



# Syria's Civil War

## Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?

Aron Lund

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Cover: An election campaign poster for President Bashar al-Assad displayed on a ruined shopping mall in the Khalidiya district of Homs, shortly after Government forces regained control of the area. Built just before the war, the mall had never opened for business. (Sergey Ponomarev, 15 June 2014)

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## Summary

This report analyzes the state of the civil war in Syria in 2018 and surveys the main actors inside and outside the country, with a particular focus on President Bashar al-Assad's central government. It investigates likely key questions ahead, as Syria heads into an endgame that may produce a "frozen conflict," leaving major territorial and political disputes unresolved as military contestation fades into the background.

In recent years, Syria's war has evolved toward a tentatively stabilizing and potentially long-lasting territorial configuration. By late 2018, all three areas still outside government control (the Tanf zone, northwestern areas including Idlib, and the Kurdish-dominated northeast) are protected by political and military arrangements imposed on Syria by Russia, the United States, and Turkey and to some extent Iran.

If these foreign powers were to revise their policies, Syria's emerging *status quo* could change or even be radically upended. On the current trajectory, however, Syria seems likely to remain divided between Assad's authoritarian central government, which rules most of the population but will struggle to recover economically, and one or more rival political orders surviving inside foreign-protected peripheral enclaves.

Keywords: Syria, Middle East, war, insurgency, non-state actors

## Sammanfattning

Denna rapport analyserar läget i det syriska inbördeskriget 2018 och ger en översiktlig bild av de viktigaste aktörerna inom och utom landet, med särskilt fokus på president Bashar al-Assads centralregering. Rapporten undersöker ett antal frågor som kan bli avgörande för framtiden, i ett läge då kriget i Syrien närmar sig en slutfas. Utfallet kan bli en frusen konflikt med olösta territoriella och politiska nyckelfrågor, trots att konfliktens rent militära dimension klingar av.

På senare år har Syrienkriget utvecklats i riktning mot en trevande stabilisering och en potentiellt långvarig territoriell uppdelning. Mot slutet av 2018 beskyddas samtliga tre återstående icke-regeringskontrollerade områden (Tanfregionen, nordvästra Syrien inklusive Idlib, samt kurdiskdominerade nordöstra Syrien) av politiska och militära arrangemang som tvingats fram av Ryssland, USA och Turkiet, samt i någon mån Iran.

Om dessa externa makter ändrar politisk inriktning kan Syriens framväxande *status quo* förändras eller till och med radikalt kullkastas. Om utvecklingen däremot fortsätter i nuvarande riktning tycks det sannolikt att Syrien förblir uppdelat mellan Assads auktoritära centralregering, som styr lejonparten av befolkningen men har svårt att återhämta sig ekonomiskt, och ett eller flera rivaliserande politiska system som fortlever i perifera enklaver under utländskt beskydd.

Nyckelord: Syrien, Mellanöstern, krig, uppror, icke-statliga aktörer

## Preface

The Asia and Middle East Programme at FOI brings multidisciplinary, analytic, and regional expertise to the key policy issues of the two regions. For the present report, Syria writer and analyst Aron Lund has been contracted as an external expert to author an in-depth study of the civil war in Syria, the main actors involved in the conflict, and the attempts to bring peace to the country. Moreover, Mr Lund attempts to find answers to a set of key questions regarding Syria's development.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Aron Lund for accepting to write this report for FOI and for excellent cooperation throughout the whole process. I am also very grateful to my colleagues Per Wikström, who has designed the maps of Syria, as well as Bitte Hammargren, Samuel Bergenwall and Erika Holmquist, who have commented on earlier versions of this report.

Stockholm, December 2018

Jerker Hellström

Head of Programme, FOI Asia and the Middle East



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# 1 Introduction

After seven years of conflict, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is widely seen as having won the civil war that began in 2011. Insurgent forces have been trapped in border enclaves, and opposition backers have withdrawn support for major operations against the central government. Calls for a foreign intervention to depose Assad have subsided, particularly since Russia's 2015 intervention.

However, Assad is heavily dependent on Russian and Iranian support and he presides over a troubled landscape of frayed sectarian relations and socio-economic hardship. His government remains shut out of peripheral areas by Turkish and U.S. troops, vulnerable to external shocks (such as an eruption of Israeli-Iranian conflict), and embedded in a crisis-ridden, under-resourced, and Western-sanctioned economy that appears to preclude effective post-conflict reconstruction.

Though this new phase of the war has all the trappings of an endgame, some aspects of it may endure for the foreseeable future. With external powers now dominating spheres of influence from which Assad cannot easily oust them, Syria's unsettled state may be turning into a "frozen conflict"<sup>1</sup> where intermittent skirmishing and negotiations emerge as a new normal, and ceasefire lines gain permanency even in the absence of formal recognition.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.1 Objectives

The objective of this study is to provide a digestible description of the state of the Syrian war in mid-to-late 2018, by briefly detailing the course of the conflict from 2011 to 2018, analyzing the goals and capabilities of major foreign actors and of

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<sup>1</sup> The term "frozen conflict" has no clear legal or political definition, being a fairly recent coinage. As noted by Thomas D. Grant, it is applied primarily to separatist conflicts, especially in situations involving Russia and/or the former Soviet Union. Classic cases are Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Thomas D. Grant, "Frozen Conflicts and International Law," *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3, Fall 2017, pp. 361-413. This report does not use the term to make a political or legal point, but simply to indicate the possibility of pragmatic, negotiated ceasefires and de-confliction arrangements remaining in effect for an indefinite period, due to the active efforts to "freeze" frontlines by Turkey, the United States, Russia, and other nations involved.

<sup>2</sup> Syria has a history of unresolved conflicts, having pursued three territorial interests with varying intensity: Lebanon, whose release from French mandatory control as an independent state Damascus accepted but resented, establishing normal diplomatic relations only in 2008; Iskanderoun, which was transformed into the Turkish province of Hatay before Syria's independence and is still claimed by Damascus; and the Golan Heights, which were occupied by Israel in 1967 and whose return has become an *idée fixe* of Syrian foreign policy. Emma Lundgren Jörum, *Beyond Syria's Borders: A History of Territorial Disputes in the Middle East*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2014.

the various peace processes, and finally describing the territorial-political blocs that have emerged inside Syria, with a special emphasis on Assad's government.

Concluding sections will briefly investigate certain key issues in coming years, including the potential for disruptive external escalation, the likelihood of U.S.- and Turkish-held areas remaining outside central government control, and the question of whether and how an Assad-led Syria can stabilize, recover economically, and reabsorb displaced populations.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

- Who are the main external actors in Syria's war, and what are their interests?
- What role do the UN and Syria's peace processes play in resolving the conflict?
- What is the disposition of forces inside Syria, how is power distributed within each political-territorial bloc, and what interests guide the conduct of the major actors? In particular, how has the Syrian government and its armed forces evolved during the war?
- What issues are likely to dominate the conflict in coming years?

## **1.3 Method and Outline**

This report draws on the author's accumulated research, including in and around Syria since 2005, and on dedicated research for this FOI publication in summer and autumn 2018.

Material has been gathered through interviews with Syrian and non-Syrian stakeholders and observers, including politicians, military/insurgent commanders, religious leaders, intelligence officials, subject-matter experts, journalists, and aid workers. Many interviewees have requested anonymity. In 2018, interviews have been conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, the United States, the Netherlands, and France and in recent years also in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. In addition, many interviews have been conducted remotely by phone or online.

Information has also been collected through a broad survey of available print and online media, published literature, social media, think tank reporting, and academic research, primarily in English and Arabic, but also using French, Swedish, and Norwegian sources.

After offering a summary chronological background to the war and its evolution, the report briefly describes the actions, capacities, and interests of core international actors (Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, Israel, the Gulf Arab

nations, and Europe). It also offers a brief sketch of the conflict's three main negotiation tracks (Geneva, Astana, and Sochi) and how they fit together.

The report then describes the territorial and political configuration of each of the five major blocs or actors inside Syria: (1) Assad's central government, with special attention to its military-political makeup; (2) the U.S.-controlled Tanf border zone in the south; (3) Turkish-dominated northwestern Syria, including jihadi and other armed factions in the Idlib region; (4) the American-backed Kurdish authorities in northeastern Syria; (5) and the residual presence of the so-called Islamic State.

In its final sections, the report highlights five key issues that dominate the conflict as of autumn 2018 or are likely to draw attention in 2019: (1) the non-negligible possibility of a disruptive event that derails Assad's march to victory, potentially related to Iran or to chemical weapons; (2) the Turkish-Russian talks determining the fate of northwestern Syria; (3) U.S. policy choices that will determine the long-term viability of a Kurdish-led enclave in northeastern Syria; (4) the growing debate over Syria's post-conflict reconstruction; and (5) the closely related problem of Syria's refugee diaspora.

## 1.4 Organizations

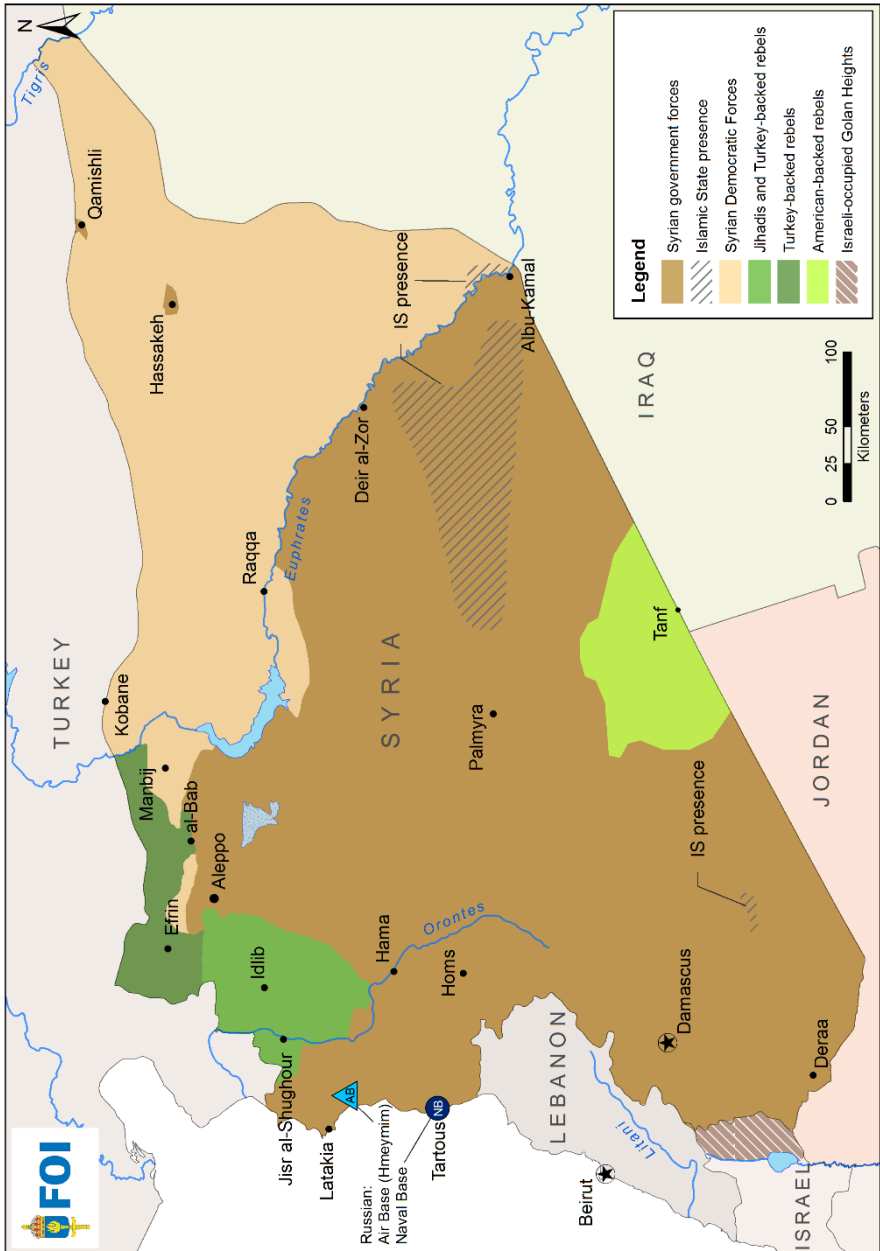
The report refers to the following organizations and groups:

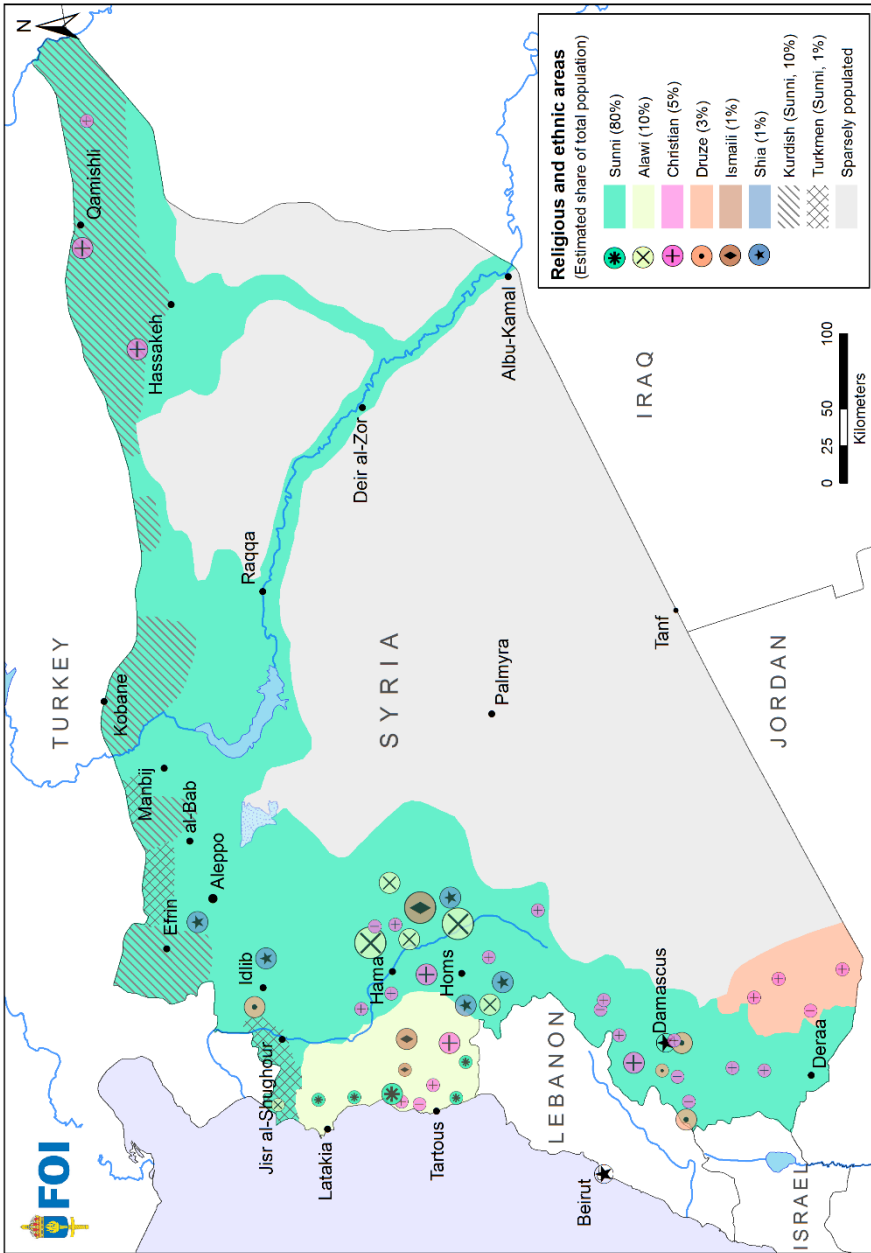
- Baath Party: Syria's ruling Arab-nationalist party, led by Bashar al-Assad
- EU: European Union
- FSA: Free Syrian Army; umbrella term used by foreign-backed, non-jihadi rebels
- Global Coalition Against Daesh: U.S.-led anti-IS coalition.
- Hezbollah: Lebanese Shia Islamist group backed by Iran
- Hurras al-Din: Idlib-based Tahrir al-Sham splinter loyal to al-Qaeda
- IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; Iranian paramilitary force
- IS: Islamic State; Sunni extremist group also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh
- Maghawir al-Thawra: Small U.S.-backed rebel group based at Tanf
- Muslim Brotherhood: Sunni Islamist group with branches in many countries
- NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- National Liberation Front: Turkish-backed rebels in Idlib
- OPCW: Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

- PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party; Kurdish group in Turkey, works in Syria via YPG
- PYD: Democratic Unity Party; PKK-friendly Syrian Kurdish political party
- Salvation Government: An Idlib-based administration backed by Tahrir al-Sham
- SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces; U.S.-backed Kurdish-Arab coalition led by YPG
- Syrian Arab Army: the official Syrian army, led by Bashar al-Assad
- Syrian Interim Government: an opposition administration backed by Turkey
- Syrian National Army: Turkish-backed rebel coalition in al-Bab and Efrin
- Syrian Social Nationalist Party: Syrian-Lebanese party allied to the Baath
- Tahrir al-Sham: Idlib-based jihadi group formerly known as the Nusra Front
- Turkestan Islamic Party: Idlib-based Uighur jihadi group
- UN: United Nations
- YPG: Popular Protection Units; Kurdish militia linked to PKK

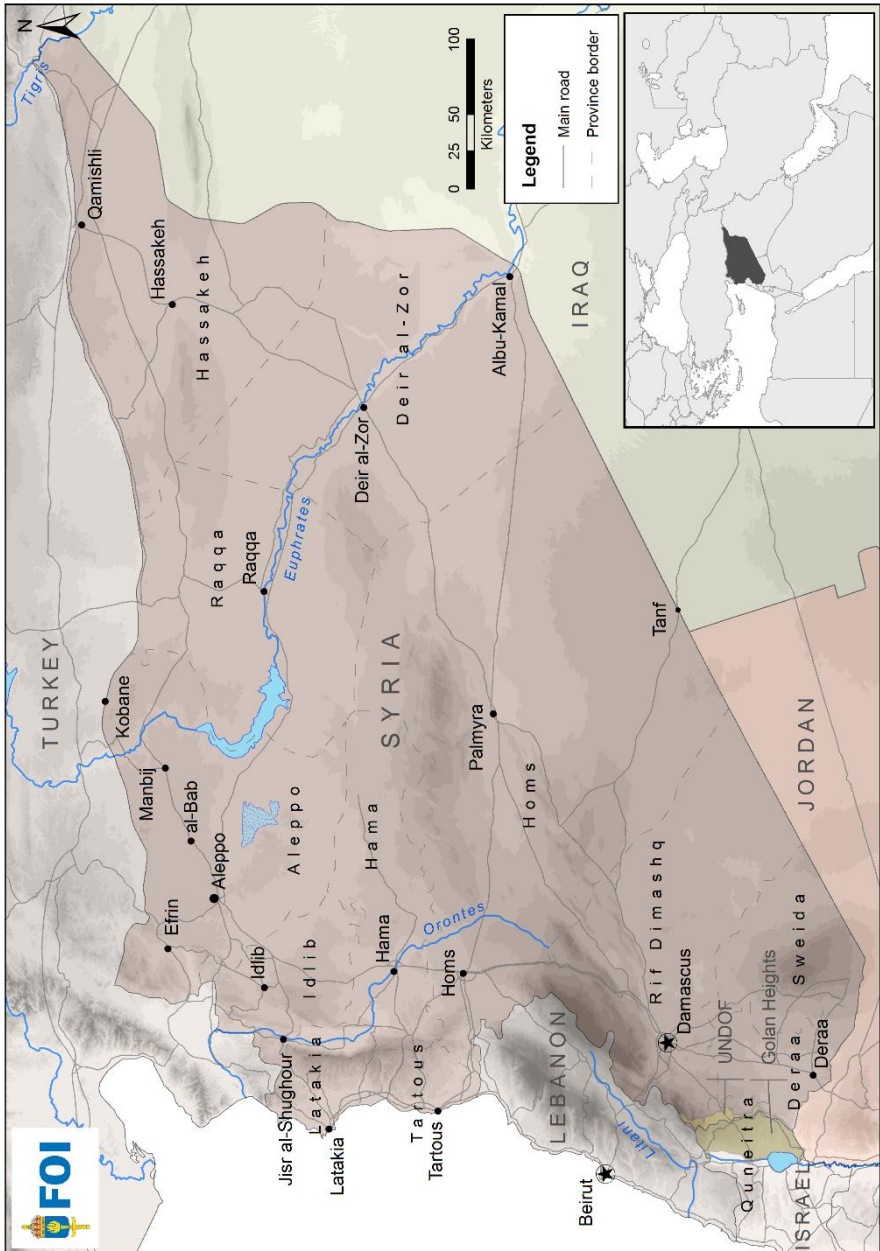
## **1.5 Maps**

All maps drawn by Per Wikström/FOI, based on originals by Aljazeera/Liveuamap and Fabrice Balanche/Mary Kalbach Horan of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.









## 2 War and intervention, 2011–2018

### 2.1 The Start of Conflict

In March 2011, ten years into the reign of President Bashar al-Assad, simmering discontent erupted into public protests inspired by the so-called Arab Spring.

Government forces responded with a violent crackdown, but protests and riots continued to spread. By late spring and summer, a general breakdown in state control was felt in some rural regions and dense outer-city slums, where a combination of revolutionary ferment, sectarian animosities, and local power-grabs filled the vacuum.

Notwithstanding prominent exceptions, the main thrust of the uprising came from within of the Sunni Muslim majority population, with a rural and religiously conservative bent. Conversely, Assad's government found its core support within the military, certain business elites, and Syria's religious minorities, though it was able to draw on a broader, cross-sectarian base using state, military, and party institutions and private economic patronage. Much of the security apparatus was dominated by Alawites, a small religious minority to which the president belongs, and the growing violence was associated with a strong undercurrent of Sunni-Alawite sectarian tension.<sup>3</sup>

The first trappings of a politicized insurgency became evident in summer 2011, as anti-regime activists, military defectors, and Islamist radicals began to assemble in organized factions.<sup>4</sup> However, the rebellion was extremely fragmented and localized. Some groups referred to themselves as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a vague term with symbolic purchase but no real organizational content, while others preferred Sunni Islamic nomenclature, and many used both.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2 Foreign Involvement and Fragmentation

Regional interventions in the conflict have largely dovetailed with Syria's internal divides. Sunni leaders in Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia began arming the insurgents, while Shia forces in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon backed Assad. Following

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<sup>3</sup> Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, online: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sectarianism-in-syrias-civil-war> (retrieved November 5, 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Aron Lund, "Stumbling into civil war: The militarization of the Syrian opposition in 2011," in *AMEC Insights, Volume 2, 2015*, Craighall: Afro-Middle East Center, 2016, pp. 2-24.

<sup>5</sup> Aron Lund, "UI Briefing 13: Syrian Jihadism", Swedish Institute for International Affairs, August 2012.

a familiar Cold War pattern, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom took the side of the opposition while Russia and China supported the government.<sup>6</sup>

In mid-2012, Turkish- and Qatari-backed rebels seized the eastern half of Aleppo, Syria's largest city, and installed a chaotic, Islamist-dominated reign. Government forces fought back with great brutality, brushing off international condemnation over indiscriminate shelling, mass arrests, and summary executions.

Syria's Kurdish population – long repressed by Assad's Baath Party but wary of the Arab opposition, too – initially stayed on the sidelines. When the Syrian army pulled out of Kurdish-majority areas in mid-2012, the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), stepped into the void. The group then kept a frosty truce with Assad's army while fending off attacks from Turkey-backed rebels.

Foreign pressures to unite the opposition often backfired, since regional sponsors were themselves divided in their approach to the insurgency, yet the resulting chaos only fueled the calls for deeper intervention. "The Saudis had their clients, the Turks had their clients, and the Qataris, too. And the United States had no authority or role because we weren't so involved, so everyone said you need to be involved and get skin in the game, be the team captain," recalls Philip Gordon, who between 2013 and 2015 served as the top White House official on Middle Eastern affairs and who says he "pretty quickly became skeptical" that arming Syria's divided rebellion could prompt an orderly transition in Damascus.<sup>7</sup> In July 2013, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency claimed to have identified at least 1,200 opposition factions and warned that extremists would dominate the insurgency unless stopped.<sup>8</sup>

In August 2013, a major chemical attack was launched against rebel-held areas near Damascus. A UN investigation led by the expert Åke Sellström (previously with the Swedish Defence Research Agency) was able to retrieve physical samples for testing.<sup>9</sup> In September, the mission concluded that sarin, a nerve agent, had

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<sup>6</sup> On the war's regional and international context, see Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Valour in the New Middle East*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, and Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York, Public Affairs, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Philip H. Gordon, White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region 2013–2015, Washington, October 2018.

<sup>8</sup> "Syria civil war could last 'multiple years' if Islamist rebels not checked says top Pentagon intelligence official," *The Telegraph*, July 21, 2013, online: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10193128/Syria-civil-war-could-last-multiple-years-if-Islamist-rebels-not-checked-says-top-Pentagon-intelligence-official.html> (retrieved October 13, 2018)

<sup>9</sup> The Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) facility in Umeå was among the OPCW-designated that analyzed samples retrieved from Syria; Sellström is the former head of the laboratory. For more on FOI support for UN and OPCW efforts in Syria, see Tunemalm *et al.*, "Syrien och

been used.<sup>10</sup> The investigators were not permitted to identify the perpetrator, but Assad's government was widely held responsible and the United States threatened to launch retaliatory air strikes. The crisis was defused when U.S. President Barack Obama accepted a Russian proposal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program through a joint operation by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>11</sup>

By June 2014, the UN-OPCW mission had seized and destroyed all 1,300 tons of chemical arms declared by Assad. However, OPCW officials noted several "gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies" in the information provided by the Syrian government, concluding that Damascus had failed to credibly demonstrate that it had revealed its entire chemical weapons program.<sup>12</sup> UN and OPCW inspectors later determined that the government had continued to use chemical weapons, accusing the Syrian military of three attacks with crude chlorine bombs in 2014–2015 and a sarin attack in 2017. Many other reported chemical attacks were under investigation.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian government denied responsibility, accusing rebel factions of staging chemical attacks.<sup>14</sup> The United States and its allies supported the UN-OPCW findings, while Russia rejected them and endorsed the Syrian government's position.<sup>15</sup> Moscow later used its veto powers to shut down the UN-OPCW investigation.<sup>16</sup>

The Obama administration had been divided over the 2013 deal with Russia, but the president stood by his decision. Arguing that it may have been an "inelegant

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kemiska vapen: utvecklingen under 2012-2014," FOI-R--3945--SE, 2014, Umeå: FOI, October 2014.

<sup>10</sup> "Report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August 2013 : note / by the Secretary-General," United Nations, A/67/997, September 13, 2013; "Final report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations, A/68/663-S/2013/735, December 13, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Aron Lund, "Red Line Redux: How Putin Tore Up Obama's 2013 Syria Deal," The Century Foundation, online: February 3, 2017, online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/red-line-redux-putin-tore-obamas-2013-syria-deal> (retrieved September 24, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> OPCW, "Conclusions on the outcome of consultations with the Syrian Arab Republic regarding its chemical weapons declaration," EC-82/DG.18, July 6, 2016, online: [https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/82/en/ec82dg18\\_e\\_.pdf](https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/82/en/ec82dg18_e_.pdf) (retrieved October 14, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Aron Lund, "No Justice for Khan Sheikhoun," The Century Foundation, November 6, 2017, online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/no-justice-khan-sheikhoun> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> "These allegations are absolutely false, and they are being used as a political tool to pressure both the Syrian government and Russia," said a Syrian official. Interview via intermediary, January 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Alexander Shulgin, Russian representative to the OPCW, email, April 2017; Interview, U.S. State Department official working on the Syrian chemical weapons problem, phone, June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Aron Lund, "Russia has finished off the UN's Syria chemical attack probe. What now?" IRIN News, November 20, 2017, online: [www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/11/20/russia-has-finished-un-syria-chemical-attack-probe-what-now](http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/11/20/russia-has-finished-un-syria-chemical-attack-probe-what-now) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

or an ugly win,” former assistant secretary of defense Derek Chollet insists that the “outcome made us all safer.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the decision not to strike militarily in 2013 became a lightning rod for criticism not only from Obama’s domestic opponents but also from the Syrian opposition, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, France, and other Assad critics, who argued that it had deflated rebel morale and damaged the prospects for regime change in Syria.

Obama’s unwillingness to intervene too deeply in the conflict was underpinned by a lack of faith in the opposition’s viability as an alternative to Assad, and by growing concerns over the extremist threat emanating from within the Syrian insurgency.<sup>18</sup> The jihadi group known as the Islamic State (IS) broke away from rival rebels and from its parent organization, al-Qaeda, in 2013–2014. In mid-2014, IS seized large parts of Iraq and also began to incorporate eastern Syria into its self-declared caliphate. By September 2014, U.S.-led counter-interventions were under way in both Iraq and Syria through a 77-nation alliance called the Global Coalition Against Daesh. Despite the animosity of many coalition members against Assad’s regime in Damascus, the intervention explicitly restricted itself to targeting IS.

The U.S.-led Coalition soon found that, apart from Assad’s government, the only effective and cohesive Syrian ground force able to resist IS in eastern Syria was YPG. By 2015, YPG had thus become an unlikely ally of the United States, which rallied smaller Arab groups to create a joint Kurdish-Arab, YPG-led military umbrella named the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). U.S. support for SDF created severe tension with Turkey, where YPG’s parent movement, PKK, has led a decades-long insurgency. It would eventually prompt Ankara to revise its policies in Syria.

Meanwhile, the strains on Assad’s regime were becoming apparent: government forces faced the combined pressure of rebels attacking from Jordan in the south, other rebels attacking from Turkey in north, and IS moving in from Iraq in the east, while struggling to cope with accumulated economic malaise.

In March-April 2015, an Islamist rebel coalition that included an al-Qaeda faction broke through army lines in the northwest, capturing Idlib and putting pressure on Alawite home regions. In May, IS seized the desert city of Palmyra, positioning the group to strike into central Syria, sever key roads, and begin probing the region around Damascus.

Despite these losses, U.S. analysts did not view Assad’s government as about to collapse. However, they did consider it likely that pro-regime forces would weaken further and could eventually lose outlying cities like Aleppo and Deir al-Zor – and

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, Derek Chollet, U.S. assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs 2012–2015, phone, August 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Gordon.

they were increasingly uncomfortable with that prospect, given that the alternative now seemed to be a Somalia-style mixture of ungovernable armed factions and anti-American jihadis.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.3 Russia Intervenes

Assad's allies seemed even more concerned, and may have feared that the government was on the verge of losing so much territory that it would effectively become unsalvageable.

In September 2015, the Russian air force began to launch attacks on rebel and jihadi forces in Syria, accompanied by a surge of Iranian and Shia Islamist forces on the ground.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the year, government lines had stabilized and in July 2016, loyalist forces encircled the rebel-held eastern part of Aleppo. After a protracted siege, rebels trapped inside the city finally negotiated a deal in December 2016 that saw them bused out alongside remaining civilians to the rebel-controlled Idlib region.

