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GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES

Fragmentation of Peacemaking in Syria: Reality and Perception

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The Global Transitions Series looks at fragmentations in the global order and how these impact peace and transition settlements. It explores why and how different third-party actors – state, intergovernmental, and non-governmental – intervene in conflicts, and how they see themselves contributing to reduction of conflict and risks of conflict relapse. The series critically assesses the growth and diversification of global and regional responses to contemporary conflicts. It also asks how local actors are navigating this multiplicity of mediators and peacebuilders and how this is shaping conflict outcomes and post-conflict governance.

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Abstract

From its inception, the conflict that has ravaged Syria for more than a decade and caused one of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide was more than just a fight between Syrians for or against President al-Assad's regime. The course of the conflict has always depended on the involvement of external powers that, over the past 10 years, have shaped both fighting on the ground and political and diplomatic outcomes at the negotiating table. After the withdrawal of the majority of US troops from Syria in 2019, Russia, Turkey and Iran became the most prominent countries involved on the ground in Syria, with other external powers playing a relatively secondary and limited role by comparison.

This report finds that an "illiberal peace" is taking hold in Syria. With authoritarian features that impair the participatory liberal peace consensus in favour of conflict resolution methods relying on peace by force, this illiberal peace has offered an alternative framework in which violence has been halted or reduced while political and social grievances have been ignored.

Syrians view foreign powers' interventions as dictated by conflicting political interests, with none of those powers committed to a genuine peace process that addresses people's grievances or the root causes of the conflict. There is a perception among Syrians that the approaches pursued by Russia, Turkey and Iran have succeeded where those of the West have failed, because those countries have been ready to wage war and to engage militarily on the ground—a strategy that the West was reluctant to pursue. As a result of this military engagement, they have become key mediators on the ground. The evolving relationship between Russia and Turkey is a critical dynamic that is shaping future peace prospects in Syria, particularly around the contested nature of the Syrian-Turkish border area, which includes the Kurdish-controlled region in Northeast Syria, and the province of Idlib—the last rebel-controlled province.

With most international attention presently on the war in Ukraine, the quest for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Syria appears more arduous than ever. The war in Ukraine is having a destabilising impact on the potential for peace in Syria. While soaring food and energy prices add further strain to a dire humanitarian situation, the objectives, capacities and approaches of Russia, Iran and Turkey are being affected, with the risk of further impediments to humanitarian access and conflict re-ignition.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The war that has ravaged Syria has drawn in a number of external powers and numerous proxy fighters and militias who, over the past 10 years, have shaped both the conflict on the ground and its political and diplomatic outcomes. Drawing on the latest political analysis, media reports and interviews with national stakeholders and international experts, this report has uncovered some key findings:

- The marginalisation of Western countries, accelerated by the withdrawal of most of US troops in 2019, coupled with the inconsistencies and inability of regional organisations to mediate, have paved the way for Russia, Turkey and Iran to consolidate their influence on the ground and increase their prominence in the management of the conflict. Other external powers are currently playing a relatively secondary and limited role by comparison.

- Russia wants to neutralise American influence and any pro-democracy forces while seeking to consolidate its role as a Middle East power broker; Iran wants to expand its ideological, religious, and cultural influence and aims for greater regional influence and power; and Turkey is involved in the Syrian conflict because it sees it as an opportunity to solve the "Kurdish problem".

- Capitalising on their military engagement, Russia, Turkey and Iran have positioned themselves as mediators, overshadowing peace initiatives by Western powers. In particular, the Astana process—under the leadership of Russia, Turkey and Iran—has supplanted the Geneva process, under UN tutelage. While the latter focused on the political transition in Syria as a condition to reducing violence — which did not materialise — the Astana process was informed by the objectives of defeating the opposition militarily and shifting the negotiations from a political transition to amending the Syrian constitution.

- Through the interventions of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, an "illiberal peace" is taking hold in Syria. The spirals of violence and ethnic strife have been curbed by force, without advancing towards a genuine process of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, where justice and the grievances of ordinary people are addressed as the basis for sustainable peace.

- The evolving relationship between Russia and Turkey is a critical dynamic in shaping future peace prospects in Syria, especially around the contested nature of the Syrian-Turkish border area. However, the differences between the goals and approaches of Russia and Turkey appear to be reconcilable, whereas there is a fundamental contradiction between the Iranians' and the Russians' visions of peace in Syria and the future political system that would guarantee this peace. While Russia's vision revolves around a strong central state with a unified army, Iran favours a Lebanese-style confessional division of power and authority, with local militias acting as its proxies.

- There is a highly polarized range of opinions and perceptions vis-à-vis Russia, Iran and Turkey, which vary by political inclinations. Russia's role and impact in Syria has been broadly welcomed by al-Assad supporters, who tend to prefer secular Russia to the Syrian regime's other key ally, Shiite Iran.

- The war in Ukraine is having destabilising effects on the potential for peace in Syria. While soaring food and energy prices, partly due to the war in Ukraine, are adding further strain to an already grim humanitarian situation, there are also signs that the objectives and capacities of external actors—in particular Russia, Iran and Turkey—are being affected. In particular, Russia's focus on its war efforts in Ukraine is leading to the Syrian government's increased military dependence on Iran, while Turkey—which backs the Syrian opposition—is also gaining greater sway in Syria. A planned new Turkish military incursion in northern Syria which aims to link up areas already under Turkish control would upset the fragile balance between Russia, Turkey and Iran, raising fears that the conflict will reignite in different parts of the country.

- China is a country that could potentially assist with reconstruction efforts in Syria. Given Syria's need for outside capital for its reconstruction and the paucity of economic assistance that traditional allies of the Assad regime can provide, Syrian officials have pointed to a number of infrastructure projects that would fit within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which the Assad regime endorsed in July 2021. However, it is doubtful that China will make significant investments in Syria, given the absence of a comprehensive peace agreement, the impact of international sanctions, and a lack of familiarity with the Syrian context.

Recommendations

- Despite the challenges emanating from the war in Ukraine and its already adverse impacts on the humanitarian and security situation in Syria, Western countries should try to insulate their engagement in Syria from tensions over Ukraine. In particular, there is a need to ensure the implementation of ceasefire arrangements and ensure that Syria does not become the theatre of a proxy war between Russia and NATO.

- All external actors should redouble their efforts that ensure that ongoing UN-sponsored negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition lead to an agreement on a new Syrian constitution.

- An immediate priority for the UN Security Council is maintaining humanitarian access to civilians in need. In this regard, the renewal of UNSCR 2585, extending the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for the delivery of humanitarian aid beyond its current expiry date of 10 July 2022, is particularly crucial.

