the Syrian regime’s tendency to misrepresent statistics, and the lack of testing capabilities in the country. Still, it is fair to say that Syria did not experience a massive outbreak of COVID-19 in the first months of the pandemic.

What is striking, however, is that the three international actors that have most decisively shaped Syria’s war trajectory over the past few years – Russia, Turkey, and Iran – have all been hit hard by the pandemic at home. These three countries are among the dozen most affected in the world, both in terms of infections and deaths from COVID-19.³ In addition, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are each undergoing massive economic crises at home, therefore potentially limiting spending abroad. This observation highlights the central question of this paper: Does the COVID-19 pandemic affect the strategic interests and behavior of international actors in the Syrian conflict?

To preface this author’s answer and argument: At this early stage of the pandemic, COVID-19 has not changed the overarching interests of Russia, Turkey, or Iran in Syria, as all three governments attach

strategic importance to maintaining their position in the conflict. This outlook is unlikely to change in the near future. Where we begin to observe some shifts, however, is in the behavior on the ground of all three, but especially Iran, whose position in Syria had already been weakened prior to the pandemic. In a broader sense, COVID-19 is not a game changer for conflict dynamics in Syria. Instead, it should be understood as one more variable that, at most, modifies certain pre-pandemic trends within the complex landscape of the Syrian war.

This paper is structured as follows: The next section provides an overview of the military situation in various parts of Syria in 2020. Subsequently, Russia, Turkey, and Iran – the three most influential international actors in Syria – will be examined in the context of COVID-19. The conclusion will summarize the main findings and develop recommendations for European policy-makers regarding Syria.

1. The Military Situation in Syria in 2020

As of June 2020, the Assad regime, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, controls more than two-thirds of Syrian territory. This dynamic began with Russia’s large-scale intervention in September 2015, followed by the brutal recapture of the northern metropolis of Aleppo in 2016 and 2017. With the help of the Russian air force and Iranian-financed militia groups, regime forces gradually reclaimed the former rebel strongholds of Daraa in the southwest, Ghouta to the east of Damascus, and various areas surrounding Homs and Hama in 2017 and 2018. Opposition fighters living in these areas then fled – along with large segments of the civilian population – to the only remaining rebel stronghold of Idlib in northwest Syria.

Since then, approximately three million people have been living in Idlib, about 1.5 million of whom are internally displaced from other parts of Syria. While the humanitarian situation deteriorated, the Russian-Turkish Sochi agreement of September 2018 ensured that a large-scale offensive planned by the regime was postponed. After the gradual breakdown of the Sochi agreement – which included Turkey’s failure to contain the radical Islamist Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham group (“Committee for the Liberation of Greater Syria,” or HTS) in Idlib – Syrian and Russian air forces began their offensive in late April 2019. By late February 2020, the heavy fighting over Idlib resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and sparked new refugee movements, with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimating that around 940,000 civilians were newly displaced in the region (ICG 2020, 2). The Syrian and Russian militaries managed to capture parts of southern Idlib province, crucially the M4 and M5 motorways, linking Aleppo to coastal Latakia as well as Damascus. An airstrike on a Turkish command headquarters in the region killed at least 33 Turkish soldiers on 27 February, 2020, which served as a trigger for Russian-Turkish negotiations, leading to a ceasefire on 5 March (ICG 2020). Although the Russian-Turkish agreement over Idlib has not addressed any of the central conflict issues, such as the role of HTS, the responsibility for refugees, or the precise borders of the region, the fragile ceasefire has held for over three months.

The region east of the River Euphrates is the second most contested area in Syria today. The announcement by US President Donald Trump on 7 October, 2019, that US troops would completely withdraw from Syria made an invasion by the Turkish military possible. Ankara’s ground troop incursion led to the expulsion of the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG, standing for “Yekîneyên Parastina Gel”), which had previously controlled large parts of the border region and enjoyed

1. Cf. UN News. 2020. “COVID-19: UN Chief Calls for Global Ceasefire to Focus on ‘the True Fight of Our Lives’.” UN News. March 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3fLAnOH>. Accessed June 22, 2020.

2. Cf. Syrian Ministry of Health Chart: Total Cases of Coronavirus Infections. May 28, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2zU8tkr>. Accessed June 22, 2020.