Similar deals were made elsewhere in Syria as rebel defenses slowly collapsed, often after sieges that saw food and aid deliveries cut off to force capitulation.<sup>21</sup> Civilians and fighters would typically be given a few hours or days to decide whether to stay and apply for amnesty or be bused to insurgent-held Idlib. Most inhabitants tended to stay under restored government rule, but, according to a UN investigative panel, civilians and defeated rebels who did leave often did so because they feared reprisals or "had no choice."<sup>22</sup>

Russia's intervention prompted rebel backers to rethink their strategic plans. Jordan began efforts to "freeze" the southern insurgency already in 2015. In mid-2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan began to soften his hostile stance toward Moscow. In August 2016, Russia facilitated a Turkish army intervention at the helm of a Syrian rebel force, allowing it to seize the IS-controlled al-Bab

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews, current and former U.S. officials, remotely and in Washington, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Roger McDermott, "Russia's Strategic Mobility and its Military Deployment in Syria," FOI Memo 5453/RUFS Briefing No. 31, FOI, November 2015, online: <https://www.foi.se/download/18.2bc30cfb157f5e989c31823/1477482863831/RUFS%20Briefing%20No.%2031%20.pdf> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> "'We leave or we die': Forced displacement under Syria's 'reconciliation' agreements," Amnesty International, November 13, 2017, online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/7309/2017/en> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Sieges as a Weapon of War: Encircle, Starve, Surrender, Evacuate," UN Human Rights Council, May 29, 2018, online: [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PolicyPaperSieges\\_29May2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PolicyPaperSieges_29May2018.pdf) (retrieved October 13, 2018)

region north of Aleppo and block YPG advances. In return, Erdogan prevented his rebel clients from attacking Assad's forces.<sup>23</sup>

With Russian, American, Turkish, Iranian, and Israeli forces now routinely operating inside Syria, several sets of de-confliction agreements were developed to avoid unintended clashes. Some of these agreements had important side effects: once Russia foreswore attacks on an area where NATO troops operated, and vice versa, it effectively froze fighting in that region and created an externally guaranteed internal border. This development soon prompted an accelerating race to grab land from IS, which had no foreign patron. U.S.-backed SDF troops seized Raqqa and other areas north of the Euphrates in 2017 while Russian- and Iranian-backed loyalist forces took desert regions south of the river.

Despite their continued demands for a political transition negotiated through UN-led talks in Geneva, most pro-opposition nations were by now in the process of disengaging from Syria, having written off the rebellion as a lost cause.<sup>24</sup> Propelled by a growing sense of alarm at the U.S.-backed SDF's advances, Turkey reacted by deepening its engagement with Russia and Iran through 2017. On Russia's initiative, tripartite talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana were organized to manage the Syrian conflict on terms acceptable to Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran.

The "de-escalation zones" negotiated in Astana formalized the already well advanced enclavization of Syria's rebel forces, allowing Assad to pick off insurgent strongholds one by one. Though he sometimes protested loudly on the rebels' behalf, Erdogan's main focus was to use the Astana format to pursue Turkey's own interests: in late 2017 and early 2018, Turkish troops seized YPG-held Efrin and installed military outposts across rebel-controlled Idlib, creating a contiguous zone of Turkish influence across northwestern Syria.

Meanwhile, Israeli-Iranian tension continued to build. Israel struck alleged Iran- and Hezbollah-linked targets in Syria at a steady clip through 2017 and 2018, prompting fears that clashes or miscalculations in Syria could trigger a region-wide conflict.

In spring and summer 2018, loyalist forces crushed the last insurgent enclaves inside government territory, then moved to recapture rebel-held areas near Jordan and Israel. Jerusalem had warned against any Iranian role in these offensives, but Russian mediation ultimately saw Israel stand down and permit the Syrian army to return to its old positions near the Golan Heights without incident.

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<sup>23</sup> Bitte Hammargren, "Authoritarian at home and impulsive abroad - Erdogan's foreign policy in the Middle East," Swedish Institute for International Affairs, UI Brief No. 7, June 2018, online: <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2018/ui-brief-no7.-2018.pdf> (retrieved October 13, 2018)

<sup>24</sup> Aron Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition," The Century Foundation, October 17, 2017, online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/assads-enemies-gave-syrian-opposition> (retrieved October 13, 2018)

Assad's victory in the south left only three regions still outside central government control, tenuously protected by externally guaranteed de-confliction agreements: a U.S.-held Syrian-Iraqi border crossing at Tanf in the southeast; a large Kurdish-Arab territory seized by U.S.-backed SDF forces in the northeast; and, in the northwest, a more densely populated crescent of Turkish-protected Sunni rebel territory stretching through al-Bab, Efrin, and Idlib.

## 2.4 The Costs of War

In all, more than half of all Syrians have been forced to flee their homes during the conflict, inside or outside Syria's borders, violently transforming the country's human geography and giving rise to a new diaspora scattered across the Middle East and Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Estimated at more than 21 million in 2011, Syria's population is thought to have decreased to below 19 million by 2018.<sup>26</sup> That figure includes an estimated 6.2 million Syrians displaced within Syria's borders, but excludes refugees.<sup>27</sup>

Humanitarian data compiled by Mercy Corps, an aid organization, suggests that approximately 73 percent of the population still inside Syria lives in areas under government control, while 17 percent are ruled by Turkish-backed rebel groups or jihadis in the northwest and 10 percent live in SDF-held territories. Syrians under IS control or in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights account for less than 1 percent of the population.<sup>28</sup> Of Syrians still in the country, two thirds are reportedly in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>29</sup>

UNHCR has as of October 2018 registered some 5.6 million Syrian refugees in countries near Syria, primarily in Turkey (3,565,000), Lebanon (976,000), Jordan

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<sup>25</sup> For example, a World Bank report estimates that the share of people living in urban areas jumped from 56 percent to 73 percent in the 2010–2017 period. “The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria,” World Bank, July 10, 2017, online: [www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria) (retrieved September 11, 2018)

<sup>26</sup> The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population to be 21.1 million in 2011. See Central Bureau of Statistics, <http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-10-2-2011.htm> (retrieved October 13, 2018). The World Bank World Development Indicators database listed Syria's 2010 population at 21 million, lowering its 2017 estimate to 18.3 million. World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SY&view=chart> (retrieved September 11, 2018). Humanitarian data compiled by Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team, which was made available to the author, put the population at 18.98 million in September 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Email from Andrej Mahecic, UNHCR Syria spokesperson, October 2018. The figure is based on UN OCHA tracking as of July 31, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Figures extrapolated from data compiled by Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team, made available to the author.

<sup>29</sup> “Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018: Syrian Arab Republic,” UN, November 2017, online: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2018\\_syr\\_hno\\_english\\_3.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2018_syr_hno_english_3.pdf) (retrieved September 11, 2018)



(671,000), and Iraq (249,000).<sup>30</sup> More than a million Syrians have sought asylum outside the Middle East, primarily in Europe. Among EU nations, Germany (555,000), Sweden (117,000), and Hungary (77,000) top the list.<sup>31</sup> An additional 260,000 refugees have been resettled across the world through the UNHCR, with the largest numbers accepted by Canada (77,000), the United States (65,000), and Germany (25,000).<sup>32</sup> In other words, total refugee numbers appear to be close to 7 million, though there may be some overlap among these figures.

While asylum seekers and resettled refugees in Europe and North America are generally well cared for, the situation for refugees in the region and for internally displaced Syrians has been extremely difficult, partly due to persistent underfunding of the UN-led humanitarian response.<sup>33</sup>

There is no agreed-upon figure for the number of casualties during the war, but a UN investigator noted that credible estimates for the number of violent deaths range from “approximately 350,000 to upwards of 500,000,” adding, “The reality of total conflict related deaths likely falls somewhere in this range.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> UNHCR data available online at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> (retrieved October 2, 2018), rounded off to nearest 10,000. UNHCR data is likely incomplete given, for example, the Lebanese government's 2015 decision to prevent UNHCR registration of new Syrian arrivals in Lebanon.

<sup>31</sup> Email from Andrej Mahecic, UNHCR Syria spokesperson, October 2018. Numbers are rounded off to the nearest 10,000.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations, “Resettlement and Other Admission Pathways for Syrian Refugees,” UNHCR factsheet, updated as of May 1, 2018, online: <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/573dc82d4/resettlement-other-admission-pathways-syrian-refugees.html>, (retrieved October 2, 2018) rounded off to nearest 10,000.

<sup>33</sup> UN statistics from September 2018 indicated that humanitarian operations in support of Syrian refugees in Turkey had received funding to cover 62 percent of estimated needs. In Lebanon, the figure was 34 percent, in Jordan 36 percent, in Egypt 22 percent, and in Iraq 14 percent. Humanitarian needs inside Syria were funded to 44 percent. “Regional Funding Update - Syria Crisis,” UN OCHA, September 10, 2018, online: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Regional%20funding%20update\\_10September%202018\\_180916\\_EN\\_v2.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Regional%20funding%20update_10September%202018_180916_EN_v2.pdf) (retrieved November 6, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Interview, Commissioner Hanny Megally, International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, email, September 24, 2018.

## 3 International and Regional Involvement

### 3.1 Russia

As of 2018, Russia is the dominant external actor in Syria, working in close coordination with Assad's government and with Iran. According to President Vladimir Putin, Russian forces will be in Syria "as long as it benefits Russia and in pursuance of our international commitments."<sup>35</sup>

Various motives have been advanced for Moscow's strong and consistent support for Assad. Russia experts generally point to some mix of the following motifs: demonstrating Russia's great-power status and value as an ally or patron; pushing back against what Russian policymakers perceived to be a wave of Western-orchestrated "color revolutions;" blocking a Libyan-style regime-change scenario that would, in the Russian analysis, turn Syria into a hotbed of Islamist extremism; and showcasing Russia's military power and capacity for long-distance intervention.<sup>36</sup> Material interests such as the protection of arms contracts or Russia's naval installation in Tartous surely played a part, too, but appear to have been less salient than a general sense of alarm at Western-led attempts to reengineer the region's political map. "Although Russia had lingering interests in Syria, the changing context of U.S.-Russia relations beginning in 2011 was a more influential factor in how Moscow would come to view this conflict," conclude Russia analysts Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky.<sup>37</sup>

The Syrian war has had a strong impact on Russia's regional position, as the "self-awareness of Russia's growing clout in the Middle East" has whetted Moscow's appetite for more.<sup>38</sup> Since 2011, and especially since 2015, the region has seen a

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<sup>35</sup> "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," Russian Presidency, June 7, 2018, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57692](https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57692) (retrieved October 13, 2018)

<sup>36</sup> Gudrun Persson, "Ryssland vill uppnå flera mål med sin krigföring i Syrien," *Utrikesmagasinet*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.utrikesmagasinet.se/analyser/2016/november/ryssland-vill-uppna-flera-mal-med-sin-krigforing-i-syrien> (retrieved October 8, 2018); Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017; Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review*, March-April 2018, online: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Rojansky-Victory-for-Russia.pdf> (retrieved October 11, 2018); Interviews, Fredrik Westerlund and Jakob Hedenskog, deputy research directors with FOI's project on Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy (RUFSS), Stockholm, October 2018; Hanna Notte, political officer with the Shaikh Group, phone, October 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?"

<sup>38</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Syria: Domestic Drivers and Regional Implications," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Policy Paper No. 8, January 2017, online: [www.kas.de/wf/en/33.47817](http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.47817) (retrieved October 11, 2018)

surge of Russian engagement. “The Middle East has now become *the* platform or arena beyond the post-Soviet space that Russia uses to project influence and signal its great-power status, striving to be on equal terms with the United States,” says Hanna Notte, an expert on Moscow’s relations with the Middle East.<sup>39</sup>

Russian coordination with Iran has grown to a point where the two nations appear to be “mutually dependent” on each other in a military sense in Syria, despite an otherwise limited overlap of interests.<sup>40</sup> Beyond the Syrian project, the Russian-Iranian relationship has remained nuanced, with fields of close collaboration as well as complication and tension. Sources of friction have at various times included Caspian Sea maritime boundary talks, Russia’s unwillingness to become entangled in Iran’s anti-Saudi policies, and an ongoing, sharp but unspoken disagreement over Russia’s close relationship to Israel. The U.S. withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal in May 2018 will likely prompt Iran to move closer to Russia, as well as China, given Tehran’s increased need to seek protection and non-Western market access after the reimposition of American sanctions.<sup>41</sup>

Cooperation with Turkey has also grown steadily since Erdogan climbed down from confrontation and sought Russia’s favor in mid-2016. The relationship benefits from Turkey’s disenchantment with U.S. support for YPG, and a wider downturn in U.S.-Turkish relations.<sup>42</sup> Pulling NATO member Turkey out of America’s embrace is a goal of major geopolitical significance to Russia and, even beyond that, the two nations have a strong trade relationship.<sup>43</sup> Putin’s desire to court Erdogan may in the end outweigh Assad’s desire to retake outlying border regions now under Turkish control.

Russia’s own position in Syria is regulated by an August 26, 2015, bilateral agreement signed by the two countries’ defense ministers. It stipulates that a Russian aviation group, whose composition will be defined by the Russian side “upon the agreement with the Syrian side,” will be permitted to remain indefinitely

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<sup>39</sup> Interview, Notte.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, Nikolay Kozhanov, nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center and visiting lecturer in the political economy of the Middle East at the European University at St. Petersburg, phone, June 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews, Dina Esfandiary, fellow with The Century Foundation and international security program research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, phone, September 2018; Rouzbeh Parsi, director of the Middle East Program at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, Stockholm, October 2018

<sup>42</sup> Erdogan’s 2017 order for Russian S-400 ground-to-air missiles (instead of the U.S.-made Patriot system) has become symbolic of the deteriorating Turkey-USA relationship. The U.S. congress has retaliated by holding up F-35 fighter sales to Turkey. “Turkey signs deal to get Russian S-400 air defence missiles,” BBC, September 12, 2017, online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41237812> (retrieved October 13, 2018); “Washington to Ankara: Give up S-400s and get the F-35s,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 27, 2018, online: [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/washington-to-ankara-give-up-s-400s-and-get-the-f-35s-136198](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/washington-to-ankara-give-up-s-400s-and-get-the-f-35s-136198) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Trenin, *What is Russia Up to in the Middle East*, pp. 114-5.

in Syria. However, either side can end the agreement with one year's notice.<sup>44</sup> The deal also denies Syrian authorities the right to inspect Russian forces entering Syria, bans them from entering Russian basing areas without permission, gives Russian forces full immunity for any infractions committed in Syria, and generally "gives an impression of having been dictated by Russia."<sup>45</sup>

The war has left Russia in control of two military installations: a naval resupply depot in Tartous that dates back to the 1970s but is now being upgraded, and a coastal airfield at Hmeimim that was the original jump-off point for the intervention.<sup>46</sup> Russian extraterritorial control over both bases was formalized in 2017 through two separate bilateral agreements running for 49-year periods, which are renewable by mutual agreement in 25-year installments.<sup>47</sup>

In sum, the Russian intervention appears to have been extraordinarily cost-effective, reshaping the Syrian war in Moscow's favor and producing a significant regional and international impact using only limited military and economic effort. In early 2016, Putin claimed that Syrian operations had cost no more than \$480 million and that the sum was being covered by existing budgets for military drills.<sup>48</sup>

By September 2018, the costs of operations in Syria to Moscow still appeared fully sustainable. The government had reported only 112 officially acknowledged military deaths, although journalists had tracked "over a hundred" additional, non-acknowledged deaths among Russian private contractors.<sup>49</sup> The financial burden

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<sup>44</sup> A facsimile of the Russian-language agreement, as well as a partial English translation, is available in Michael Birnbaum, "The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche> (retrieved October 19, 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Åtland, Kristian *et al*, "Russlands militære intervensjon i Syria – bakgrunn, gjennomføring og konsekvenser," Forsvarets forskningsinstitutt (FFI), 16/00500, March 15, 2016, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/16-00500.pdf> (retrieved October 19, 2018), p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> The Soviet navy originally gained rights to a resupply area in the Tartous port in 1971, though Hafez al-Assad later rejected Russian demands for a full naval base. After 1991, the Tartous port became Russia's last extraterritorial base outside the former Soviet Union. It was refurbished in the late 00s as part of a general Russian military buildup. "al-bahriyya al-rousiyya taoud ila mina tartous al-souri," BBC Arabic, September 13, 2008, online: [news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid\\_7613000/7613724.stm](https://www.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid_7613000/7613724.stm) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>47</sup> "bunoud al-ittifaqiya al-rousiya al-souriya hawla tawsie markaz al-imdad al-madi wal-taqani al-rousi fi tartous," Rousiya al-Yawm, January 20, 2017, online: <https://arabic.rt.com/news/859603-طرطوس-في-الروسي-والتقني-المادي-الإمداد-مركز-توسيع-حول-السورية-الروسية-الاتفاقية-بنود-أهم> (retrieved October 12, 2018); "Russia's upper house ratifies protocol to agreement for deploying air group to Syria," TASS, July 19, 2017, online: [tass.com/politics/956891](https://tass.com/politics/956891) (retrieved October 12, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Åtland *et al*, "Russlands militære intervensjon i Syria," p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> "Russia lost 112 servicemen over three years of counter-terror operation in Syria - MP," TASS, September 30, 2018, [tass.com/defense/1023714](https://tass.com/defense/1023714) ; Maria Tsvetkova, "Military veterans to Kremlin: Come clean about Syria mission," Reuters, July 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-contracto/military-veterans-to-kremlin-come-clean-about-syria-mission-idUSKBN1JV2QL> (both retrieved October 19, 2018).

also remained light, with much of the ammunition expended likely drawn from older stockpiles nearing expiration date. There was no sign of a reduction in Russian military drills, typically the first budget item to suffer when fixed or operational costs escalate.<sup>50</sup>

## 3.2 Iran

Locked in conflict with Israel and contesting Saudi and American influence across the region, Iran has found the Assad regime to be a rare, useful, and mostly reliable ally since the 1979 Islamic revolution.<sup>51</sup> Crucially, Syria has come to serve as Iran's link to the Mediterranean and to Lebanon, where Hezbollah's missile arsenal doubles as an Iranian threat and deterrent against Israel. As seen from Tehran, Syria was not a war of choice but a conflict forced upon Iran by its enemies.