- The international community, particularly Western countries, should seriously consider the measures needed to prevent a resurgence of ISIS. Most of this has to do with response strategies that move away from a nearly exclusive focus on hard security counter-terror initiatives, and instead promote initiatives aimed at preventing and addressing the root causes for the possible re-emergence of ISIS and other violent groups. These should include: intensifying humanitarian efforts, improving living conditions, and expanding education and peacebuilding activities in internal displacement camps and detention centres. There is also a need to alleviate the burden placed on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) through the repatriation of European nationals currently in AANES detention centres.

- We suggest that a key part of future peace research on Syria should focus on the way Syrians perceive peace and fragmentation, especially in relation to the dominant foreign actors that are engaged in Syria. We see that more in-depth and dedicated research in this direction would be key to better understanding how the fragmentation process prevents a return to peace, and to derive practical suggestions for better coordination of the economic, political, and diplomatic actions of foreign powers.

Introduction

Background

In March 2011, anti-government protests influenced by major uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as social and economic factors, expanded into a full-scale civil war. The ensuing decade-long conflict that has ravaged Syria has caused one of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide. There are estimates that the conflict has killed nearly 600,000 people (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2020), with 13.4 million people throughout the country in need of assistance (United Nations, 2021). 5.6 million Syrians are registered as refugees across North Africa and the Middle East (UNICEF, 2021), while over one million Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees are hosted in Europe (UNHCR, 2021). Cities like Aleppo and Homs are in ruins.

From its inception, the conflict became much more than a fight between Syrians for or against President al-Assad's rule. It has drawn in external powers that, over the past 10 years, have shaped both the conflict on the ground and its political and diplomatic outcomes. Some countries—like Russia and Iran—have sided with the al-Assad regime, while others—like the US, France, UK, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey—have opposed the rule of al-Assad and backed, to varying degrees, Syrian opposition forces. Extremist jihadist organisations, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group and al-Qaeda, also emerged as significant conflict actors, reshuffling the cards of power, reshaping borders, and holding about one third of Syrian territory from 2013 to 2018 (Glenn et al., 2019). Countering the rise of ISIS was the only common goal unifying, since 2014, the international community's efforts on Syria, with a very large multinational coalition mobilized to counter-attack ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which led five years later to the destruction of the self-proclaimed "caliphate" (Lister, 2020).

No other conflict in contemporary history has seen such a large influx of foreign forces from so many different countries as the Syrian conflict. In addition to American, Russian, Turkish and Iranian military personnel, fighters from numerous other countries also joined the fight.

Over the course of the conflict, the role and impact of Western and Arab countries has become secondary and limited compared to the engagement of Russia, Turkey and Iran, which are currently the most prominent countries involved on the ground. In September 2015, Russia, which had previously supported the Syrian regime politically and operationally with weapons supplies, intervened militarily on behalf of President al-Assad, shifting the conflict in the regime's favour. Iran's influence in the conflict gradually increased thanks to the support of local and foreign militias, in particular the Lebanese Hezbollah, whose collaboration and strategic coordination on the battlefield with Russia and Iran was crucial to the preservation of the Syrian regime (Khouri, 2018). At the outbreak of the conflict, Turkey became involved politically by calling for regime change in Syria, then militarily by arming rebel groups, while also playing a critical role in the ensuing refugee crisis by hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the war. Since 2016, Turkey has conducted large-scale military operations along the northern border of Syria, capturing territory mainly to prevent Syrian Kurdish forces from controlling border regions.

At the time of writing, the Syrian regime and its allied militias control roughly sixty-three percent of Syria's territory (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2020), while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control fifteen point seven percent (ibid) and Turkey and its proxy factions have control over areas that comprise about five percent of Syria (ibid). Additionally, within this timeframe, the conflict has reached a stalemate, with a significant reduction of the overall level of armed violence and no direct armed confrontations currently taking place. Each prominent external actor has chosen its area of military control and influence, accentuating the territorial, political and social fragmentation of the country and stalling the prospects for a comprehensive peace. Such a fragile equilibrium of forces may be broken if Turkey, or other key actors on the ground, decide to use military means to advance their political goals.

Since 2014, political negotiations between the government and opposition delegations at UN-sponsored Geneva peace talks have failed to produce a resolution to the Syrian conflict. Since early 2017, Iran, Russia, and Turkey have held separate political negotiations in Kazakhstan's capital Astana (the so-called "Astana process") outside of UN auspices. Following the withdrawal of American troops in 2019, the Astana process has overshadowed the UN-backed Geneva process, thus providing a test case for illiberal non-Western actors' efforts to coordinate their actions and secure a reduction—albeit a fragile one—of armed violence.

The third section will discuss the military engagement, partial withdrawal, and marginalisation of Western countries; following this is an investigation of mediation attempts by regional organisations and the UN; later, the paper will examine the military involvement and "peacemaking" initiatives by Russia, Iran and Turkey, followed by a review of key perceptions and insights on peacemaking from interviews with Syrian and international experts. China's role as a potential rebuilder will be discussed in the penultimate section while the last piece of discussion offers some final conclusions and recommendations.

Methodology

This report uses a mixed methodology. We relied on a variety of secondary sources, including the latest political analysis on Syria and media reports, as well as primary data acquired through five semi-structured interviews, with a cross section of national stakeholders and international experts — one independent Syrian journalist, one former Syrian politician, one Syrian scholar, one international expert on Syria and one senior UN consultant focusing on Middle Eastern Affairs. The interviews concentrated on how local actors and Western policy experts perceive the current role and impact of the most prominent countries involved on the ground in Syria—namely Russia, Turkey and Iran. The role of China in Syria, although secondary and limited by comparison, was also discussed, because the country is proposing an alternative approach for stabilisation and potential reconstruction. The data collected was used to update and complement ongoing day-to-day discussions by the leading author with professional networks in Syria spanning government and military authorities, civil society, and local communities. To stimulate free and candid discussions and to protect confidentiality, and in line with the approved ethics protocols of the project, the names of some of the interviewees and their institutions have been withheld.

Military Engagement, Partial Withdrawal, and Marginalisation of the West

Since the start of the civil war in Syria the military engagement of the United States, other Western countries, and their regional allies all undertook different phases that impacted the evolution of the conflict on the ground and the diplomatic prospects for a peace agreement. In the wake of a significant deterioration of the security situation in Syria and Iraq, with the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit falling into ISIS's hands, the United States launched Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in 2014. The operation, which was led by the United States Army Central Command (ARCENT), saw the participation of military forces and personnel from over 30 countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Jordan, Turkey, Canada, Australia, who focused efforts on degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS and the al-Nusra Front (ARCENT, 2022).