3. Cf. Johns Hopkins University’s Coronavirus Research Center. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Accessed June 22, 2020.

the protection of US troops during their struggle against the radical Islamic State (IS). Since Washington changed its policy once again, deciding to leave a contingent of what is currently around 400 US troops in northeast Syria, Russia came to an agreement with Turkey at the end of October 2019 over the latter's establishment of a safe zone. The Turkish-controlled zone stretches about 100 kilometers from Tall Abyad to Ra's al-'Ayn along the Syrian-Turkish border. In response to the Turkish offensive, the Syrian regime sent troops to the northeast. Furthermore, the Iran-backed Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun Brigades, consisting mostly of Shi'ite Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries, has been operating in the Syrian-Iraqi borderland. Therefore, in the northeast, a particularly complex form of fragmented territorial control has emerged in 2019 and 2020 between the Kurdish YPG, Tehran-allied militias, the Syrian army, and the troops of Russia, Turkey, and the US.

Despite the very fragile ceasefire in northwest Idlib and the fragmented, multi-actor control of territory in the northeast, a "victor's peace" is slowly emerging for the regime of President al-Assad and its key allies, Russia and Iran, in the war overall (Bank 2019). Unless a mass COVID-19 outbreak occurs in Syria, the virus will most likely not change these structural shifts in Syria's military landscape.

2. Russia in Syria during COVID-19: Major Interests, Minor Adjustments

Following its intervention in September 2015, Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, has become the most powerful military actor in the Syrian war. Operating from Hmeimim air base and Tartus naval base, both strategically located in the regime's Alawi heartland, Russian air bombardments have been instrumental for the Assad regime in reconquering rebel-held Aleppo, Daraa, Ghouta, and, more recently, parts of Idlib. Russia's past and present military investments in the war suggest that regime survival in Damascus and the maintenance of its own direct influence in Syria are both major security interests for Moscow. In addition to its military engagement, Russia has strong economic interests in Syria, ranging from the control of natural resources to the sale of weapons, thereby supporting its arms industry at home. Examples of Moscow's lucrative business deals in Syria include the Russian company Stroytransgaz's management, renovation, and expansion of the Mediterranean port of Tartus. The same company, run by the billionaire oligarch and Putin ally Gennady Timchenko, has also acquired a phosphate company in Khneifis, near Hama, and a fertilizer factory in Homs. In addition, Russia has secured a 20 percent stake in the Syrian oil sector (Bank 2019, 7). Finally, Russian support for the Assad regime signals global ambitions to revive many of the old Soviet-era alliances. Due to its large investment in Syria, Moscow challenges the status of the US as the most powerful non-Middle Eastern actor in the region, at least in the short term.

Given its major geo-strategic and geo-economic interests in Syria, Russia has not substantially changed its general outlook on the conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its objectives remain to prevent regime change and to maintain its status as the sole external power which must be consulted by all others on crucial decisions regarding Syria's political future (Asseburg et. al 2020, 4). Russia's strong engagement in Syria is thus unlikely to change in the short term, even though domestically the country has been hit hard, albeit relatively late, by the pandemic. By 22 June, 2020, the Russian government officially reported almost 600,000 cases of COVID-19 infections, the third highest number worldwide after the US and

Brazil, with 8,190 deaths.⁴ Moreover, the energy export-dependent Russian economy has been affected very negatively by plummeting oil prices, which have fallen by over 65 percent since May 2019.

For Russia's policy in Syria, the negative economic fallout of COVID-19 at home has led to minor adjustments on the ground. These mostly pertain to reducing costs or identifying new sources of income in Syria. In light of these adjustments, it makes sense for Moscow to maintain the fragile ceasefire with Turkey over Idlib for the foreseeable future, unless the situation is drastically exacerbated either due to anti-Russian operations by HTS, or a massive build-up of Turkish troops (ICG 2020, 6-7). Even though Moscow considers Ankara to be a major rival in Syria and other conflict-ridden areas in the region, such as Libya, the bilateral relationship has also thawed in recent years, in particular in the areas of arms trade, energy cooperation, and tourism. Having transactional ties with Turkey also helps Russia to maintain some leeway in relation to both an increasingly unruly President Assad – who continues to pressure Moscow for a renewed offensive on Idlib, and regularly disregards Russian reform proposals – and in relation to Iran and its various militias in Syria. In northeast Syria, Russia has also seemingly found a *modus operandi* with Turkey, having accepted Ankara's control over the safe zone on the Syrian-Turkish border since fall 2019. In the medium term, given the likelihood of increasing financial pressure, partly due to COVID-19 and high energy prices, Russia may become more directly engaged in northeast Syria with the aim of gaining further control over Syria's oil resources.