Since 2011, Iran has assisted Damascus directly by exporting arms and extending several billion dollars' worth of credit lines, helping to organize Iraqi oil shipments, training Syrian militias, recruiting foreign Shia Islamists to fight in Syria, and even sending units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the regular Iranian army to fight alongside Assad's forces. While Iran's involvement in Syria has been economically and politically costly, IRGC's clear political ownership of the issue combined with the rise of anti-Shia jihadism across Syria and Iraq have blunted internal criticism.<sup>52</sup>

The strengthening of Assad's position may now allow Iran to seek strategic returns on an investment that was initially reactive and defensive in nature.

Iranian companies, including many with IRGC links, have sought entry into Syrian telecommunications, phosphate mining, and other strategic sectors, but Iranian businessmen reportedly face stiff competition from Russia and China.<sup>53</sup>

Politically, however, Tehran can look forward to unprecedented influence across the northern tier of the Levant, where it now has strong ties to ruling elites in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – a prospect that worries its regional adversaries. Pushback is

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<sup>50</sup> Interviews, Westerlund and Hedenskog.

<sup>51</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Interviews, Esfandiary and Parsi.

<sup>53</sup> Bozorgmehr Sharafedin and Ellen Francis, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards reaps economic rewards in Syria," Reuters, January 19, 2017, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/irans-revolutionary-guards-reaps-economic-rewards-in-syria-idUSKBN1531TO>; Erika Solomon and Najmeh Bozormehr, "Iran faces uphill battle to profit from its role in Syria war," *Financial Times*, February 14, 2018, online: <https://www.ft.com/content/f5129c30-0d7f-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09>; "More Information on Syria's Debt Repayments to Iran," The Syria Report, September 11, 2018, online: [www.syria-report.com/news/economy/more-information-syria-s-debt-repayments-iran](http://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/more-information-syria-s-debt-repayments-iran) (all retrieved September 11, 2018).

already apparent, in the form of Israeli air strikes on Iran-linked forces in Syria and U.S. promises to remain in the country until Iran leaves.

Even as one of the winners in Syria, the Iranian leadership will face continued pressures and must be mindful of a growing social and economic malaise at home, especially after the U.S. decision to reimpose sanctions in May 2018.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.3 Turkey

Turkish influence over the Syrian opposition only increased as the rebels' situation became more desperate, especially after other funders of the insurgency began to disengage from Syria in 2015–2016. Without formally relinquishing the goal of Assad's removal, Erdogan has pushed Syrian factions to operate in service of Turkish interests that only partially overlap with the opposition's own agenda and whose implementation is brokered with Russia and Iran. Turkey also uses its influence over Syrian exile politicians based in Istanbul to block the inclusion of YPG representatives in peace talks.

Turkey's goals in Syria, which are significantly shaped by domestic priorities, appear to be to (1) control the border, (2) roll back PKK influence in Syria, (3) prevent the entry of additional refugees, and (4) to defend its influence in Syria by safeguarding "as much as possible as of investments made in building up 'moderate' Sunni resistance."<sup>55</sup>

Today, Turkey dominates an arc of territory that wraps around Aleppo along the border, from al-Bab to Efrin and Idlib. The al-Bab and Efrin areas are controlled by a loose assembly of FSA-branded Turkish proxy factions collectively known as the Syrian National Army, and governed almost as Turkish protectorates.<sup>56</sup> Idlib is under much looser Turkish control, with Ankara working through a network of military outposts and a fractious, FSA-flagged, Islamist-led coalition known as the National Liberation Front. Ankara also strives to extend its influence over to the most powerful group in the area, the internationally terrorist-designated jihadis of Tahrir al-Sham.

In September 2018, Turkey negotiated a ceasefire agreement for Idlib with Russia, contingent on Turkish promises to contain and degrade Tahrir al-Sham. It remains

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<sup>54</sup> Mohsen Milani, "With U.S. Sanctions Looming, Iran Faces a Potentially Explosive Economic Crisis," *World Politics Review*, August 2, 2018, online:

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/25360/with-u-s-sanctions-looming-iran-faces-a-potentially-explosive-economic-crisis> (retrieved September 11, 2018); Interview, Esfandiary.

<sup>55</sup> Interviews, Michael Sahlin, Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, Stockholm, October 2018, and email, September 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah El Deeb, "Blurring the border, Turkey deepens roots in northern Syria," *Associated Press*, June 19, 2018, online: <https://apnews.com/3adcaa2b9b214465bb9e61d8427ab774/Blurring-the-border,-Turkey-deepens-roots-in-northern-Syria> (retrieved October 3, 2018).

to be seen how sustainable the Russian-Turkish understanding will be, and Turkey's long-term plans for its holdings in northwestern Syria are not clear. It is possible that Ankara will seek to trade land for concessions on the Kurdish issue, or simply hold on to territory captured.

For the time being, Ankara's attention remains focused on managing the Kurdish issue, with an eye to domestic Turkish-Kurdish strife, and on preventing a flare-up of fighting in Idlib for fear of a worsened refugee crisis. In the longer term, Ankara may try to repatriate Syrian refugees into parts of Syria under its control, and could also seek to broker trade access and other economic advantages in Syria despite its hostile relationship to Assad's government.

### 3.4 The United States

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has reduced its exposure to the Syrian conflict and shut down an Obama-era CIA program to arm Syrian rebels.

While the White House continues to insist that Assad is an illegitimate ruler, deposing him is no longer seen as America's responsibility. Trump-era U.S. policy focuses on combating IS, rolling back Iran, and preventing chemical weapons use or proliferation. (The United States launched two missile strikes in Syria in 2017 and 2018, citing the need to punish chemical attacks.) Washington has also signaled its determination to continue isolating Damascus economically and diplomatically until the UN verifies that "a credible and irreversible political process is underway."<sup>57</sup>

However, Trump-era U.S. policy remains volatile and unpredictable. In autumn 2017, the Trump White House decided to keep troops in northeastern Syria indefinitely as a means to suppress IS remnants, gain leverage over Assad and his allies, and frustrate Iran's regional ambitions.<sup>58</sup> In spring 2018, Trump suddenly ordered a complete reversal of that policy, began calling for U.S. troops to withdraw from Syria, and ordered cuts in civilian aid to the U.S.-backed SDF. Months later, after U.S. allies had stepped forward to fill some of the aid funding gap, Trump again dropped his demands for a rapid withdrawal.<sup>59</sup> Washington has

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<sup>57</sup> "Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts To Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS," U.S. State Department, August 17, 2018, online: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285202.htm> (retrieved October 12, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria," U.S. State Department, January 17, 2018, online: <https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm> (retrieved October 14, 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Dion Nissenbaum, "In a Shift, Trump Approves an Indefinite Military and Diplomatic Effort in Syria, U.S. Officials Say," *Washington Post*, September 6, 2018, online: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-approves-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-approves-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html) (retrieved October 12, 2018).

since swung back to the 2017 policy and beyond, adding an additional demand for Iran's total withdrawal from Syria.

In September 2018, James F. Jeffrey, who as the State Department's new special representative for Syria was seen as an important driving force behind the policy shift that summer, made the old-new U.S. position explicit by stating that the United States is "not in a hurry" to pull out and will keep troops in Syria until all Iranian forces are withdrawn.<sup>60</sup>

The appointment of Jeffrey and other senior officials to the State Department in summer 2018 appeared to be anchoring the Iran-centric, stay-the-course policy more firmly than before. However, there was continued internal pushback from Pentagon officials who warned against taking on overly ambitious goals without committing adequate resources, and from Turkey, which continued to view YPG/SDF as a terrorist entity. The lack of clear congressional support to confront Iran and the president's penchant for abrupt policy interventions created additional uncertainty about the new U.S. strategy's longevity.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.5 Israel

In the words of Syria expert Eyal Zisser, the Israeli government's initial reaction to the civil war in Syria was to "wish both sides good luck."<sup>62</sup> In 2013, however, Israel began to push for a tougher U.S. line on Assad and to conduct air strikes inside Syria, primarily against Hezbollah and Iran-linked targets.<sup>63</sup> Israel also began to offer limited support to rebels near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.<sup>64</sup>

The Israeli government ultimately refrained from intervening against the Syrian army as it retook areas near the Golan Heights in summer 2018, accepting Russian facilitation of a return to the pre-2011 status quo. However, Israel has escalated

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<sup>60</sup> Elise Labott, "US envoy to Syria says US will stay until there is an 'enduring defeat' of ISIS," CNN, September 7, 2018, online: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/06/politics/us-envoy-syria-enduring-defeat/index.html> (retrieved October 12, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Interviews, current and former U.S. officials, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Eyal Zisser, Tel-Aviv University, email, November 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Dan Williams, "In public shift, Israel calls for Assad's fall," Reuters, September 17, 2013, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-israel/in-public-shift-israel-calls-for-assads-fall-idUSBRE98G0DR20130917> (retrieved September 5, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> "Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria," International Crisis Group, Report No. 187 - MENA, June 21, 2018, online: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/187-keeping-calm-southern-syria>; Elisabeth Tsurkov, "Inside Israel's Secret Program to Back Syrian Rebels," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2018, online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/06/in-secret-program-israel-armed-and-funded-rebel-groups-in-southern-syria> (both retrieved September 6, 2018).



the pace of attacks inside Syria, claiming to have conducted over 200 air strikes in Syria since early 2017.<sup>65</sup>

Israeli de-confliction agreements with Russia were tested by a September 2018 incident that ended in the accidental downing of a Russian IL-20 surveillance aircraft by Syrian air defenses.<sup>66</sup> In response, Russia overruled longstanding Israeli objections and announced the delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Syria.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, with Assad ostracized by so many of his former allies and Trump pursuing an unprecedentedly pro-Israel policy, the government in Jerusalem has also begun to push for U.S. recognition of its 1981 annexation of the Golan Heights.<sup>68</sup> With or without such recognition, Israeli officials insist that the Golan Heights “will remain under Israeli sovereignty in any foreseeable future scenario.”<sup>69</sup>

### 3.6 Gulf Arab Nations

The Gulf Arab oil monarchies have played an important role in Syria’s war, viewing it as a chance to check Iranian influence and satisfy pro-Sunni, anti-Shia sentiment at home. However, intra-Gulf relations have long been beset by a bitter rivalry between the two primary opposition backers, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, supported respectively by Turkey and the United Arab Emirates; these internal disputes ended up “polluting each effort to unify the opposition with the same toxic dynamics.”<sup>70</sup> U.S.-led attempts to bridge the rift were only intermittently successful.

The Gulf kingdoms have gradually reduced their involvement in Syria since 2015, resigned in the face of Russian intervention and preoccupied with conflicts closer

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<sup>65</sup> Yoav Zitun, “IDF says it launched 200 strikes in Syria over past 1.5 years,” YNet, September 4, 2018, online: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5341135,00.html> (retrieved September 6, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> “Russia: Israel to Blame for Downed Plane Over Syria, Deliberately Mised Us,” *Haaretz*, September 23, 2018, online: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/russia-israel-to-blame-for-downed-plane-over-syria-deliberately-mised-us-1.6494034> (retrieved September 23, 2018).

<sup>67</sup> “Three Russian S-300PM battalion sets delivered to Syria free of charge — source,” TASS, October 8, 2018, online: [tass.com/defense/1025020](https://tass.com/defense/1025020) (retrieved October 11, 2018).

<sup>68</sup> “Minister says U.S. may soon recognize Israeli sovereignty over Golan,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 23, 2018, online: <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israeli-minister-says-US-may-soon-recognize-Israels-hold-on-Golan-558200> (retrieved September 6, 2018); Yvette J. Deane, “U.S. Ambassador to Israel: It’s possible we will recognize Golan Heights,” *The Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2018, online: <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/US-Ambassador-to-Israel-Its-possible-we-will-recognize-Golan-Heights-566643> (retrieved September 6, 2018).

<sup>69</sup> Interview, Israeli official, email, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, p. 136.

to home in Yemen. In 2017 Qatar's relationship to its neighbors collapsed, sparking a crisis that has pushed Syria further down the agenda.<sup>71</sup>

2017 and 2018 saw a slow drip of Gulf Arab comments and actions in recognition of the new reality. "Bashar is staying," noted Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in March 2018, though he urged the United States to keep troops in eastern Syria to roll back Iranian influence.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, Qatar has reestablished relations with Iran and some Emirati and Kuwaiti businessmen have resumed work in Syria, even though the country is formally under Arab League sanctions.<sup>73</sup> The Bahraini foreign minister has gone further than the rest, making waves in the media in September 2018 by cheerfully greeting Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem and saying that, whatever its flaws, "the Syrian government is Syria's government" and should rule the entire country.<sup>74</sup>

While some Gulf Arab officials reportedly advocate for an "Arab opening" to Damascus in order to limit Iranian and perhaps also Turkish influence, official rhetoric has generally remained frosty or outright hostile to Assad. Given countervailing popular and U.S. pressures and a likely limited economic and political upside to resuming contacts, the Gulf oil kingdoms may find it preferable to ignore the conflict, quietly initiate backdoor talks, or seek strictly limited understandings instead of radically altering their policies in public.

### 3.7 Europe

The European Union has been critical of Assad and supportive of U.S. policies, although opinions within the EU have at times differed. France and the United Kingdom have taken the strongest pro-opposition stances and delivered direct military support to Syrian rebels, while most other members went along with this policy without offering military support. Some Eastern European nations, notably

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<sup>71</sup> Aron Lund, "As Arabs Bicker over Qatar, Assad Sees an Angle," The Century Foundation, June 16, 2017, online: <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/arabs-bicker-qatar-assad-sees-angle> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>72</sup> "mohammed bin salman: laisa min maslahat al-assad itlaq yad iran fi souriya," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 1, 2018, online: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1223526/الأسد-مصلحة-من-ليس-سلمان-بن-محمد> (retrieved September 11, 2018).

<sup>73</sup> Simeon Kerr and Ahmed Al Omran, "Qatar restores diplomatic ties with Iran," *Financial Times*, August 24, 2017, online: <https://www.ft.com/content/bd8f21c8-889d-11e7-bf50-e1c239b45787> (retrieved September 11, 2018); "Prominent UAE Investor Visits Damascus," The Syria Report, August 7, 2018, online: [www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate-construction/prominent-uae-investor-visits-damascus](http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate-construction/prominent-uae-investor-visits-damascus) (retrieved September 30, 2018); "Kuwait's Kharafi Group Announces Land Purchase Deal Outside Damascus," The Syria Report, January 30, 2018, online: [www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate-construction/kuwait's-kharafi-group-announces-land-purchase-deal-outside-damascus](http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate-construction/kuwait's-kharafi-group-announces-land-purchase-deal-outside-damascus) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> "shahad wazir kharijiyat al-bahrain an liqa al-moallem: lam yurattab lah," *al-Arabiya*, September 30, 2018, online: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2018/09/30/خارجية-وزير-شاهاد-للمعالم-لقاء-عن-البحرين> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

the Czech Republic, have been critical of the opposition and maintained ties to Damascus.