By the end of 2018, ISIS dominion had largely been eliminated in Iraq and Syria. In December 2018, as he declared victory over ISIS, US President Donald Trump unilaterally ordered the withdrawal of American ground troops in Syria, sparking concerns that ISIS might regain strength and that this would diminish US influence in Syria and across the region (Starr, Browne & Gaouette, 2018). With mounting concerns over a potential power vacuum, the U.S. announced on 22 February 2019 that instead of a total withdrawal, a small contingency force would remain garrisoned in Syria for a period of time, and that their withdrawal would be gradual and conditions-based (Reuters, 2019). Later, in October 2019, the US administration ordered American troops to withdraw from Northeastern Syria, where the United States had been supporting their Kurdish allies (BBC, 2019).

The withdrawal of most US troops from Syria in 2019 marked a significant turning point for Western engagement in Syria; Russia, Iran, Turkey and the Syrian regime all stood to gain from it. The Syrian regime benefited from the recasting of alliances. Feeling betrayed by its US ally, Syria's Kurds—despite facing a weaker hand in negotiations with al-Assad—asked the Syrian government for protection in order to repel likely attacks by Turkish armed forces. Turkey also benefited, as the US withdrawal from Syria's north paved the way for a long-threatened Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria, which took place in October 2019 (McKernan, Borger & Sabbagh, 2019). With no peace agreement in sight, the US drawdown provided conditions for Russia to entrench its position as power broker in any eventual Syrian peace. The US' loss of credibility and trust in the region also empowered Iran, which is hungry for more influence in the region and is ready to fill any void left by Ukraine-bound Russian military personnel (Arab News, 2022; Adar et al., 2022).

There is a general perception among Syrian experts that the US and other Western countries, with their low "casualty tolerance" and fewer policy levers, have lost the battle in Syria (Interview 2). Conversely, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been ready to wage war and to engage in a way that the West does not wish to — that is, on the ground (Interview 1). As one respondent stated, "being directly involved militarily on the ground gives the Russians, the Iranians and the Turks a real influence on the local political process. No peace initiative can take place without prior negotiations with these powers and without their direct approval" (Interview 2). The same respondent argues that with no military weight on the ground, Western governments' influence has become marginal (ibid). However, the military commitment of non-Western countries is also not absolute. One former Syrian politician discusses the different commitments in detail and argues that "The Turks only commit their soldiers against the Kurds. Apart from that, they are content to support the Syrian rebellion and to offer it a base for withdrawal. The Russians take very few risks: to minimise their losses, they only engage their air force; on the ground, they use mercenaries. The Iranians also use Shiite militias. Only the Lebanese Hezbollah have fully committed their troops to the fighting and have consequently suffered severe losses" (ibid).

The abrupt and confusing withdrawal of most of US troops in 2019 accelerated the marginalisation of Western countries, paving the way for Russia, Turkey and Iran to consolidate their influence on the ground and increase their prominence in the management of the Syrian conflict.

The Inability of Regional Organisations and the UN to Mediate

According to one respondent, Arab states, too, "have recognized in a rather fatalistic way that they have lost the war in Syria" (Interview 4). Throughout the conflict, mediation by both the UN and regional organizations has proved ineffective. At the beginning of the civil war, the Arab League was at the forefront of conflict management efforts, dispatching its Secretary General, Nabil al-Arabi, on mediation missions to Syria in 2011 and 2012, missions that resulted in meetings with President al-Assad, discussions with opposition delegations and consultations with countries in the region (Lundgren, 2016). Such efforts brought about an "Arab Action Plan", which called for the cessation of violence, the withdrawal of military equipment, the start of a national dialogue, and a monitoring mission with civilian and military observers (ibid). However, after its initial involvement, the Arab League then gradually disengaged because of the Syrian government's mistrust of the League, as well as internal divisions and polarisation among Arab League members (Interview 4). Syria was suspended from the Arab League in 2011 and then, in January 2012, the Arab League halted its controversial monitoring mission in Syria. Since then, regional countries have been divided on whether to engage with the Syrian regime or continue a policy of isolation (Maher et al., 2021).

At the outset of the Syrian conflict, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries sided with the opposition, adopting a common stance aimed at isolating the Syrian regime economically and politically. However, one respondent noted that in the following years, the GCC's policies lacked a solid plan and became chaotic (Interview 1), while it was discovered that "money from regime dignitaries, including the al-Assad family, was flowing into GCC banks and investment funds (for example, those of regime-linked businessman Mohamad Hamsho, or Boshra al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's sister)" (ibid). Only the Qataris—argues the interviewee—have shown some consistency in their approach by seeking cooperation with Turkey (ibid) and later mediating with Iran (Bianco, 2020).

The inconsistent GCC's strategy—in the opinion of the same respondent—stems from the fact that Saudi Arabia has not played its traditional leading role within the GCC. The ruling family's internal conflicts and the country's involvement in the war in Yemen have resulted in deep contradictions in the GCC's policy and engagement in Syria, and fostered the GCC's "credibility deficit" among Syrian Islamist groups. The same interviewee argues that "by financing many groups, the Gulf countries have generated corruption, as well as a strong competition for funding, within the Syrian opposition. Islamist groups have accused each other of stealing money from the Gulf countries that was intended for them" (Interview 1). Recent analysis further highlights the drawbacks of the Gulf countries' "cheque-book diplomacy", as well as the absence of a long-term strategy and a systematic approach to peacemaking after the Arab Spring (Freer, 2022).

Another respondent argues that there is no longer any regional organization that is active in Syria (Interview 5). However, there are signs that the Arab League is currently trying to regain a role in the Syrian peace process (interview 4). Algeria, which hosted the last League's summit in March 2022, pushed, along with Bahrain, for the participation of Syria in the summit (ibid). Moreover, it appears that Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two heavyweights of Arab politics, want to rehabilitate the Syrian regime (Ziadeh, 2021). Similarly, the UAE is seen as pursuing a policy of normalization of relations with the Assad regime (Freer, 2022).

The inability of regional organisations to mediate in the conflict and stop the war was followed by repeated mediation attempts by the United Nations, attempts that also failed to produce any longstanding conflict resolution agreement. The February 2012 appointment of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as UN mediator in Syria brought hopes of progress towards a common approach to the resolution of the conflict. After Annan drafted a six-point plan for a supervised truce, the Security Council adopted two resolutions endorsing Annan's plan and establishing a UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) (UNSC, 2012). Annan formed the Action Group for Syria, a group of stakeholders with interests and influence in Syria, which included representatives from the UN, Arab League, EU, and foreign ministers from the UNSC and several stakeholders in the Middle East. The group, which laid out the guidelines for a peace process, convened in Geneva for the first time on 30 June 2012 (UN, 2012). However, irreconcilable international differences, especially between Russia and the US over al-Assad's role in any future political process, led Annan to resign his mission in August 2012 (Cranna, 2020; Lundgren, 2016).