To summarize, even though Russia, under Putin, has been negatively affected in economic terms by COVID-19, it has not changed its overall interests and general outlook on Syria. The past few months have seen some minor adjustments related to cost cutting, but there has certainly been no overhaul of the core strategy pursued by Moscow in Syria over the last five years.

3. Turkey in Syria during COVID-19: Major Interests, Minor Adjustments

Turkey has been deeply involved in Syria since 2011, but its major interests have shifted over time. In 2011, in line with its self-perception as an emerging regional power in the Middle East, the Justice and Development Party (AKP, standing for "Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi") under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attempted to capitalize on the Arab Uprisings, presenting itself as the model which the protest movements should follow. With regard to Syria, this meant that Ankara reversed its previously cordial relations with Damascus and called for the Assad regime to be ousted. In line with the same policy, Turkey began funding the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and ended up hosting over three million Syrian refugees. Thus, by late summer 2011, Ankara perceived Syria as the decisive stepping stone for a Turkey-led, neo-Ottoman Middle East. In summer 2012, however, the Syrian-Kurdish YPG gained control over much of Syria's northeast, alerting Erdoğan to the possibility of an autonomous Kurdish region on Turkey's southern border, with strong ties to the PKK ("Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê"). In 2014, the radical jihadist IS rapidly conquered large swathes of Iraq and Syria, including on the Syrian-Turkish border. Finally, in 2015, Russia intervened and the Syrian regime gradually reconquered

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Turkish-supported rebel territories, especially around Aleppo and Idlib.

These war dynamics in Syria, combined with the AKP's decreasing popularity both in the Middle East (e.g., the defeat of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood) and domestically (e.g., the Gezi protests and the fallout with the Gülen movement), led Ankara to a major shift in policy. Rather than pursuing neo-Ottoman, region-wide ambitions through Syria, primarily by using proxies, such as the FSA or various Islamist militias, Turkey pursued three narrower, Syria-centric objectives in later years. The first has been to continuously undermine Kurdish autonomy in Syria as a way to prevent similar developments in Turkey. The second is to halt or slow military advances of the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran as a way for Turkey to gain a place at the negotiation table regarding Syria's political future. The third aims at preventing more Syrian refugees from fleeing to Turkey. To achieve these three strategic goals, Ankara has not fully given up its support of proxies, though it has moved to intervene militarily in Syria a number of times in recent years (e.g., in Jarabulus in 2016; Afrin in 2018; the northeast in 2019; and Idlib in early March 2020). At present, Turkey not only directly controls territories in Kurdish-dominated Afrin and the safe zone between Tall Abyad and Ra's al-'Ayn further east, its troops are also present in other parts of northern Syria, making Turkey directly responsible for the fate of around four million Syrians (Aydıntaşbaş 2020).

Taking these major geo-strategic interests in Syria into account, it is clear that Turkey has not substantially changed its general outlook on the conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ankara still pursues the three aforementioned goals of Kurdish containment, halting Assad's advances, and preventing refugees from fleeing to Turkey. As with Russia, Turkey's large-scale engagement in Syria is thus unlikely to change in the near future, even though the country has also been heavily affected by the pandemic. By 22 June, 2020, the Turkish government had officially reported over 188, 000 cases of the virus and over 4,900 deaths.⁵ Though Turkey is an exporter neither of oil nor gas, the country's economic situation has worsened during the pandemic. Even before COVID-19, Turkey was already suffering from a high budget deficit, a rapidly weakening currency, and low levels of foreign exchange reserves (Asseburg et al. 2020, 6).