Following Washington's lead, France and the United Kingdom abandoned their support for the armed insurgency in Syria in 2017–2018.<sup>75</sup> However, they and most other EU nations, including Germany, continue to endorse opposition aspirations and promote a negotiated transition through the Geneva peace talks. European nations also take a hard line on chemical weapons use, and France and the United Kingdom took part in U.S.-led air strikes against an alleged Syrian chemical weapons research center in April 2018. In summer 2018, the three nations issued a joint warning against renewed chemical attacks.<sup>76</sup>

Separately, many EU nations are active members in the U.S.-led Global Coalition Against Daesh, with France, in particular, operating alongside SDF forces on the ground in Syria.

The EU remains a major humanitarian actor in Syria, with Germany and the United Kingdom among the largest donors. The EU has sided with the United States in refusing to offer longer-term development aid and reconstruction support for areas under the control of an unreformed Assad government. EU external affairs chief Federica Mogherini reiterated in September 2018 that the union “will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, is firmly under way.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Lund, “How Assad’s Enemies.”

<sup>76</sup> U.K. Government website, “Chemical weapons attack in Syria: US, UK and France joint statement,” August 21, 2018, online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/us-uk-france-statement-on-the-chemical-weapons-attack-in-syria> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>77</sup> “Federica Mogherini met with United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura,” EU External Action Service, September 15, 2018, online: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/50519/Federica-Mogherini-met-with-United-Nations-Special-Envoy-for-Syria,-Staffan-de-Mistura](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/50519/Federica-Mogherini-met-with-United-Nations-Special-Envoy-for-Syria,-Staffan-de-Mistura) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

## 4 Diplomacy and Peace Talks

### 4.1 The UN Security Council

The United Nations has functioned poorly in Syria, hobbled by disagreements among the five permanent members of the Security Council.

After the failure of a half-hearted Arab League monitoring mission in winter 2011–2012, attempts to treat the Syrian crisis as a regional issue ended and Syria became a regular item on the Security Council agenda.<sup>78</sup> Although the United States, the United Kingdom, and France repeatedly won majority support for resolutions critical of Assad's conduct, they almost always found themselves blocked by Russian and Chinese vetoes. To date, Russia and China have jointly vetoed six resolutions on Syria since 2011 and Russia vetoed another six alone, mostly relating to UN and OPCW investigations of Syria's chemical weapons.<sup>79</sup>

In practice, the Security Council has only been effective when Russian-American understandings paved the way for collective action to manage specific facets of the crisis.

A Russian-American agreement in September 2013 allowed the council to construct a framework for chemical weapons disarmament in Syria. It operated through 2014 without major upsets, but once UN and OPCW inspectors found pro-Assad forces guilty of continued chemical warfare, Russia began to withdraw support and finally closed down the investigation in 2017.<sup>80</sup>

In 2014, the Security Council was able to adopt resolution 2165, which has since been renewed annually.<sup>81</sup> The resolution empowers the UN to deliver humanitarian aid across Syria's borders without prior permission from the government in Damascus, which routinely blocks deliveries to civilians outside its own control. According to the UN, some 680,000 Syrians received life-saving assistance through resolution 2165's cross-border mechanism in July 2018 alone, mostly in northwestern Syria.<sup>82</sup> The rapid government advances in 2018 may put the fate of resolution 2165 back on the table. By vetoing a renewal or watering-down the resolution's content, Russia could potentially provide the central government with

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<sup>78</sup> Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, IISS, Abingdon:Routledge, 2013, pp. 159-160.

<sup>79</sup> See "Security Council - Veto List," Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN, [research.un.org/en/docs/sc](https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc).

<sup>80</sup> Lund, "Russia has finished off..."

<sup>81</sup> Sam Heller, "Syrian Humanitarian 'Lifeline' Goes to Vote," The Century Foundation, December 18, 2017, online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/syrian-humanitarian-lifeline-goes-vote> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> UN Secretary General's report S/2018/777, August 22, 2018, online: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/{65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9}/s\\_2018\\_777.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/{65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9}/s_2018_777.pdf) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

new leverage over border regions and subvert Turkish or, more likely, U.S. attempts to sustain their favored clients in isolation from Damascus.

## 4.2 The Geneva Process

UN attempts to organize a Syrian peace process have been unsuccessful and appear doomed to fail, partly because no attempt has been made to offer straightforward mediation between the warring sides – only to organize a transition in Damascus, which military realities do not permit.<sup>83</sup>

The UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, a Swedish-Italian diplomat, led political talks in Geneva from 2014 until his resignation in October 2018; he will be replaced by Geir O. Pedersen of Norway.

The Geneva process was initially based on a 2012 agreement among external actors, known as the Geneva Communiqué or Geneva I, which stipulates the creation of a “transitional governing body with full executive powers” made up of both government and opposition representatives.<sup>84</sup> In 2015, the Security Council adopted resolution 2254. Without abrogating the 2012 document, it calls for a new constitution and free elections as a path to “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance.”<sup>85</sup> How these two overlapping frameworks relate to each other has never been fully clarified.

The Geneva talks have pitted Syrian government delegations against exiled dissidents and rebel representatives sponsored by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. YPG/SDF loyalists are excluded from the talks due to Turkish objections.

Unsurprisingly, Assad views the call for a political transition as a demand for regime suicide and refuses to engage seriously with the idea. Conversely, opposition nations are firmly wedded to the concept and have declared that only a transition as set out in resolution 2254 would lead them to consider Syria’s government legitimate, lift sanctions, and provide post-war reconstruction aid.

## 4.3 Astana and Sochi

Assad’s intransigent attitude and refusal to make even symbolic concessions appear to be a source of some frustration to Russian diplomats, who struggle to get

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<sup>83</sup> For an insider’s view of the Geneva process, see Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2017, pp. 138-167.

<sup>84</sup> Geneva Communiqué, UN, June 30, 2012, online: [www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>85</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015, online: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

around the transition hurdle. To wiggle past the UN deadlock, Moscow has tried to create rival or complementary negotiating tracks. Chief among them are the Astana and Sochi talks, organized in collaboration with Iran and Turkey.

Trilateral talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana began after the loyalist victory in Aleppo in December 2016, and have focused on mapping-out military zones of influence. By designating rebel areas as *de-escalation zones*, the Astana parties tried to freeze hostilities on a case-by-case basis.<sup>86</sup> In practice, this created a security architecture favorable to Assad. Turkey protested with varying degrees of sincere indignation, but its collaboration was rewarded in spring 2018 when Russia stepped aside to permit Turkish intervention against Kurdish-controlled Efrin.<sup>87</sup>

In January 2018, the Astana troika organized a Syrian peace congress in Sochi, Russia. This visibly stage-managed event ended in a decision to create a constitutional committee in accordance with resolution 2254.<sup>88</sup> Western nations and Turkey continued to stress Geneva's primacy over Sochi as the "only path to a political solution," but the committee has since been incorporated in the UN process, though de Mistura failed to get Russia's approval for a final list of members.<sup>89</sup>

The idea behind Sochi and similar Russian initiatives is to work through the terms of resolution 2254 in a controlled fashion, and then feed the results into the Geneva process.<sup>90</sup> While these plans have had limited success so far, Moscow seems to wager that war-weary Western, Turkish, and Arab leaders will eventually approve of a peace process tailored to legitimize Assad's victory, as a face-saving retreat.

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<sup>86</sup> In 2017, the United States, Russia, and Jordan launched a separate de-escalation project outside the Astana framework, covering areas in southern Syria.

<sup>87</sup> Interview, Saleh Muslim, TEV-DEM, Stockholm, March 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Interview, Syrian participant in the Sochi congress, 2018. For the congress outcome, see "Final statement of the Congress of the Syrian national dialogue, Sochi, January 30, 2018," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, January 30, 2018, online: [www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3046246](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3046246) (retrieved, October 13, 2018).

<sup>89</sup> Interview, U.S. State Department spokesperson, email, September 2018. See also "Staffan de Mistura (Special Envoy) on the situation in the Middle East - Security Council, 8355th meeting," UN Web TV, September 18, 2018, online: [webtv.un.org/watch/staffan-de-mistura-special-envoy-on-the-situation-in-the-middle-east-security-council-8355th-meeting/5836470956001](http://webtv.un.org/watch/staffan-de-mistura-special-envoy-on-the-situation-in-the-middle-east-security-council-8355th-meeting/5836470956001) (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>90</sup> Sam Heller, "America in Search of an Un-Geneva for Syria," War on the Rocks, January 8, 2018, online: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/america-search-un-geneva-syria> (retrieved October 11, 2018).



## 5 The Situation Inside Syria in 2018

### 5.1 Government-controlled Areas

In 2018, most of Syria is back under the control of Bashar al-Assad's government. According to one humanitarian database, these areas hold approximately 13.3 million people, which adds up to 73 percent of the non-refugee population.<sup>91</sup> However, all statistics remain highly uncertain.

The government controls Syria's four major cities – Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo – in addition to most provincial capitals. Pro-Assad forces also hold the entire border with Lebanon, have restored limited land access to Iraq, and have recaptured the entire southern border. Jordan and Syria reopened the border for trade in October 2018.

The Syrian state has come under extreme economic pressure, but somehow muddled through. It still runs schools, hospitals, and other institutions, albeit at a reduced level, and has continued to pay salaries and pensions without interruption, though their value has decreased sharply.<sup>92</sup> Some state institutions and regime-linked economic entities continue to operate in SDF-held areas and even in rebel-held Idlib, and many Syrians in non-state areas continue to travel to or otherwise interact with the central government in order to access bureaucratic services, markets, or humanitarian aid.

The government's ability to maintain its institutional centrality in an otherwise anarchic environment has been a major advantage, serving as a pull factor that draws displaced Syrians to state-controlled regions, as noted by Assad himself: "People are very interested in dealing with the state. Not the government. Maybe they're against the Baath Party and maybe they are against the president and the officials and this whole structure. But they now value the state."<sup>93</sup>

Even so, that state is weak and hollowed-out by years of war and sanctions, and Assad's government will struggle to effect any sort of economic recovery.

Much of the country's industrial base has been ruined, brain drain has been severe, and the state lacks the means to fund more than a fraction of Syria's post-war reconstruction needs; poverty rates have climbed steeply and millions of Syrians depend on UN aid and remittances from relatives abroad.

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<sup>91</sup> Population data compiled by Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team, made available to the author.

<sup>92</sup> "Analysis: How Does the Syrian Government Manage to Pay Salaries and Other Expenses?," The Syria Report, April 24, 2018, online: [www.syria-report.com/news/economy/analysis-how-does-syrian-government-manage-pay-salaries-and-other-expenses](http://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/analysis-how-does-syrian-government-manage-pay-salaries-and-other-expenses) (retrieved September 30, 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Interview, Bashar al-Assad, Damascus, December 2016.



### 5.1.1 The Political System

Little has changed in Syria's political system since 2011 beyond cosmetic reforms, despite profound social and cultural changes wrought by war, migration, and technology.<sup>94</sup>

Power remains concentrated in the hands of President Bashar al-Assad, who is also supreme commander and head of the ruling Baath Party. The president is chosen for seven year terms in tightly controlled elections, the next one being in 2021. The official cult of personality has diminished considerably since the death of Assad's father Hafez al-Assad (who ruled Syria between 1970 and 2000), but continues to color official discourse and propaganda.<sup>95</sup> Pictures of the president adorn Syrian cities, and the government does not tolerate even mild questioning of Assad, his family, or the security establishment.

Below the president, a superficially representative-looking set of political institutions (parliament, cabinet, etc.) is overshadowed by a tightly knit informal network of security chiefs, politicians, and wealthy businessmen orbiting the president and his family. Key figures are thought to include, for example, the president's brother Maj. Gen. Maher al-Assad, their businessman cousin Rami Makhlouf, and senior security chiefs. There is very little clarity on the exact nature of this power structure, but Syrian defectors with insight into elite politics have described the president as the unrivaled final arbiter, although second-tier figures influence policy by pursuing their own initiatives, arguing for their views, and bringing disputes to him for resolution.<sup>96</sup>

The cabinet runs day-to-day affairs but is subservient to the president and the security elite, executing policy with little apparent control over its strategic direction. Prime Minister Emad Khamis has held office since 2016. Prominent cabinet members include Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Interior Minister Maj. Gen. Mohammed Ibrahim al-Shaar, Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Ali al-Ayyoub, Minister of State for Reconciliation Ali Heidar, and Local Affairs Minister Hussein Makhlouf.

The 250-member People's Council is a rubber stamp parliament controlled by the Baath Party and a handful of minor allies, such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. Elections are rigged and offer no opportunity to hold rulers to account,

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<sup>94</sup> On the political system before 2011, see e.g. Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, London: Zed Books, 2003; Volker Perthes, *Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Modernization and the Limits of Change*, Adelphi Paper 366, Abingdon: Routledge, 2004. Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007; Souhaïl Belhadj, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad. Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire*, Paris: Belin, 2013.

<sup>95</sup> On the pre-Bashar cult of personality, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>96</sup> Interviews, Abdelhalim Khaddam, former Syrian vice president, Brussels, Belgium, April 2009; senior Syrian defector, 2016; former Syrian government official, 2016.

although there is a limited measure of competition among independent candidates. These typically businessmen or tribal sheikhs who seek access to the ruling elite and are brought into parliament as a means of co-optation. Tellingly, the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections saw several pro-Assad militia leaders elected as independents.

The Baath Party lost its constitutionally mandated role as Syria's "leading party in society and state" in 2012 but remains in control of all political institutions. Its leftist and Arab nationalist ideology has mostly faded into empty slogans, but the party cadre still plays a sectoral role in the policymaking apparatus. Assad leaves day-to-day management of Baath affairs to his deputy in the party, Hilal Hilal.

Media and public life is strictly controlled, and competing security agencies run large networks of informers to monitor citizens and each other. The security apparatus operates without legal oversight and has a well-established track record for torture and brutality. The UN's International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic says tens of thousands of Syrians have gone missing in government captivity during the war, noting reports from human rights organizations that put the number in the 60,000–100,000 range.<sup>97</sup> Many of the disappeared are thought to have been killed.<sup>98</sup>

### 5.1.2 Sect and Secularism

The Syrian government promotes secular politics, bans any discussion of sectarian problems, and often organizes inter-faith meetings to project a vision of religious harmony. The president, whose marriage to a Sunni Muslim woman is well publicized in Syria, consistently seeks to demonstrate a secular and religiously tolerant attitude. Nevertheless, sectarian dynamics play an important role inside the regime and for how others relate to it.

The Damascus-based leadership is disproportionately Alawite and has relied heavily on minority support to suppress a mostly Sunni insurgency, itself dominated by religious fundamentalists. Alawites make up approximately a tenth of Syria's population, alongside smaller Christian, Druze, Ismaili, and Shia

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<sup>97</sup> Interview, Megally.

<sup>98</sup> "Between the Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearances in Syria," Amnesty International, November 2015, online: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2425792015ENGLISH.PDF>; "If the Dead Could Speak Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities," Human Rights Watch, December 2015, online: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities>; "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic," UN Human Rights Council, February 3, 2016, A/HRC/31/CRP.1, online: [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-CRP1\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-CRP1_en.pdf) (all retrieved October 13, 2018).

minorities. Sunni Muslims, including Kurds, account closer to four fifths percent of the population.