After the failure of Annan's initiatives, the chief UN mediator became Lakhdar Brahimi, a former Foreign Minister of Algeria with experience in mediation in several conflicts, who served as the United Nations and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria until May 2014. Despite his "more cautious and consultative approach" (Lundgren, 2016) and the success of bringing back the conflict parties to the negotiating table—the so-callled Geneva II process—in 2014, the UN process once again stalled.

Under a new Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and following new developments on the battlefield—including the rise of ISIS, Russia's direct military intervention in Syria and less acrimonious US-Russia relations—a re-energised diplomatic push in 2015 led to a new Security Council resolution demanding, amongst other things, that all parties cease attacks against civilian targets and called for a political process establishing "a credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance" (UNSC, 2015). This was followed by encouraging progress, such as a nation-wide ceasefire that started in February 2016 and a UN Special Envoy's Paper on Points of Commonalities of 24 March 2016, which listed points of convergence between the warring parties on their visions regarding a future Syrian state (UN, 2016). However, as had previously occurred, divergent views on the future role of al-Assad proved to be a stumbling block, while there were repeated violations of the agreed ceasefire, especially in and around the city of Aleppo (Lundgren, 2016). In the following years, the UN Geneva-based negotiations continued as part of the so-called Geneva process, which focussed on key items of UN Security Council Resolution 2254: a transitional governing body, the drafting of a new constitution and UN-supervised parliamentary and presidential elections. These intra-Syrian talks failed, however, to make any substantial progress because the Syrian government representatives wanted to focus discussions on counterterrorism, while the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), an umbrella body representing the Syrian opposition, wanted to prioritise the issue of political transition (Lundgren, 2019). Ultimately, the Syrian regime opposed any concession threatening the power of President al-Assad (Hiltermann, 2018). In November 2018, with no sign of a breakthrough, Staffan de Mistura stepped down. Since January 2019, a new Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, has been leading the UN's efforts to implement UN Security Council resolution 2254.

The UN's failed attempts to deliver a viable peace process in Syria are reflected in global media perceptions of the UN interventions in Syria. Recent analysis using GDELT—a Google-based database of coded global news stories—shows that over a nearly seven-year period (from January 2015 to November 2021) in-country and global media perceptions of the UN in peace-related activities in Syria had quite a negative sentiment. This was true across English and Arabic news sources, and across news sources both inside and outside Syria (Gardner & Bell, 2022). Although further research is needed to determine if the negative perceptions indicate a poor opinion of the UN, the data collected shows that mentions of the UN engagement in Syria occur in stories that are mainly negative (ibid).

As examined in the section below, against the backdrop of a sluggish UN peace process (Bibbo, 2022) and the inability of regional bodies to mediate, a separate negotiation track, the Astana process, with partly different participants, would add further complexities to an already intricate peace process.

Military and Diplomatic Involvement by Russia, Iran and Turkey

Among the many international actors pursuing different objectives in the Syrian conflict, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been able to consolidate their influence and impact on the ground, filling the void left by the US' and other Western countries' baffling strategies and partial disengagement, and the ineffectual diplomatic interventions by regional organisations and the UN.

Interests and priorities

Interviewees do not view the interventions of non-Western actors in Syria as specifically aimed at making or building peace, or at addressing the root causes of the conflict (Interview 2). External interventions are seen as dictated by existing rivalries as well as the national objectives and the strategic interests of external powers (Interview 1) that are taking advantage of the fragmentation of Syria to fulfil their ambitions of strengthening their regional and global power (Interview 2). By doing so, they are undermining genuine peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts (Interview 1).

Currently, for Russia and Iran, the key priority is preserving the Syrian regime—or even strengthening it—by extending the regime's power into the regions it does not currently control, especially the province of Idlib and the Northeast of the country. Russia and Iran consider these areas to be occupied zones and, for them, "good governance" means restoring the regime's authority and driving out other foreign forces, and a "stable institution" means strengthening the existing state institutions of the al-Assad regime, which they view as the only legitimate authority in the country. One interviewee argues that "Rule of law and accountability is not a vocabulary that is used by the Russians or the Iranians" (Interview 1).

Russia wants to maintain an authoritarian system with controlled pluralism, which would result in there being no democratic style of opposition. To be perceived as legitimate, any opposition group must exist under the regime's umbrella. While in the Western concept of peacebuilding, there are initiatives that relate to and emanate from civil society, for Russia—notes one respondent—there is no such thing as civil society playing any substantial role in a peace process (Interview 1). That is why, he concludes, "We have never heard of the Russians committing funding to rural areas, or to projects targeting women or youth, children, or NGOs. This is a Western way of doing things that the Russians do not do" (ibid).

Iran differs from Russia in that it is very involved in social initiatives. One interviewee asserts that this involvement is intended to expand Iranian Shiite ideological and religious influence wherever it finds locals who agree with this ideological project (Interview 2). They want the local population to learn Farsi and become familiar with Iranian cultural codes (ibid). The Iranians have the distinctiveness of not favoring any of the interests of the other external actors present (American, Russian, Turkish), even indirectly. They favor the regime, but only as an indirect means to serve their ideological project in Syrian society (Interview 1).

Turkey aims for deep political reforms in Syria, both at the local level and the national level. Turkish officials have repeatedly stated that it is necessary to introduce democratic governance so that the opposition participates in, and shares power with, the current regime. Turkey is also active in educational activities in the areas under its control or influence. For instance, the Turkish Gaziantep University has opened faculties in the governorate of Idlib, in Jarablus and Tal al-abyad (Drevon, 2021; Interview 4; al-Khateb, 2019). Moreover, Turkey has set up offices of its Turkish Post, the national telecommunications and telephone company, in the so called "liberated area" in Afrin in 2018. It funded the construction of a new hospital the same year in al-Bab, and, in 2019, it announced plans for a multi-billion housing project in northeast Syria to settle up to one million Syrian refugees in a "safe zone" (Reuters, 2019).