The negative economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey has contributed to only minor adjustments of Ankara's positioning in Syria. In Idlib, Erdoğan has an interest in maintaining the ceasefire with Russia that was established on 5 March, 2020. From Turkey's perspective, the current hiatus relieves some of the pressure that internally displaced persons in Idlib put on the Turkish border, as it gives them some respite from the previously heavy bombardments and multiple waves of displacement. At the same time, Turkey has further increased its military posture in Idlib, with currently around 20, 000 troops on the ground in order to prevent any potential future attacks (ICG 2020). In the northeast, Turkey is eager to maintain the safe zone whilst continuing to put pressure on the Kurdish YPG. At the same time, a further military push southward is unlikely in the short term, as it would entail too many risks given the multiple actors involved. Moreover, the domestic economic malaise, partly caused by the pandemic, makes it possible that there will be a partial opening of Turkey towards its more financially-solvent NATO partner states. This was evidenced by Ankara's announcement of a delay in the activation of the S-400 missile system, which it purchased from Russia, much to the chagrin of the US and EU states (Asseburg et al. 2020, 6). In northeast Syria, partial opening of this kind could mean that Turkey will try to make arrangements with US troops and could also involve

a temporary release of direct pressure on the US-allied Kurdish YPG.

In conclusion, even though Turkey has been negatively affected in economic terms by the COVID-19 pandemic, Erdoğan has not changed its three strategic objectives in Syria; namely, to contain Kurds, to halt Assad's advances, and to prevent more refugees from entering Turkey. The last few months have seen only minor adjustments of Turkey's policy in Syria, namely that it is now trying to negotiate with Russia over Idlib and with the US in the northeast.

4. Iran in Syria during COVID-19: Major Interests, Major Adjustments

Iran has been the Assad regime's most important regional supporter in the Syrian war, building on the two countries' special relationship, which goes back to the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. For Tehran, strong ties with, and partial control over, Syria are national security interests. This close alliance with the Syrian regime allows Iran to enjoy direct influence in the Middle East and, consequently, provides a strategic land bridge from Tehran via Baghdad, with its Shi'ite-led government, to Damascus under Assad all the way to Beirut, where its key ally, Hezbollah, plays a dominant role. A strong foothold in Syria also means Iran can play a direct role in the "Palestinian question," which historically has been the central arena of Middle Eastern regional politics. Iran's position in Syria means it can also put military pressure on Israel. These very strong geostrategic interests have meant that the regime under Ayatollah Khamene'i has provided massive financial and military support to Damascus.

In addition to direct cash transfers to the Syrian regime, and the training of its elite units, Iran has typically worked through its proxies on the ground, which include the Lebanese Hezbollah and various other Shi'ite militias with tens of thousands of fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This process has been coordinated since the beginning of the Syrian conflict by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in particular by its longtime head, Qassem Soleimani, who was killed by a US drone on 3 January, 2020. More recently, Iran has become increasingly interested in Syria in economic terms, which is evident in its efforts to gain access to the Mediterranean port of Latakia and the country's telecommunications sector (Bank 2019, 7). Profiting financially from the Syrian war became more urgent for Tehran after the breakdown of the nuclear agreement (JCPOA, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) signed by Iran and the P5+1 (five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) in 2015, following President Trump's unilateral abrogation of the deal in May 2018. Combined with gradually-declining oil and gas prices, the latter move has contributed to a serious economic crisis in Iran.

Given its major geo-strategic interests in Syria, Iran has not altered its overall policy regarding the conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic. The regime in Tehran is still pursuing its overarching objective of safeguarding Assad and ensuring its political and military influence from Iran to Lebanon, via Iraq and Syria. Similar to both Russia and Turkey, Iran's immense interest in Syria is unlikely to change in the short term, even though the country has been hit hard by the pandemic. By 22 June, 2020, the Iranian authorities had officially reported over 207, 000 cases of COVID-19 infections and over 9,700 deaths.⁶ Crucially, being among the world's leading energy exporters,

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Iran has been affected particularly negatively by the plummeting oil and gas prices during March and April 2020. The Islamic Republic was already suffering a massive economic crisis prior to the pandemic, as a result of the reinstatement of US primary and secondary sanctions and the consequent decline of international trade and investment over the past two years, as well as growing reports of corruption among regime elites. This economic malaise was a leading cause of the mass protests that rocked Iran in November 2019, when demonstrations took place all across the country.