Historically seen as heretics by many Sunni Muslims, Alawites, who see themselves as a branch of Shia Islam, suffered relentless social and economic discrimination through most of their history. However, a string of coup d'états in the 1950s and 1960s empowered the military and the Baath Party, two institutions in which Alawites were prominently represented. Hafez al-Assad became Syria's first Alawite president in 1971, and his allies and friends, many of whom shared his background, came to wield enormous power through the security apparatus. Under Baath Party rule, the wider Alawite community became heavily invested in the state, party, and army as sources of employment, social advancement, influence, and protection.<sup>99</sup>

While the Baathist period brought historically unprecedented levels of sectarian, regional, and social integration, it also produced painful friction. Many members of other religious groups resented the burgeoning influence of Alawite migrants to Sunni-majority cities, particularly as it came against a backdrop of Baathist repression and corruption. Religious prejudice existed on all sides, with Sunni fundamentalists particularly provoked by what they viewed as state capture by "apostates" and by the party's secularizing reforms. The 1980s saw vicious violence as the government bloodily put down a Sunni Islamist uprising. The 2011 conflict quickly fell into the same pattern, triggering existential fears and initiating a destructive spiral of sectarian passions.

While the Baathist system as a whole always had some level of cross-sectarian support, including from Sunni Muslims, the Alawite over-representation has been very pronounced in the military. A study of the Hafez-era military elite from 1970 to 1997 indicated that 61 percent of leading officers were Alawites and 35 percent were Sunnis. Nearly half of the Alawite senior officers belonged to the president's clan, the Kalbiya, and almost as many were related to the Assad family by blood or marriage.<sup>100</sup> These sectarian imbalances appear to have grown even more acute with the generational transition from Hafez to Bashar. A study of the pre-war security elite suggests that ten out of twelve division commanders in 2011 were Alawites, in addition to the ministers of defense and the interior, the heads of the Navy and the Air Force, and the directors of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate and the Military Intelligence Department.<sup>101</sup> In 2018, after years of war and

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<sup>99</sup> For a description of this process and the cast of characters involved, see Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2nd revised edition, 1995; Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999; Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath*, London: I.B. Tauris, 4th revised edition, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Batatu, pp. 224, 229.

<sup>101</sup> Hicham Bou Nassif, "'Second-Class': The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 38, 2015, pp. 626-649.

sectarian killing, the Alawite dominance within the armed forces appears overwhelming.<sup>102</sup>

The comparatively less powerful civilian side of the regime does not evince the same Alawite over-representation as the officer corps. Both presidents Assad have sought to ensure fair representation for religious groups and geographic regions within the cabinet, parliament, and Baath Party leadership, with a clear preference for placing Sunnis in high-status, high-visibility positions.<sup>103</sup> The Kurds are an exception: as non-Arabs, they have suffered systematic discrimination.<sup>104</sup>

Although the sectarian dimension of the regime (as well as the insurgency) is well understood by all Syrians, and sectarianism has been a major structural feature of the current conflict, the government adamantly refuses to acknowledge the existence of any sort of disparity or problem. Any Syrian who broaches the issue in public is likely to be punished with demonstrative severity.

### 5.1.3 The Security/Intelligence Apparatus

Syria's security apparatus is factionalized by design, as a coup-proofing measure to prevent lateral networking.<sup>105</sup> There are four main security/intelligence agencies, further subdivided into regional, thematic, and technically specialized branches:

- The Military Intelligence Department is the largest of the agencies, commanded by Maj. Gen. Mohammed Mahalla.
- The Air Force Intelligence Directorate, which appears to have grown in importance during the conflict, is led by Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Jamil Hassan, who is widely seen as one of the regime's most hawkish figures.
- The General Intelligence Directorate, also known as State Security, is led by Maj. Gen. Mohammed Dib Zeitoun.
- The Political Security Directorate, smallest of the four, is commanded by Maj. Gen. Mohammed Rahmoun.

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<sup>102</sup> Interview, Kheder Khaddour, nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center, phone, September 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Syria has had twelve prime ministers and three foreign ministers since Hafez al-Assad assumed the presidency in 1971. All have been Sunnis. The Ministry of Defense and the General Staff were led by Sunnis for nearly all of Hafez al-Assad's reign, but by a succession of Sunni, Christian, and Alawite officers under Bashar al-Assad. All the senior deputies that manage the Baath Party have been Sunni Muslims since 1970. With the special exception of Refaat al-Assad, a wayward family member promoted a face-saving solution to a bungled coup, all vice presidents under both presidents Assad have been Sunni Muslims.

<sup>104</sup> Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria. An existence denied*, Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005, pp. 75-125.

<sup>105</sup> James T. Quinlivan, "Coups-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Fall, 1999, pp. 131-165.

Formally, all branches are coordinated by the National Security Office. In practice, the office seems to have little control over other security chiefs, but its head, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Ali Mamlouk, has emerged as one of Assad's most trusted associates and envoys.

#### 5.1.4 Government Armed Forces

In 2011, the Syrian Arab Army was divided into twelve divisions, whose basing areas were heavily concentrated around Damascus and in southwestern Syria, i.e. facing Israel.<sup>106</sup>

Open-source estimates of the total force strength are mostly guesswork. By way of example, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimated Syrian military manpower at 220,000 ground troops in 2011, but simply cut that estimate in half in 2013.<sup>107</sup> In April 2015, a senior U.S. official told the *New York Times* the army had gone from 250,000 soldiers to 125,000, backed by the same number of militia.<sup>108</sup> Two well-connected commentators with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy cited an estimate of "25,000 deployable troops" in 2016, without clarifying the source.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, analysts with the Russian International Affairs Council have claimed that by 2014–2015, "some expert estimates" believed total military manpower had dwindled to around 100,000 soldiers, of whom only 20,000–25,000 served in units capable of mobile, offensive operations.<sup>110</sup>

In 2018, the manpower problem seemed to have eased somewhat after the Syrian army's Russian-backed advances reduced the number of active fronts and allowed the government to draft ex-rebels and civilians in recaptured regions.<sup>111</sup> In summer

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<sup>106</sup> Kheder Khaddour, "Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 14, 2016, online: [carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968](https://www.carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968) (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>107</sup> "Syria's diminished security forces," *Daily Star*, August 28, 2013, online: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-28/228953-syrias-diminished-security-forces.ashx#axzz35Pa7Jlek> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>108</sup> Anne Barnard, Hwaida Saad, and Eric Schmitt, "An Eroding Syrian Army Points to Strain," *New York Times*, April 28, 2015, online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/middleeast/an-eroding-syrian-army-points-to-strain.html> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>109</sup> Andrew J. Tabler and Dennis Ross, "A Syria Policy for Trump: How Washington Can Get to a Settlement," *Foreign Affairs*, November 28, 2016, online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-11-28/syria-policy-trump> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>110</sup> Grigory Lukyanov and Ruslan Mamedov, "Back to Order?" *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 6, 2017, online: [eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Back-to-Order-18763](http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Back-to-Order-18763) (retrieved September 24, 2018).

<sup>111</sup> Aymenn J. al-Tamimi, "The Post-Rebellion South: Interview," Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, August 13, 2018, online: [www.aymennjawad.org/2018/08/the-post-rebellion-south-interview](http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/08/the-post-rebellion-south-interview) (retrieved September 24, 2018).

2018, at least some conscripts enrolled in 2010 were reportedly released from active service for the first time during the war.<sup>112</sup>

Offensive operations often include elements of key praetorian units like the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored Division, and the Special Forces. All three are reportedly specially vetted for loyalty, very disproportionately Alawite, and given preferential access to modern weaponry.

Starting in summer 2011, officer-rank defections to the opposition became a growing problem along with rampant draft-dodging and conscript desertions. However, no armed units defected *en bloc* and by the time defections dried up in 2013, only a very small minority of officers had turned against the government.<sup>113</sup> Virtually all were Sunni Muslims, and most were low- or mid-ranking officers. In other words, the officer corps appears to have remained broadly intact despite a loss of base-level manpower, with few defections from the senior ranks where Alawites were most heavily over-represented. Apart from the sectarian dimension, cohesion also depended on strict internal surveillance and on a decades-long practice of enmeshing officers in state/regime patronage through Baath Party membership and perks like military housing, as well as widespread, tolerated corruption.<sup>114</sup>

#### 5.1.4.1 Military Materiel and Imports

The Soviet Union was the wholly dominant supplier of military materiel to Syria from the 1950s onward, with large quantities of materiel donated or sold on credit to match U.S. supplies to Israel. Shipments dropped sharply at the end of the Cold War but resumed on a commercial basis around 2007 following a debt write-off.<sup>115</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of conflict, the Syrian military was therefore well stocked with aging Soviet equipment, including a dense if somewhat outdated air defense

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<sup>112</sup> Maher al-Mounes, "Eight years on, Syria army conscripts pack bags for home," *AFP/Jordan Times*, June 8, 2018, online: <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/region/eight-years-syria-army-conscripts-pack-bags-home> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>113</sup> Hicham Bou Nassif reports that his informants (24 defected Syrian officers who were interviewed in Turkey in summer 2014) put the total number of officers in the pre-2011 military between 50,000 and 60,000. The highest estimate of defectors offered to him was 3,000, which would represent 5 or 6 percent of the total officer corps. Bou Nassif's informants also estimated that roughly half of all Sunni officers in the military had defected by 2014. Naturally, all these numbers should be approached with caution. Bou Nassif, "'Second-Class'."

<sup>114</sup> Kheder Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 4, 2015, online: [carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/04/assad-s-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal-pub-61449](http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/04/assad-s-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal-pub-61449) (retrieved September 18, 2018); Khaddour, "Strength in Weakness."

<sup>115</sup> Interview, Pieter Wezeman, senior researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), phone, September 2018. The debt-write off was agreed in 2005. "Russia writes off \$9.8 billion of Syrian debt," *Daily Star*, January 26, 2005, online: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2005/Jan-26/71201-russia-writes-off-98-billion-of-syrian-debt.ashx> (October 13, 2018).

network and a nearly 5,000-strong tank fleet dominated by T-55s, T-62s, and T-72s.<sup>116</sup>

Since 2011, equipment losses have been severe. Air defenses have been thinned-out and many hundreds of armored vehicles have been lost.<sup>117</sup> The air force, too, has been decimated. The widespread use from 2012 onwards of so-called barrel-bombs – primitively designed munitions dropped from transport helicopters – may indicate a shortage of purpose-built modern bombs and aircraft.

The extent to which Russia has helped replenish these losses is difficult to ascertain. According to Pieter Wezeman, a senior researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia seems to have treated arms exports to Syria as a commercial enterprise even after 2011, offering ammunition and light arms but refusing to provide any significant quantities of advanced weaponry unless paid. Deliveries of equipment already on order continued through 2011 but appear to have tapered off in 2013.<sup>118</sup> For example, Moscow refused to follow through on deliveries of MiG-29 and Yak-130 aircraft, which could likely have been of great use to the Syrian military. Although Iran has stepped forward as a supplier of light arms and rockets, Wezeman says both Russian and Iranian efforts to re-equip the Syrian military appear surprisingly limited given the many other types of assistance provided, and are not even nearly on par with U.S. arms deliveries to the Iraqi army.<sup>119</sup>

While still limited, the Russian arms flow to Syria seems to have increased again after the 2015 intervention, though not necessarily in the form of sales – the Norwegian Defense Research Institute (FFI) notes that the “dividing line between Russian arms exports and Russian military assistance has been watered down.” By early 2016, Syrian forces were reportedly receiving uniforms, bullet-proof vests, helmets, and transport trucks straight out of Russian stockpiles, as well as T-90 tanks and BTR-82 armored vehicles (possibly along with Russian personnel to drive and maintain them). It was unclear how much of this equipment was donated, on loan, paid for, or sold on credit.<sup>120</sup>

SIPRI data also registered small numbers of T-90 and T-62 tanks and BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles being shipped to Syria in the 2015–2017 period, possibly

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<sup>116</sup> “Syria’s diminished security forces.”

<sup>117</sup> Jakub Janovský, “Seven Years of War — Documenting Syrian Arab Army’s Armoured Vehicles Losses,” Bellingcat, March 27, 2018, online: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/03/27/saa-vehicle-losses-2011-2017> (retrieved September 20, 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Interview, Wezeman. Some Syrian weapons were reportedly transferred to Hezbollah, including Yakhont anti-ship missiles. J. Dana Stuster, “Why Hezbollah’s New Missiles Are a Problem for Israel,” *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2014, online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/03/why-hezbollahs-new-missiles-are-a-problem-for-israel> (retrieved September 30, 2018).

<sup>119</sup> Interview, Wezeman.

<sup>120</sup> Åtland *et al*, “Russlands militære intervensjon i Syria,” p. 31.

second-hand equipment donated as military aid.<sup>121</sup> Trenin cites Russian sources saying Moscow has delivered \$1 billion worth of arms and ammunition after 2011 and transferred “about ten” modernized Su-24 M2 bombers to Syria after 2016.<sup>122</sup>

Syria’s friendly-fire shutdown of a Russian signals-intelligence IL-20 during an Israeli raid in autumn 2018 triggered a strong reaction from Moscow, which subsequently announced the delivery to Syria of three free-of-charge S-300PM ground-to-air missile systems.<sup>123</sup> In previous years, Russian officials had repeatedly floated plans to deliver S-300s to Syria without following through, likely as a pressure tactic against Israel and the United States.<sup>124</sup>

### 5.1.5 Manpower Problems and Militias

To compensate for the army’s structural problems and manpower losses, the Syrian government began to rely on auxiliary forces very early in the conflict.<sup>125</sup> Some loyalists mobilized spontaneously, including but not limited to Alawites in politically tense, religiously mixed areas like Homs.<sup>126</sup> As insecurity spread in the first months of 2011, government supporters began to set up so-called Popular Committees to run checkpoints and night-time patrols, overseen by the security services.<sup>127</sup>

With time, some of these groups were armed by the army or private sources and grew into paramilitary formations. Many were incorporated in the National Defense Forces, an umbrella network set up with Iranian assistance in 2012 by officers linked to the ruling family.<sup>128</sup>

Separately, powerful businessmen, intelligence chiefs, and other regime power-brokers drew on private and state resources to create their own paramilitary

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<sup>121</sup> SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org) (data downloaded October 8, 2018).

<sup>122</sup> Trenin, pp. 118-9.

<sup>123</sup> “Three Russian S-300PM battalion sets delivered to Syria free of charge — source,” TASS, October 8, 2018, online: [tass.com/defense/1025020](http://tass.com/defense/1025020) (retrieved October 11, 2018).

<sup>124</sup> See for example, “Russia Says Will Deliver New Air Defense Systems to Syria Soon, Escalating Tensions With Israel,” Reuters/*Haaretz*, April 25, 2018, online: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/russia-says-will-deliver-new-air-defense-systems-to-syria-soon-escalating-tensions-with-israel-1.6029530>; Andrew Osborn, “Russia, after Netanyahu visit, backs off Syria S-300 missile supplies,” Reuters, May 11, 2018, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia/russia-after-netanyahu-visit-backs-off-syria-s-300-missile-supplies-idUSKBN1IC0SW> (both retrieved September 13, 2018).

<sup>125</sup> Aron Lund, “Chasing Ghosts: The Shabiha Phenomenon,” in Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin (eds.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, London: Hurst & Co, 2015.

<sup>126</sup> Aziz Nakkash, “The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community,” Friedrich Ebert Foundation, March 2013.

<sup>127</sup> Interview, Syrian Military Intelligence Department defector, Paris, 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Lund, “Chasing Ghosts;” Leenders and Giustozzi, “Outsourcing state violence.”



structures, working in collaboration with senior officers and army institutions. Prominent examples included:

- The Tiger Forces: recruited and led by Brig. Gen. Soheil al-Hassan to serve as the field army of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate.
- The al-Bustan militias: a network of armed groups bankrolled by Assad's businessman cousin Rami Makhlouf and supported by his charity foundation, al-Bustan.
- The Baath Battalions: a party militia developed by Hilal Hilal, Assad's deputy party leader.
- The Desert Hawks: set up by businessman brothers Ayman and Mohammed Jaber to protect their interests in the oil trade, but later developed into a heavily armed militia. This group was reportedly shut down by Assad in 2017–2018.<sup>129</sup>

Military commanders have also commonly recruited civilians on a contract basis to create local auxiliary forces, drawing on loyalist networks in their areas of operation. Funding and support for such groups was often sourced from wealthy and influential local leaders who relied on the army for protection, such as tribal sheikhs or businessmen.<sup>130</sup>

Together, these factions have come to comprise tens of thousands of fighters and make up a very large share of the government's total armed forces – very possibly the majority.