Meeting objectives

Russia has been able to achieve its objectives: ensuring the survival of al-Assad's regime and securing a prominent role for itself in the management of the Syrian conflict. The deployment of Russian military forces in September 2015 became a turning point for President al-Assad's regime. Particularly crucial was the use of the Russian air force to provide cover to Syrian troops on the ground, to support counter-offensives, and to destroy and degrade opposition ground forces (Jones, 2020). By 2021, the opposition forces challenging President al-Assad's regime had largely been defeated, with rebel forces only retaining the northern province of Idlib and the eastern border town of al-Tanf, while the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) was forced by the end of US support to reach an accommodation with the regime in Damascus, which was in line with Russia's grand strategy.

Russia has influenced the war in ways that have gone far beyond its military intervention. Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, Russia has used its diplomatic power, in particular its veto at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to protect the al-Assad regime from international condemnation, harsher sanctions, and military intervention, undermining Western and regional powers' efforts to remove President al-Assad from power (Phillips, 2019). Economically, Russia has helped Syria circumvent Western sanctions and provided credit for arms purchases (ibid). Since 2016, Russia has used humanitarian and development aid as a strategic tool to enhance its conflict management mechanisms (Dieckhoff, 2020). This was particularly evident in 2020, when Russia attempted to reduce cross-border UN aid flow to rebel-held areas while reinforcing its own and the Syrian government control of humanitarian assistance (Alhaji & Al-Lama, 2020). Russia has also developed its own aid network inside Syria, managed by the Russian military's Centre for Reconciliation of Conflicting Sides in Syria (CRCSS). Recent analysis suggests, however, that Russia's distribution of aid has aimed primarily "to buy loyalty and showcase its soft power" (Sosnowski & Robinson, 2020). Alongside the CRCSS, at least twenty-five other Russian entities, mostly religious organizations or state-linked NGOs, are also reportedly active in Syria, creating "a shadow aid system" that is part of Russia's wider mechanism of conflict management (Robinson, 2020).

The depth of Russia's involvement in Syria has significantly enhanced its role and influence as "the conflict's key international broker" (Phillips, 2019). No future peace plan for Syria can be negotiated which does not start with Russia, and none has a reasonable chance of success without Russia's approval. As will be discussed below, Russia initiated its own mediation, the Astana process, outside UN auspices, presenting al-Assad's continued rule as a "fait accompli". While Russia's role in Syria is likely to remain substantial, due to the war in Ukraine, Russia currently faces the challenge of preserving its accomplishments, while also adapting its engagement to reduced capabilities (Adar et al, 2022).

Turkey cannot claim full victory in Syria because it did not succeed in removing President al-Assad from power. However, it has weakened the Syrian Kurds and, like Russia, it has reaffirmed for itself a strategic role in any future deal to end the Syrian civil war through its military interventions. Turkey's engagement is also seen to have "equipped Turkey with new tools for conducting a more aggressive, nationalistic foreign policy", boosting its image and international role (Siccardi, 2021). Over the years, Turkey has readapted its role and tactics. When it decided to call for al-Assad's removal in 2011, it gave a major boost to the rebels. It hosted a large part of Syrian refugees (almost four million to date), sponsored political opposition groups, and facilitated the arming of numerous rebel groups, believing in the imminent fall of al-Assad and gearing for a future pro-Turkey government. However, with the US shifting its stance and Russian military intervention in 2015, Turkey re-adjusted its priorities, still calling for al-Assad's departure, but focussing mainly on the security situation on its southern border (Kösebalaban, 2020). Preventing the collapse of Idlib province and containing Kurdish militias became Turkey's new priorities.

Turkey's intransigence on the Kurds has weakened the opposition front. In particular, Turkey insisted that as an affiliate of the banned Turkish Kurdish PKK separatists, the Syrian Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - PYD) be excluded from talks with Syrian opposition groups (Khayrallah, 2021). This led the PYD to pursue its own goal of Kurdish autonomy rather than working together with the main rebel groups. To Ankara's alarm, two PYD militias, the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), trained and armed by the PKK, emerged as the most powerful Kurdish fighters and soon dominated eastern Syria (Drevon & Haenni, 2021). Further worries came when in 2014 the US decided to arm the YPG to fight ISIS, helping it forge the broader Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with some Arab fighters. With the IS pushed back, Ankara faced the prospect of a US-supported PYD-dominated government all along its southern border. To prevent this, it has launched three military incursions into Syria since 2016. One international expert sees the military weight of Turkey and Russia in the war in Syria to be equivalent (Drevon, 2021). One expert succinctly summed up Turkey's current strategic position: "Turkey now has control of the air thanks to drones. It can destroy the regime's forces on the ground, if it wishes. This is why Turkey does not need fighter jets for the moment. With drones, it is already achieving its goals at a low cost" (ibid).

A protracted war in Ukraine is potentially playing out to Turkey's advantage in Syria, especially if that results in weakening Russia's military engagement in Syria and the opening up of new diplomatic (Adar et al., 2022) and military opportunities. However, Turkey also has to contend with preserving the delicate balance with Russia, Iran and NATO, which has come under increased strain following Turkey's announced plans in May 2022 to launch a new military incursion into Syria to expand "safe zones" already set up across Turkey's southern borders (Al Jazeera, 2022; Butler, Spicer & Gebeily, 2022). The planned incursion has generated a debate about whether the new military operation will be part of a deal between Turkey and NATO to decrease the western alliance's support for Syrian Kurdish militants in exchange for Turkey reducing its objections on the enlargement goals of the organization, in particular the admission of Finland and Sweden as new members (Tokyay, 2022).

Iran's involvement in Syria's civil war has been significant and that involvement has helped it accomplish its objectives in the wider region. When the conflict started, Iran saw the preservation of al-Assad regime as both a historical duty to a long-term ally and a strategic necessity to preserve a key link with its allies in Lebanon and Iraq (Steinberg, 2021). Alongside Russia, Iran helped turn the tide of the war decisively in President Assad's favour, by providing vital economic and military support, mainly heavily discounted oil and supplies of weapons (Hatahet, 2019). Most importantly, Iran deployed thousands of Shia Muslim militiamen, mostly from Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, but also from Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen, to fight alongside the Syrian army. Iran has established a far deeper presence in Syria than it had prior to 2011. The war in Ukraine is likely to increase al-Assad's dependence on Iran. With Russia having to contend with the war in Ukraine, the Syrian regime will continue to need Iran's support on the ground to fill any gaps left by a Russian drawdown (Arab News, 2022). As a sign of continued Iranian prominence in Syria, recent media reports suggest that Iran is sending more military personnel to Syria (ibid), while also intensifying its political, diplomatic and economic activities (Adar et al., 2022).