Within the context of the conflict dynamics in Syria, the very grave domestic economic situation in Iran suggests Tehran is likely to be forced to undertake major adjustments on the ground, even though it considers the survival of the Syrian regime and its own strong influence in the country as national security interests. At least until the pandemic is under control at home and the economic situation has improved, Iran has to substantially cut its previously large-scale funding in Syria (Asseburg et al. 2020, 5). Regarding the Assad regime, Tehran's earlier plans to acquire major stakes in lucrative economic sectors in Syria, such as natural resources, ports, transportation, and telecommunications, will likely not come to fruition, at least in the short term. Decreasing funding to the Syrian regime might also weaken Tehran's position in the conflict's power structure, in which Russia has recently been comparatively better positioned (Bank 2019, 7). Similarly, Iran has had to cut its spending on salaries and equipment for the various Shi'ite militias operating in Syria. This may mean that the mercenaries from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – many of whom are in Syria with their families – will have to find other sources of income. This process could cause a potential anti-Iranian backlash further down the road. Finally, due to the dwindling availability of money, Iran has had fewer opportunities to buy the loyalty of different local actors in Syria. Accordingly, Iran has had to concentrate on key areas in Syria it deems of particular strategic importance. Rather than operating across the country, Iran has focused its attention in recent months on controlling parts of the Deir al-Zor region east of the Euphrates, especially the border area between eastern Syria and western Iraq, in order to ensure its land bridge from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

To summarize, while Iran's major strategic interests in Syria have not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has nevertheless begun to make major adjustments on the ground, primarily related to cutting financial expenditures considerably. For Iran, the negative economic fallout from the pandemic has been drastic, especially since it has exacerbated an already very dire economic situation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has argued that, in the few months since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has not been a game-changer for conflict dynamics in the Syrian war. For Russia, Turkey, and Iran – the three most influential international actors in the war – the pandemic's effect has mostly pertained to the economic situation at home, rendering massive spending abroad more challenging. Still, given the major strategic interests that all three countries perceive in Syria, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have all remained strongly invested in the conflict, and this investment will likely continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, there have been indications that Iran, more so than Russia and Turkey, has been forced to make major adjustments by cutting its spending in Syria, given its particularly acute domestic economic crisis, which was already serious prior to the pandemic. For the moment, the limited outbreak of COVID-19 in Syria and its indirect

effects on the economies of the three most influential international actors have at least not worsened the situation on the ground in the spring of 2020, though neither have they improved it.

Given the current status of the conflict, European policymakers should focus their short term attention in Syria on humanitarian support and indirect diplomacy. Firstly, EU states should maintain, or – better yet – expand their provision of humanitarian aid and support for healthcare and education inside the country. Since EU states also face their own challenges of coping with the COVID-19 fallout at home, they should prioritize their support to the two regions most in need of external support, namely the northwest and northeast. In Idlib, this would mean finding cross-border arrangements with Turkey and indirectly testing the willingness of HTS to become less hostile to such initiatives (cf. ICG 2020, 27). In the northeast, it would mean re-engaging the Kurdish actors as they particularly suffer from the lack of humanitarian aid centralized by the regime in Damascus.

Secondly, while EU states should not stop their support of the UN-led Geneva process on the constitutional committee for Syria, they should nonetheless concentrate their attention in the near future on other forms of indirect diplomacy. Given Geneva's continued standstill, which is largely due to the lack of interest from the Assad regime and the exclusion of the two most influential Syrian rebel groups, namely the Kurds and HTS, the EU should diplomatically re-engage Russia and Turkey to find more durable solutions to the very fragile 5 March ceasefire in Idlib. Only when the issues of the role of HTS, support for refugees, and border controls are addressed can the fragile ceasefire resist the pressure from Damascus for another offensive, which would likely lead to another humanitarian disaster. If there is opposition to such increased diplomatic involvement from other EU states, Germany should take the lead in this regard and use its EU presidency in the second half of 2020 to push for such an initiative. Though none of these recommendations will substantially alter the emerging "victor's peace" in Syria – and with it the survival of a brutal dictatorship – they might nevertheless contribute to lessening the humanitarian suffering of many Syrians in the short term.

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