Groups outside or on the fringes of the regime have also chipped in with assistance. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party recruited in both Lebanon and Syria on behalf of its armed wing, the Hurricane Eagles. Damascus-linked Palestinian factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine/General Command were similarly tapped to contribute on the government side.

Most importantly, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Lebanon's Hezbollah have trained and embedded with local Syrian militias.<sup>131</sup> Some Iran-linked Syrian factions are, as of 2018, organized in a militia network known as the Local Defense Forces.<sup>132</sup> IRGC-linked Shia factions from Iraq have

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<sup>129</sup> On these groups, see e.g. Lund, "Chasing Ghosts;" Khaddour, "Strength in Weakness." On the crackdown against the Desert Hawks, see "al-nizam yusader amlak ayman jaber," *al-Modon*, May 30, 2018, online: <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2018/5/30/النظام-يسئولي-على-املاك-ايمن-جابر> (retrieved November 5, 2018).

<sup>130</sup> Interview, Khaddour.

<sup>131</sup> "Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training," Reuters, April 4, 2013, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404> (retrieved October 13, 2018)

<sup>132</sup> Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Think-Tanks Bark and the IRGC Moves On," *Syria Comment*, July 13, 2018, online: <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-think-tanks-bark-and-the-ircg-moves-on> (retrieved September 20, 2018).

also been recruited to fight in Syria, including groups represented in the Iraqi parliament – such as the Badr Organization and Asaeb Ahl al-Haqq – and Afghan refugees in Iran from the Hazara Shia minority have been sent to Syria to fight for a newly established faction called the Fatemiyoun Brigade. On occasion, Tehran has deployed IRGC ground forces, special forces, and even regular army units in direct combat roles.<sup>133</sup>

The foreign fighters appear to have played an important role as mobile and offensive shock troops, but information available in open sources suggest that they are relatively few in numbers. An Iranian official cited a figure of 2,100 dead by March 2017, while a study based on public propaganda and martyrdom notices found evidence of at least 2,854 deaths in Shia foreign fighter ranks between January 2012 and January 2018, of whom 43 percent were Lebanese nationals, 29 percent were Afghans, and 19 percent Iranians, alongside smaller numbers of Pakistanis and Iraqis.<sup>134</sup>

### 5.1.6 Maintaining Central Control

The emergence of so many paramilitary networks has created a diverse and unwieldy repressive apparatus, which could seem to constitute a long-term threat to centralized control. Reinoud Leindeers and Antonio Giustozzo of King's College have described the loyalist camp as a “heterarchical order,” where Syrian factions and foreign troops operate side by side in an ambiguous, nonlinear, and shifting constellation under the overall umbrella of Assad's government.<sup>135</sup>

Unsurprisingly, however, Damascus has worked assiduously to maintain overarching control over these militias and keep them dependent on the military's central structures, supply chains, and logistics.<sup>136</sup> All militias reportedly have a liaison with the military, and control is also exercised through regional Security and Military Committees that gather senior Syrian Arab Army and Military Intelligence officers.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, militia fighters do on occasion clash with each other or with the army, and they are often linked to smuggling, looting, and criminality to an extent that has frustrated a central government otherwise not easily embarrassed by corruption.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Aron Lund, “Not Just Russia: The Iranian Surge in Syria,” Carnegie Middle East Center, May 23, 2016, online: [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63650](https://www.carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63650) (retrieved September 20, 2018).

<sup>134</sup> Ali Alfoneh, “Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2018, online: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387> (retrieved, October 12, 2018).

<sup>135</sup> Leenders and Giustozzi, “Outsourcing state violence.”

<sup>136</sup> Khaddour, “Strength in Weakness.”

<sup>137</sup> Interview, Khaddour.

<sup>138</sup> “hamla amniya jadida fil-ladhiqiya: hal tantasir 'haibat al-dawla' ala abna al-mutanaffidhin wal-shabbiha?,” *Damas Post*, May 31, 2018, online: [damaspost.com/article/17237-](https://damaspost.com/article/17237-)

For example, after the long battle for Aleppo ended in a government victory in December 2016, semi-criminal militias continued to disrupt normal life with kidnappings, shootings, etc. Loyalist businessmen eventually began to lobby for a presidential intervention, complaining that trade along the vitally important Aleppo-Damascus road was being choked by checkpoints demanding “escort fees.” In summer 2017, Assad was forced to dispatch his head of General Intelligence from Damascus to take charge of a crackdown, which seems to have reduced the problems though they have not disappeared.<sup>139</sup>

Similarly, desert areas retaken from IS in 2017 remain plagued by rampant checkpoint extortion and clashes among militias vying for control over the Euphrates trade. In the eastern city of Deir al-Zor, Russian military police reportedly had to step in to separate skirmishing Tehran- and Damascus-backed groups in August 2018.<sup>140</sup>

Nevertheless, the many low-level fissures within the pro-Assad camp have not so far bloomed into systemic splintering. Intra-loyalist armed clashes remain rare compared to the turf wars that have devastated the opposition, and they are typically about money or street-level rivalries rather than politics, allegiance, and ideology. Such behavior may threaten local officials and undermine the loyalist war effort, but absent elite-level splits it does not challenge Assad’s primacy.

Importantly, most pro-government militias appear unable to break loose from the state without deflating their own power. As effective as they may be on the battlefield, they depend on the official military and other institutions, or on figures in Assad’s entourage, for access to salaries, ammunition, security clearances, air support, heavy weapons, hospital care, veterans’ benefits, etcetera; in addition, their civilian lives and families remain embedded in the prevailing order.

“If evaluated for its conventional fighting ability, the Syrian Army is weak, but in the current conflict it remains relevant and central to the regime’s survival through its investment in various functions other than direct combat,” says Kheder Khaddour, a researcher with the Carnegie Middle East Center. “[T]he Syrian army has remained the central platform for coordinating and providing logistical support

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حملة أمنية جديدة في اللاذقية هل تنتصر هبة الدولة على أبناء المتنفذين والشبيحة (retrieved November 5, 2018).

<sup>139</sup> Aron Lund, "Aleppo militias become major test for Assad," IRIN News, June 22, 2017, online: <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/06/22/aleppo-militias-become-major-test-assad> (retrieved September 12, 2018).

<sup>140</sup> Firas al-Hakkar, "al-raqqa: shatat bayn diffatay al-furat... wal-hawajez bayna-ha 'munshar'," *al-Akhbar*, July 16, 2018, online: <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/254238/الفرات-ضفتي-بين-شئات-الرقعة>; منشار بينهما والحواجز "deir al-zor: al-shurta al-rousiya tatasallam al-maaber al-nahriya min milishiyat al-nizam wa-iran," *al-Modon*, August 17, 2018, online: <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2018/8/17/مليشيات-من-النهرية-المعابر-تستلم-الروسية-الشرطة-دير الزور> (both retrieved September 12, 2018).

to the various pro-regime forces deployed around the country, for instance by sourcing and distributing weapons to the paramilitary groups.”<sup>141</sup>

While the Syrian military command has adapted pragmatically to the new situation, Assad’s foreign partners relate slightly differently to the militias. The IRGC appears perfectly at ease in Syria’s scramble of non-state and sub-state actors, whereas Russia works with militias as needed but is also attempting to return the army to a more conventional state.

Around the time of the intervention, the Syrian General Staff announced the creation of a new force called the 4th Assault Corps “to exploit the results of joint Russian-Syrian air strikes.”<sup>142</sup> It quickly disappeared from the headlines, but a year later, Russia helped create the 5th Assault Corps, widely portrayed as an attempt to regularize militias and limit Iran’s influence.<sup>143</sup> The 5th Assault Corps continues to play an active role in offensive operations, operating in close coordination with Russia and with senior Russian officers embedded in its leadership.<sup>144</sup> Somewhat belying its “regular” nature, it also appears to function as a holding unit for side-switching ex-rebels.<sup>145</sup>

## 5.2 The Tanf Border Zone

American and allied forces within the Global Coalition Against Daesh have controlled the Tanf border crossing with Iraq since 2016. Tanf lies on the main road between Damascus and Baghdad, close to the tri-border area with Jordan.

<sup>141</sup> “Despite its Weakness, the Syrian Army Remains Central to the Regime’s Survival - Syrian Expert,” *The Syrian Observer*, February 13, 2017, online: [syrianobserver.com/EN/Interviews/32329/Despite\\_Weakness\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Army\\_Remains\\_Central\\_to\\_the\\_Regime\\_Survival\\_Syrian\\_Expert](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Interviews/32329/Despite_Weakness_the_Syrian_Army_Remains_Central_to_the_Regime_Survival_Syrian_Expert) (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>142</sup> “qiyadat al-arkan al-souriya: al-faylaq al-rabea (iqtham) yabda hujouman wasiean lil-qada ala al-irhab,” al-Baath Media, October 8, 2015, online: [albaathmedia.sy/الأيوب-العقاد-المسلحة-القوات-أيوب-العقاد](http://albaathmedia.sy/الأيوب-العقاد-المسلحة-القوات-أيوب-العقاد) (retrieved September 22, 2018); “ma huwa al-failaq al-rabea iqtham alladhi sarrah an tashkili-hi al-imad ali ayyoub???” Syria Scope, October 10, 2015, online: [www.syria-scope.com/field-news/47871](http://www.syria-scope.com/field-news/47871) (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>143</sup> “uelinat an tashkil al-failaq al-khames lil-amal ila janeb al-quwwat al-musallaha,” *Tishreen*, November 23, 2016, [tishreen.news.sy/?p=58484](http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=58484) (retrieved September 11, 2018); Raid al-Salhani, “al-failaq al-khames - iqtham: fikra rousiya li-hall milishiyat,” *al-Modon*, December 22, 2016, online: <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2016/12/22/المليشيات-لحل-روسية-فكرة-اقتحام-الخامس-الفيلق> (retrieved September 18, 2018); Ibrahim al-Hamidi, “al-failaq al-khames ... jaish al-sharq al-rousi li-qamaa rufaq al-silah wa-tathbit al-silm,” *al-Hayat*, January 9, 2017, online: [www.alhayat.com/article/801141/-الفيلق-الخامس-الجيش-الشرق-الروسي-للمنع-الروسي-الشرق-الجيش-الخامس-الفيلق](http://www.alhayat.com/article/801141/-الفيلق-الخامس-الجيش-الشرق-الروسي-للمنع-الروسي-الشرق-الجيش-الخامس-الفيلق) (retrieved September 11, 2018) Lukyanov and Mamedov, “Back to Order?”

<sup>144</sup> “Russia says general killed in Syria held senior post in Assad’s army,” Reuters, September 27, 2017, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-general/russia-says-general-killed-in-syria-held-senior-post-in-assads-army-idUSKCN1C22TW> (September 11, 2018).

<sup>145</sup> Duaa al-Refaai, “fasil musallah fi bosra al-sham yandamm lil-failaq al-khames bil-jaish al-arabi al-souri,” al-Baath Media, July 2, 2018, online: [albaathmedia.sy/ينضم-الشام-بصرى-فى-مسلح-فصيل](http://albaathmedia.sy/ينضم-الشام-بصرى-فى-مسلح-فصيل) (retrieved September 12, 2018).

The area contains no proper settlements except a refugee camp, Rukban, with an estimated 30,000–50,000 inhabitants who are refused entry to Jordan.<sup>146</sup> U.S. troops steer clear of Rukban’s volatile mixture of anti-government militants, jihadi cells, and armed clans, but they patrol the surrounding desert alongside Maghawir al-Thawra, a small Coalition-backed rebel group.<sup>147</sup>

American-Russian deconfliction arrangements guarantee U.S. control within 55 km of the border crossing, and sporadic attempts by pro-Assad groups to overstep that line have been checked by Coalition air strikes and artillery fire.<sup>148</sup> Coalition and U.S. spokespersons insist that the Tanf deployment remains part of a war against IS and deny any intent to control Syrian territory.<sup>149</sup> However, U.S. debate over Tanf suggests otherwise. U.S. officials now describe the preservation of their garrison at Tanf as a way to prevent a reopening of the Baghdad-Damascus road, in order to frustrate Iranian access to Syria and Lebanon.<sup>150</sup>

### 5.3 The Northwest (Al-Bab, Efrin, Idlib)

As of 2018, what remains of Syria’s anti-Assad Sunni insurgency has been contained in the northwestern part of the country, where it survives under Turkish protection.

The northwest can be subdivided into three areas: Al-Bab, Efrin, and Idlib. The former two, which according to a humanitarian survey may hold as many as 842,000 inhabitants, are under more or less firm Turkish control through proxy rebel forces. The third and largest, Idlib, which according to the same source contains 2.49 million people, is ruled by a volatile mix of Turkish proxies and independent-minded jihadi groups.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Interview, humanitarian worker, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>147</sup> Aron Lund, “Blame Game over Syrians Stranded in the Desert,” The Century Foundation, June 18, 2018, online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/blame-game-syrians-stranded-desert> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>148</sup> For example, “U.S. aircraft conduct strike on Syrian army convoy,” CBS News, May 18, 2017, online: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-aircraft-strike-syrian-regime-forces-al-tanf-base/> “U.S. bombs Syrian army position near Tanf: pro-Assad commander,” Reuters, June 22, 2018, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/u-s-bombs-syrian-army-position-near-tanf-pro-assad-commander-idUSKBN1JH3IX> (both retrieved September 12, 2018).

<sup>149</sup> Interview, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Adrian Rankine-Galloway, email, May 2018; Interview, Global Coalition Against Daesh press official, email, May 2018.

<sup>150</sup> Missy Ryan and Greg Jaffe, “In Syria, an accidental bulwark against Iran shows confusion of Trump policy,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2018, online: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-an-accidental-bulwark-against-iran-shows-confusion-of-trump-policy/2018/05/12/458ed726-4ed7-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-an-accidental-bulwark-against-iran-shows-confusion-of-trump-policy/2018/05/12/458ed726-4ed7-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe_story.html) (retrieved September 24, 2018).

<sup>151</sup> Figures from the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team, September 2018, made available to the author. Note that humanitarian and UN population figures in Syria have often skewed high, likely due to over-reporting by local sources hoping to secure foreign assistance.

Rebel-held areas are governed by a patchwork of sharia courts, local councils, exile government institutions, and direct rule by armed groups. UN investigators have noted “arbitrary detention, hostage-taking, abductions, access to education, and [violations of] the rights of vulnerable groups,” including women and religious minorities.<sup>152</sup>

### 5.3.1 Al-Bab and Efrin

The al-Bab area, near Aleppo, was captured from IS in a Turkish-led military operation dubbed Euphrates Shield in 2016. Apart from al-Bab, main settlements include the border towns of Azaz and Jarablos. Rebels in the region are hostile to both the government, which controls Aleppo to the south, and to SDF, which holds Manbij to the east, but are banned from attacking either by their Turkish handlers.

In March 2018, Turkey led a coalition of fighters from the al-Bab region into the Kurdish enclave of Efrin, between al-Bab and Idlib. Nearly half of Efrin’s population was displaced to SDF- or army-held areas.<sup>153</sup> Turkey has since opened Efrin to Syrian rebels and civilians displaced by Assad’s forces, allowing them to settle in abandoned Kurdish homes.<sup>154</sup> YPG/SDF leaders have vowed to drive the new arrivals out and launched a low-level insurgency in the area.<sup>155</sup> Although the United States backs SDF in northeastern Syria, it wants no part of the conflict in Efrin and has not provided assistance to Kurdish fighters there.

In al-Bab and Efrin, Turkey appears to be digging in for a long stay. Turkish authorities have helped their Syrian clients set up local councils linked to the Gaziantep-based Syrian Interim Government, a cabinet-in-exile created with support from Western and Arab nations in 2013 that effectively serves as a Turkish puppet body.<sup>156</sup> Turkish flags fly alongside opposition banners, while rebel salaries, public services, and police forces are funded from Ankara, Turkish is

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<sup>152</sup> Interview, Megally.