At the international diplomatic level, the main achievement by Russia, Turkey and Iran has been setting up a new mediation process that allowed them and the Syrian government to redesign peacemaking initiatives in their favour. Since the beginning of the civil war, Russia's dissatisfaction with lack of progress by UN peace initiatives led it to seek more effective parallel diplomatic tracks (Lundgren, 2019). However, it was only in late 2016 that the Astana process emerged with Russia and Turkey negotiating a ceasefire proposal. It then acquired a more political role with the launching of the "Astana talks" in January 2017.

While the Geneva process focused on the political transition, and failed to curb the spiral of violence and ethnic strife, the Astana process is an unconventional form of "sponsored negotiation, where the sponsors are also parties to the conflict" (Lundgren, 2019). These sponsors hold significant influence over key actors on the ground; Russia over the Syrian government; Iran over Shiite militias and the Syrian government, and Turkey over a range of opposition groups. The "power politics" rationale of the process is reflected in the composition of participants. Compared to the Geneva talks, the Astana process has shown some signs of greater "inclusiveness", with the wider participation of opposition power actors, including Salafist groups (Lundgren, 2019), although the Kurdish-dominated SDF were not invited due to Turkey's objections. The focus of the talks moved from initial objectives that were rather limited in scope — shoring up local ceasefires and establishing four "de-escalation zones" across the country — to a more ambitious conflict resolution agenda involving the redrafting of the Syrian constitution, an issue on which the Geneva and Astana processes have overlapped since 2018 (Tziarras, 2022; Lundgren, 2019). A Russian-sponsored conference held in Sochi in January 2018, in which the UN participated, agreed to form a 150-member committee to draft a new constitution. The committee was very slow in beginning its work, mainly because of disagreements about its members. Eventually the committee, which consisted of a large body of 150 men and women — fifty nominated by the Government, fifty nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and fifty representatives of civil society — and a small body of forty-five men and women — fifteen nominated by the Government, fifteen nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and fifteen representatives of civil society — was launched on 30 October 2019 in Geneva (OSES, 2022). After eight rounds of talks in two and a half years, an agreement on a new constitution has yet to be reached.

On balance, although the Astana process has contributed to imposing and holding a ceasefire between the Syrian army and rebel groups and a reduction—albeit fragile—of armed violence, it has favoured the Syrian regime's interests (Abboud, 2021). It created de-escalation zones that gave the government the opportunity and time to revise its strategies and priorities, concentrate its forces to different front lines and eventually achieve a military turnaround, including its ability to retake from the opposition groups three out of the four de-escalation zones. Moreover, it downgraded the influence of Western powers and it shifted diplomatic efforts from political transition to constitutional reform. In the view of one interviewee, the Astana process has not achieved a lasting peace in Syria, because the powers involved "see peace as a balance of power and territorial military control and are only proposing precarious ceasefires" (Interview 2).

Different visions

Syria has been one of the theatres in which the complex and, at times, conflictual relationship between Russia and Turkey has unfolded (Siccardi, 2021). Turkish-Russian relations continue to be characterized by conflicting interests, but, currently, the differences between Russia and Turkey in Syria are not irreconcilable: for Russia, the top priority is the survival of al-Assad's regime at any cost, while Turkey prioritises weakening, if not destroying, the Syrian Kurds (Interview 1). A new "modus vivendi" between Russia and Turkey, informed by some cooperative approaches, has been facilitated by the evolving relations between the two countries and Turkey's strategic realignment towards Russia (Dalay, 2021). For President Putin, Turkey's distance from the West is particularly welcome. The fact that they agree on how to handle the Syrian conflict is in Russia's national interest, because it is Turkish control of the Bosporus Strait that guarantees uninterrupted Russian access to the Mediterranean and its military bases in Syria. There are also economic links between the two countries, including a gas pipeline to Europe that passes through Turkish territory, as well as important Turkish agriculture exports to Russia (Erşen & Köstem, 2020). Neither Russia, nor Turkey want a Kurdish state and they both dislike the American presence in Syria and US support for the Syrian Kurds. While Western countries are not hostile to the creation of a Kurdish state or province, Turkey will do everything in its power to ensure that such a project will never be realized. Finally, Russia and Turkey have the authoritarianism of their leaders in common. However, one analysis suggests that Turkey does have an advantage over Russia through its ability to rely on Qatari funding to strengthen its presence in the northern part of Syria, support the opposition, and facilitate the reconstruction of civilian infrastructure, which represent economic resources that Russia lacks (Battaloglu, 2021).

There are more marked differences between the Russian and the Iranian visions of peace and stability in Syria, and the political system that would guarantee them (Interview 1). According to one interviewee, the Russians show a "a macro-institutional mindset"(Interview 4), as their vision for peace revolves around a strong central state, with a unified army as the centrepiece of state power. He cites as support for this the fact that Russia wants to reintegrate into the army all the officers who had previously defected to the various rebel movements (ibid). This interviewee then describes the approach of the Iranians as "micro-territorial"(ibid) because it relies on the use of local militias and the lebanese Hezbollah as a proxy military actor (ibid). Iran's vision of governance—according to another interviewee—is the Lebanese-style model with a confessional division of power (Interview 1). Syria is a heterogeneous country, both in religious and ethnic terms, and Iran would like to see it function through a system whereby power is distributed among the different religious communities. According to such model—argues the respondent—the army would coexist with militias that, like the Hezbollah in Lebanon, are more powerful than the national army. In this view, "if the Russians leave Syria, the Iranians will occupy the vacant ground, and if the Russians maintain their presence, which is very likely, the Iranians cannot be satisfied". That is why—concludes the interviewee—"the Russians are not bothered by, or even encourage, the regular bombing in Syria by the Israeli army against Iranian military targets in Syria" (ibid). These views suggest that there is barely any scope for compromise between the Russian and Iranian visions of a future Syria.

Perceptions of Peacemaking Interventions

Views on non-Western approaches to peacemaking

Interviewees stated that for non-Western powers involved in Syria, peacemaking is foremost a military issue (Interview 5; Drevon, 2021). They argue that peacemaking in Syria is about strengthening the military prowess of the side one power supports. For armed opposition groups, resilience is the ability to defend themselves. Resilience for the regime is the ability to maintain control over conquered territory. Russia supports the Syrian regime in this sense. It allows it to be "resilient" (ibid). One interviewee notes that non-Western powers in Syria "do not aim for peace, but for appeasement. In the end, it is not a question of peace, but rather of "reconciliation agreements" that are based on local capitulations of opposition groups to the Syrian regime" (Interview 4).

Extrapolating from Western and non-Western approaches to making peace in Syria, one international expert concludes that although Western countries pretend to be different, they in fact have the same paramount objective: to preserve their national interests (Drevon, 2021). This expert argues that the terminology and the discourse of the West is different and is oriented towards the construction of civil society, the building of a political alternative against religious or other extremisms. But in the end, national interests have primacy and the only levers to promote such interests are military in nature (ibid).

In the eyes of another interviewee, "The West has never succeeded in getting armed groups in Syria to be pro-France or pro-Great Britain. Only the Americans have managed to get the Kurds to pledge allegiance to them with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)" (ibid). But the US experience shows that funding groups is not the same as controlling them; despite spending almost one billion US dollars in aid to opposition groups in Syria, the US has almost nothing to show for it (Drevon & Haenni, 2021). Turkey, instead, is seen as better able to manage armed groups. By paying salaries and offering weapons and training, Turkey has secured the allegiance of groups that are fully politically aligned with its government and are openly pro-Turkey (ibid) (Drevon, 2021). According to this view, the strategic interests of the opposition groups in Idlib and those of Turkey are aligned because the overall situation in Syria and the region favours the alignment of these interests (ibid). There is a form of ideological and strategic proximity between Turkey and the armed opposition groups in their vision of the region and Syria's place in the region.

However, the support of local actors is not limitless. Despite its popularity in the areas controlled by the Syrian armed opposition, when Turkey requested that Syrian armed groups send their fighters to Libya, the demand was met with resistance (ibid). In another example, Turkey requested a local group (Ahrar al Sham) participate in the Astana process, which was part of Turkey's political objectives. However, the group's "majless al shura" (Advisory Council) objected to this request and the group ultimately did not take part in the Astana talks (ibid). Therefore, even if Turkey pays the salaries of Syrian fighters, it sometimes fails to impose its objectives and strategic decisions (ibid). In this sense, the term "proxy" is considered by one interviewee to be "analytically inadequate because it assumes that the donor pays and the recipient performs, while the reality may be different" (ibid).

Interviews with local stakeholders also tried to elicit views on international mediation efforts, especially the initiatives supported by the Geneva and Astana processes. According to one respondent, beyond the diverging and converging interests and approaches of different, external actors, it remains that the "UN process ('Geneva peace talks') could not succeed because of the military asymmetry on the Syrian ground" (Interview 4). Russia and Turkey managed to reinforce this asymmetry by extending it into the political and diplomatic arena.

One interviewee laments that the Astana talks are not a peace process, because they do not have a genuine peace and conflict resolution aim (Interview 2). However, the Astana process is useful for non-Western powers because it assists them in managing their divergent ambitions and in avoiding any open confrontation (Belhadj, 2021). This is an important issue, as one interviewee explains, "because if Russia, Turkey and Iran get into a confrontation, they would risk losing the ground advantage that they have gained over the West in Syria" (Interview 2). Another respondent concurs with this view and sees the Astana process as a forum for Turkey and Russia to establish the limits of their respective interventions in the Syrian conflict, "a form of coordination, of management of their rivalry and their divergent interests" (Drevon, 2021). A different respondent also highlights Russia's interest in promoting a political and diplomatic process that runs parallel to its military engagement in Syria, although it soon became clear that the benefits of the Astana talks for the non-Western actors engaged in Syria would not be diplomatic, but military and strategic (Interview 4). In fact "the discussions and negotiations ended up focussing on the military aspects on the ground and on Russian and Turkish interests on Syrian soil and in the region in general" (ibid), rather than seeking a comprehensive peace agreement.

A more divided society, territory and politics

In the view of the interviewees, Syria is completely fractured: "there is a Turkish Syria, a Russian Syria, and an Iranian Syria" (Interview 1). The Syrians do not have a unified opposition and a national political framework, since international negotiations have failed to create this framework. An approximate unified Syrian opposition exists outside of Syria, but it has no power and no influence, as exemplified by the fact that local groups do not act at all according to what the external opposition demands (Belhadj & Ruiz de Elvira, 2018). Instead, local actors are content to negotiate with the dominant external power in their area. This dynamic is unlikely to change in the short term, because no local Syrian opposition group has a strong and functional political, social, or, especially, service and administrative infrastructure to completely control their territory and negotiate in the name of the Syrian people (Hinnebusch, 2020). In the end, the only actor in Syria that can credibly claim to contest the ambitions and agendas of the external actors is the Syrian regime and that is why it has such a strong advantage over all local Syrian opposition actors.

The current situation, with a Syrian society divided religiously, communally, and territorially, is not completely new and is not merely a result of the war. Before the war, Syria was not united. As one interviewee explains, "Syrians from Latakia, Deir al-zor, Hassaka or Bosra, were very different, exotic to each other. They didn't know each other well and they couldn't talk to each other freely. It was dangerous to talk about the Druze, the Alaouites, the Kurds of Hassaka, and about religion in general. Syrians were not allowed to talk about them because they would immediately be labelled as 'ta'ifi', i.e. sectarian, a red line for the regime" (Interview 2). Through its conduct during the war, the regime has further exacerbated the communal and territorial divisions that already existed before 2011. Given this legacy, "peace in Syria would probably mean an end to the fighting and a return to a situation where society is divided, although not to the extreme extent of today" (ibid).

In such a divided society, there is unsurprisingly a highly polarized range of opinions and perceptions vis-à-vis external actors, opinions and perceptions that vary by the political inclinations of the perceiver. Russia's role and impact in Syria wins largely positive popular reviews among al-Assad supporters, who tend to prefer secular Russia to the regime's other key ally, Shiite Iran. According to one respondent, Russia's engagement has helped to bring the conflicting domestic Syrian parties to the negotiating table, so as to discuss the conditions for a ceasefire and prepare the political transition (Interview 1). No future peace plan for Syria can be negotiated without Russia, because it is "a counter force in the Syrian war with (…) an equivalent military weight to Turkey" (Drevon, 2021). One former Syrian politician argues that "Syrians have a closeness with the Russians. Many Syrians have married Russians, especially the Syrian elite. Many have studied in Russia. But the extent of the destruction in Aleppo and the ferocity of Russian bombings has alienated Russia from many Syrians" (Interview 2).

Turkey is popular in the areas controlled by the Syrian armed opposition. In Idlib, the local population only knows Russia through bombardments, so they have no concrete relationship with Russia, apart from the war from the air. Russia has no involvement, for example, in the pressing daily issues of food and electricity supplies, work opportunities, education services, tax collection, or security. Conversely, for example, thousands of Syrian teachers are paid by Turkey, and local police are Turkish-trained.

While Turkey is interested in promoting the installation of stable institutions, especially at the local level, and the Russians in maintaining the Assad regime with its current national institutions, Iranians exclude the institutional approach. "Iranians want weak political institutions" emphasizes one of the experts interviewed (Interview 4). The Iranian approach is more about exporting their "Shiite worldview" and creating "Shiite pockets". In this respect, the Iranians are ensuring the continuity of the project linked to the Syrian civil society they had implemented locally in the 1990s; establishing mausoleums and mosques (notably in the Alawite area), promoting NGOs in Raqqa, cultural centers in Daraa, Deir Zor, and Aleppo. After 2011, most of the past achievements of Iranian NGOs were destroyed by the Syrian opposition and ISIS. The Iranians re-established these NGOs as soon as they gained a territorial and military foothold in Syria and with exactly the same approach (culture, religion, Shiism) (Interview 1). However, as assessed by an expert, "this way of operating is the opposite of a peacebuilding process where common denominators must be found as a basis for future peace" (ibid).

China as a Potential Rebuilder?

While not one of the primary external actors involved in Syria, China could nevertheless play a future role that is worth examining. According to one interviewee, China is currently neither politically, nor economically visible in Syria: "It supports the Iranians and the Russians, in particular thanks to its seat at the UN Security Council, but it has no presence on the ground" (ibid). A former Syrian politician shares a similar opinion, adding that "… if China supports Russian and Iranian actions in the war in Syria, it is only to counterbalance the influence of the Americans. What interests China is the economy, where they can extract natural resources and the future markets where they could sell their equipment, cars, engines and construction material" (Interview 2).

Despite its low-profile role, China has occasionally emphasised its support for the Syrian government's effort in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and opposed regime change under the slogan "Syrian-led, Syrian-owned" principle (Global Times, 2021). The 2019 White Paper by the Chinese Ministry of Defence emphasises China's constructive role in seeking a political settlement of the "Syrian issue" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019). However, after China's endorsement of the results of the Presidential election in Syria in May 2021, there have been reports that China may have a role in the reconstruction effort, given Syria's need for outside capital and the paucity of economic assistance that traditional allies of the Assad regime can provide (Burton et al., 2021). Syrian officials have pointed to a number of infrastructure projects, from the construction of highways and railroads to the re-development of ports, that would fit within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which the al-Assad regime endorsed in July 2021 (CGTN, 2019). However, analysts have also questioned the interest of the Chinese government, and of Chinese firms, to invest in Syria. They point to the focus of China's commercial activities elsewhere in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf region, and to the very risky and volatile environment offered by a country that remains in a state of war, the impact of international sanctions and the lack of Chinese familiarity with the Syrian context (Burton et al., 2021; Chulov, 2021).

Conclusions

Ten years of a vicious civil war involving a plethora of foreign countries and a multitude of proxy fighters have left Syria in ruins. During the war, the conflicting goals and interests of Russia and the US, coupled with the machinations of regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, have shaped the conflict on the ground, enabling or hindering the military and political actions of the Syrian government.

Today, in a divided country where each prominent external actor—namely Russia, Turkey and Iran—has chosen its area of military control and influence, thus accentuating Syria's territorial, political and social fragmentation, an "illiberal peace" is taking hold. Armed violence has subsided, and there is a strategic stalemate on the ground. Syria no longer captures headlines, but as was recently emphasised by the UN special envoy on Syria, Syria is not a frozen conflict and the current situation "should not mislead anyone into thinking that the conflict needs less attention or fewer resources, or that a political settlement is not urgent" (UN News, 2022).

An agreement on a revised constitution, which has been debated for two and half years, could contribute to a political solution of the conflict and remains a diplomatic priority. However, ensuring a peaceful future for the country goes well beyond agreeing a new constitution. The goals of the Syrian government and the main non-Western actors that are involved in Syria run contrary to a genuine process of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, where justice and the grievances of ordinary people are addressed and mutual understandings are found as a basis for sustainable peace. Without a genuine peace process, the political and social grievances that ignited the conflict will be ignored and new conflict fault lines will be left simmering, with the risk that armed violence will re-emerge.

Regional and global powers will continue to influence events in Syria. In particular, the complex relationship between Russia and Turkey—a mix of cooperation and competition exemplified in the context of the war in Ukraine by Turkey's efforts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine while selling armed drones to Kyiv —is a critical dynamic in shaping future peace prospects in Syria, especially regarding the conflicted Syrian-Turkish border area, and in Idlib—the last rebel province. However, differences between the goals and approaches of Russia and Turkey are not irreconcilable, whereas the most marked differences are between the Iranians' and the Russians' vision of peace in Syria and the future political system that would guarantee this peace. The Turkish and Iranian agendas are not so opposed and could converge in the short and medium term, but they fundamentally contradict each other in their hegemonic leadership ambitions in the Middle East.

There are signs that the war in Ukraine is shifting the balance of power in Syria, with reports that Iran and its backed militias in Syria are ready to fill any void left by Russian military forces being redeployed to Ukraine, while Turkey may launch a new military incursion into Northern Syria. In such a volatile environment, there is a need to avoid the re-ignition of the Syrian conflict and the risk that it becomes a proxy war between Russia and Western countries, or the theatre of intensified fighting between the US and its allies on one side and Iran and its local militias on the other. While the process of insulating international cooperation on Syria from tensions elsewhere, especially those over Ukraine, is bound to face challenges, it should remain the primary goal. In particular, international efforts should continue to ensure that ceasefire arrangements are upheld. At the diplomatic level, while states should redouble efforts to revive the peace process and ensure some progress towards agreeing a new Syrian constitution, an immediate priority is maintaining humanitarian access to civilians in need. In this regard, the renewal of UNSCR 2585, extending the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for the delivery of humanitarian aid beyond its current expiry date of 10 July 2022 is particularly crucial.

The international community should seriously consider the measures needed to prevent a resurgence of ISIS. Most of this has to do with response strategies that move away from an exclusive focus on military and other security counter-terror initiatives and towards efforts that prevent and address the root causes for the re-emergence of extremist and violent groups. These should include: intensifying humanitarian efforts, improving living conditions, expanding education and peacebuilding activities in internal displacement camps and detention centres. There is also a need to alleviate the burden placed on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) through the repatriation of European nationals currently in AANES detention centres.

Fragmentation—territorial, social, ethnic, religious and political—represents a formidable obstacle to peace in Syria. There is a need for further and more in-depth research on the way Syrians perceive peace and fragmentation, especially in relation to the dominant foreign actors that are engaged in Syria. This would be crucial to better understanding how the fragmentation process prevents a return to peace and to derive practical suggestions for better coordination of the economic, political and diplomatic actions of foreign powers, both at the micro-territorial level (reconstruction and the needs of the population) and at the regional and international strategic and diplomatic level.

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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