<sup>153</sup> United Nations, “Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian situation update in Afrin District and for IDPs in surrounding communities (as of 15 June 2018),” Humanitarian Response, June 15, 2018, online: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/stima/document/syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-situation-update-afrin-district-and-idps> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>154</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property,” June 14, 2018, online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/14/syria-turkey-backed-groups-seizing-property> (retrieved September 18, 2018); United Nations, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” A/HRC/39/65, August 9, 2018, online: [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A\\_HRC\\_39\\_65\\_EN.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_39_65_EN.docx) (retrieved September 21, 2018).

<sup>155</sup> Helbast Shekhani, “YPG to stop demographic change, will target new settlers in Afrin: Spokesperson,” *Kurdistan 24*, August 12, 2018, online: [www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/e6192e00-276e-4375-9a34-da5d3597397d](http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/e6192e00-276e-4375-9a34-da5d3597397d) (retrieved September 21, 2018).

<sup>156</sup> “Syrian rebel leaders to form interim government for ‘free’ areas,” Associated Press/*The Guardian*, March 18, 2013, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/18/syrian-rebel-interim-government-free> (retrieved September 21, 2018).

taught in schools, and new bilingual Turkish-Arabic ID cards are linked to Turkey's population registry.<sup>157</sup>

The al-Bab/Efrin rebel force originally consisted of some three or four dozen non-jihadi but often Islamist factions. They have been problematic allies for Turkey, demonstrating poor discipline and clashing amongst each other.<sup>158</sup> Since 2017 Turkey has tried to establish a single chain of command by herding them into a loose, FSA-branded coalition known as the Syrian National Army, which operates under Turkish oversight. Prominent member factions include:<sup>159</sup>

- The Sultan Murad Brigade: an Arab-Turkmen group from Aleppo.
- The Moutassem Brigade: formerly U.S.-backed rebels.
- Ahrar al-Sharqiya: an Islamist faction from eastern Syria.
- The Shamiya Front: Islamists from Aleppo and Azaz, linked to border smuggling.

### 5.3.2 Idlib

The rebel-held region around Idlib, which includes adjacent parts of the Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo governorates, is often described as the last stronghold of the opposition. Through years of war, it has become a refuge for Syrians fleeing Assad's government, including fighters and activists from towns recaptured by the army. An estimated 90,000 people have been bused to Idlib as part of capitulation agreements in 2018 alone.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> El Deeb, "Blurring the border;" The Syria Report, "Turkish Hold on Syria's North Increases with ID Cards, Car Registration Plates, Electricity Supplies," August 28, 2018, online: [www.syria-report.com/news/economy/turkish-hold-syria's-north-increases-id-cards-car-registration-plates-electricity-suppl](http://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/turkish-hold-syria's-north-increases-id-cards-car-registration-plates-electricity-suppl) (retrieved September 17, 2018); "bitaqat shakhsiya jadida li-sukan marea shamali halab," *Enab Baladi*, August 8, 2018, online: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/245433> (retrieved September 17, 2018).

<sup>158</sup> During the Euphrates Shield intervention in al-Bab in 2016, coordination problems among Turkey-backed factions slowed the offensive, which saw painful Turkish losses. According to open source research compiled by the website LostArmour.info, seven Turkish Leopard 2A4 tanks were destroyed or heavily damaged by anti-tank missiles and suicide attacks in only five weeks of fighting against the Islamic State in the al-Bab region. The author wishes to thank to Jakub Janovsky for assistance. See also "The Battle for Al-Bab: Verifying Euphrates Shield Vehicle Losses," *Bellingcat*, February 12, 2017, online: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/02/12/battle-al-bab-verifying-turkish-military-vehicle-losses> (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>159</sup> "al-hukouma al-muaqqata tualan tashkil 'al-jaish al-watani al-souri'," *Baladi*, October 30, 2017, online: [https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/news/details/26258/الوطنى\\_الجيش\\_تشكيل\\_المؤقتة\\_تعن\\_تَشكِيل\\_الجيش\\_الوَطَنِي\\_السُورِي](https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/news/details/26258/الوطنى_الجيش_تشكيل_المؤقتة_تعن_تَشكِيل_الجيش_الوَطَنِي_السُورِي) (retrieved November 5, 2018); interviews with Syrian opposition members, 2018.

<sup>160</sup> Interview, humanitarian official, email, August 2018.

The UN describes civilians in Idlib as “extremely vulnerable,” with two thirds of the population in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>161</sup> Given the large numbers of displaced people already in the area, fighting could trigger mass flight on such a scale that it could “overwhelm capacities.”<sup>162</sup> Ensuring that renewed fighting in Idlib does not send hundreds of thousands of people fleeing into Turkey is accordingly “a priority” for Ankara.<sup>163</sup>

Idlib’s rebel landscape is overwhelmingly Islamist, but factions relate differently to Turkey:

- A large bloc of fighters are allied with or controlled by Turkey, similar to rebels in Efrin and al-Bab. (National Liberation Front)
- Another large bloc of fighters has worked pragmatically with Turkey to stave off a loyalist attack, but rejected Turkish-sponsored institutions. (Tahrir al-Sham)
- Some smaller groups reject any dealings with Turkey. (Hurras al-Din, Ansar al-Tawhid)

The single-strongest group in Idlib is Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as the Nusra Front.<sup>164</sup> The Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani has distanced himself from al-Qaeda, but his group of Syrian and foreign jihadis remains internationally classified as a terrorist faction, including by the UN, U.S., EU, and Turkey.<sup>165</sup> Tahrir al-Sham controls key areas of Idlib, including the provincial

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<sup>161</sup> Interview, Linda Tom, UN OCHA spokesperson, email, August 2018.

<sup>162</sup> “Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria by Mr. John Ging, Director of Operations and Advocacy, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs,” ReliefWeb, August 28, 2018, online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/briefing-security-council-humanitarian-situation-syria-mr-john-ging> (retrieved September 17, 2018).

<sup>163</sup> Interview, Armenak Tokmajyan, International Crisis Group, email, September 2018.

<sup>164</sup> Aron Lund, “Black flags over Idlib: The jihadi power grab in northwestern Syria,” IRIN News, August 9, 2017, online: <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/08/09/black-flags-over-idlib-jihadi-power-grab-northwestern-syria> (retrieved September 17, 2018); Aron Lund, “A Jihadist Breakup in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2017, online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-09-15/jihadist-breakup-syria> (retrieved September 27, 2018).

<sup>165</sup> United Nations, “Security Council ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List,” SC/13365, June 5, 2018, online: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13365.doc.htm>; “Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusrah Front,” U.S. Department of the State, May 31, 2018, online: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282880.htm>; Official Journal of the European Union, L146/3, June 11, 2018, online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018R0855&from=HU>; The Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey, August 29, 2018, online: [www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2018/08/20180831-4.pdf](http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2018/08/20180831-4.pdf) (all retrieved September 18, 2018).



capital and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which serves as a “lifeline” for the region’s population.<sup>166</sup>

As Idlib’s and Syria’s pre-eminent rebel leader, Jolani has established a tense but pragmatic relationship to Ankara, apparently hoping that a limited Turkish role in Idlib will hold his Syrian, Russian, and Iranian enemies at bay while leaving him in charge. However, Tahrir al-Sham refuses to accept the Ankara-backed Syrian Interim Government and has instead set up its own Salvation Government.

Other jihadi groups in Idlib include:<sup>167</sup>

- The Turkestan Islamic Party: a mid-size faction made up of Uighur Chinese fighters based around Jisr al-Shughour. The group’s senior leadership apparently remains based in the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands and although its Syrian wing seems to maintain some form of discreet relationship with Turkey, it has nevertheless supported Tahrir al-Sham against Ankara-backed Islamists.<sup>168</sup>
- Hurras al-Din: a small group of mostly Jordanian and Palestinian jihadis who continue to pledge fealty to al-Qaeda and criticize Jolani for going soft.
- Ansar al-Tawhid: a small ally of Hurras al-Din that may be trying to attract IS sympathizers fleeing eastern Syria.

Between October 2017 and May 2018, Turkey established twelve military outposts inside Idlib, as agreed with Iran and Russia in the Astana talks. Tahrir al-Sham

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<sup>166</sup> Interview, Pawel Krzysiek, Communication Coordinator at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Damascus, email, August 2018. In August 2018, 85 percent of all trucks carrying humanitarian assistance that entered Syria under UN auspices passed through Bab al-Hawa. UN Secretary General’s report S/2018/777.

<sup>167</sup> Aron Lund, “Syrian war: Understanding Idlib’s rebel factions,” IRIN News, September 3, 2018, online: <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/09/03/syrian-war-understanding-idlib-s-rebel-factions> (retrieved November 5, 2018); “tashkil jadid fi idleb taht musamma 'hilf nusrat al-islam,” *Enab Baladi*, April 29, 2018, online: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/225038> (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>168</sup> Interview, Ahmed Aba-Zeid, Syrian researcher and opposition member, online messaging service, September 2018; Gerry Shih, “AP Exclusive: Uighurs fighting in Syria take aim at China,” Associated Press, December 23, 2017, online: <https://apnews.com/79d6a427b26f4eeab226571956dd256e> (retrieved November 6, 2017); Message from Turkestan Islamic Party General Emir Abdelhaqq *Turkestan al-Islamiyya* No. 21, July-August 2017, pp. 33–34, available available via Jihadology.net at <https://jihadology.net/2017/08/29/new-issue-of-%e1%b8%a5izb-al-islami-al-turkistanis-magazine-turkistan-al-islamiyyah-21>; Turkestan Islamic Party statement on Idlib insurgent infighting dated February 23, 2018, available via Jihadology.net at <https://jihadology.net/2018/02/22/new-statement-from-hizb-al-islami-al-turkistani-in-bilad-al-sham-on-recent-developments-in-the-field-of-al-sham>; interview with Turkestan Islamic Party Deputy Emir Abdullah Mansour in *Turkestan al-Islamiyya* No. 24, September-October 2018, pp. 19–22, available available via Jihadology.net at <https://jihadology.net/2018/10/06/new-issue-of-%e1%b8%a5izb-al-islami-al-turkistanis-magazine-turkistan-al-islamiyyah-24> (all retrieved November 4, 2018).

reluctantly approved of the outposts, but Turkey has continued to push for the dissolution of Jolani's group, saying this is the only way avoid a loyalist attack on Idlib.<sup>169</sup> In what may have been an attempt to pressure Jolani to comply, Turkey officially designated Tahrir al-Sham an illegal terrorist faction in August 2018.<sup>170</sup>

Turkey's favored client in the Idlib region is the National Liberation Front, a hastily cobbled-together, FSA-branded coalition of local factions with close ties to the Syrian National Army rebels in Efrin and al-Bab.<sup>171</sup> Member factions include, among others:

- Ahrar al-Sham: a Salafi group based in the southwestern part of the enclave. Formerly Tahrir al-Sham's main competitor, it was decimated by the jihadis in 2017.<sup>172</sup>
- The Nouredine al-Zengi Brigades: an Islamist faction that has repeatedly switched sides between rival insurgent coalitions, based near Aleppo.
- Failaq al-Sham: a Muslim Brotherhood-linked, FSA-branded network whose leader, Col. Fadlallah al-Hajji, is the National Liberation Front's general commander.
- Jaish al-Ahrar: an Islamist group with roots in Ahrar al-Sham that briefly joined Tahrir al-Sham in 2017.<sup>173</sup>
- The Free Idlib Army: a collection of formerly Western-supported factions using the FSA brand.<sup>174</sup>

In August and September 2018, Russia put pressure on Turkey to move out of the way as Assad sent tanks and soldiers north.<sup>175</sup> Turkey stood its ground, dispatching reinforcements to the observation posts and mobilizing its rebel allies.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Interview, Aba-Zeid.

<sup>170</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey.

<sup>171</sup> "al-jabha al-wataniya lil-tahrir unwan jadid li-fasail musallaha bi-idleb," Aljazeera, August 2, 2018, online: [www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/8/2/مسلمة-لفصائل-جديد-عنوان-التحرير-الوطنية-الجبهة-بإدلب](http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/8/2/مسلمة-لفصائل-جديد-عنوان-التحرير-الوطنية-الجبهة-بإدلب) (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>172</sup> Ahmed Aba-Zeid, "kaifa anharat harakat ahrar al-sham?," Toran Center for Studies and Political Research, August 9, 2017.

<sup>173</sup> Lund, "A Jihadist Breakup in Syria."

<sup>174</sup> Lund, "Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions; interviews with Syrian opposition members, 2018.

<sup>175</sup> Aron Lund, "Idlib briefing: 'Humanitarian catastrophe' feared as Syria war reaches final rebel stronghold," IRIN News, September 3, 2018, online: <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/09/03/idlib-briefing-humanitarian-catastrophe-feared-syria-war-reaches-final-rebel> (retrieved October 3, 2018).

<sup>176</sup> Orhan Coskun and Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Turkey reinforces military in Syria's Idlib after ceasefire call fails," Reuters, September 12, 2018, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkey-reinforces-military-in-syrias-idlib-after-ceasefire-call-fails-idUSKCNILS2NO> (retrieved September 16, 2018).

On September 17, Erdogan and Putin met in Sochi and agreed to establish a buffer zone along the edge of the Idlib region's insurgent-held territory.<sup>177</sup> The Syrian and Iranian governments tentatively welcomed the agreement.<sup>178</sup> The National Liberation Front also voiced support for the agreement while Tahrir al-Sham maintained an ambiguous position, unable to justify cooperation with "unbelievers" but ultimately unwilling to confront Turkey and expose itself to attack.<sup>179</sup> As the October 15 deadline for rebel withdrawals passed, Moscow signaled continued support for the Sochi agreement and said it was "satisfied" with Turkey's efforts despite "glitches."<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> "Press statement following Russian-Turkish talks," Russian Presidency, September 17, 2018, online: [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58574](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58574) (retrieved October 1, 2018); "Russian defense minister rules out new military operation in Syria's Idlib," TASS, September 17, 2018, online: [tass.com/defense/1021975](http://tass.com/defense/1021975) (retrieved September 18, 2018). Copy of the document as circulated to the UN Security Council, via *The National* (UAE): <https://multimedia.thenational.ae/assets/imi/Russia-and-Turkey-letter-of-18-September.pdf> (retrieved October 1, 2018)

<sup>178</sup> "Syria welcomes agreement on Idleb announced in Sochi, stresses that it is outcome of intensive consultations with Russia," Syrian Arab News Agency, September 18, 2018, online: <https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=147225> (retrieved September 18, 2018); "Iran Welcomes Russia-Turkey Agreement on Syria's Idlib," Iranian Foreign Ministry, September 18, 2018, online: [en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?siteid=3&fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=36409&newsview=535561](http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?siteid=3&fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=36409&newsview=535561) (retrieved September 26, 2018).

<sup>179</sup> Interview, Sam Heller, senior fellow with International Crisis Group, phone, September 2018.

<sup>180</sup> "Russia says Syria Idlib deal going ahead despite missed deadline," AFP/*The National*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/russia-says-syria-idlib-deal-going-ahead-despite-missed-deadline-1.781157> (retrieved October 16, 2018).

## 5.4 The Kurdish-Controlled Northeast

In northeastern Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controls some 2 million people, according to humanitarian statistics.<sup>181</sup> The region is ethnically mixed: Kurds predominate along the Turkish border, while the Euphrates region is mostly inhabited by Sunni Arab clans. There are also Syriac-Assyrian minorities.

SDF governance has evolved under several different names. Since September 2018, the overarching administrative framework is known as the Northern and Eastern Syria Autonomous Administration.<sup>182</sup>

IS controlled much of the area from 2014 until 2017, but was pushed out by SDF, backed by the U.S.-led Global Coalition Against Daesh. According to the Pentagon, some 2,000 U.S. troops operated in SDF-controlled areas in mid-2018, backed by a much smaller number from France and other Coalition members.<sup>183</sup>

SDF was formed in 2015 to channel U.S. and Coalition support. It consists of several small Arab and Syriac groups gathered around the Kurdish YPG. The latter group is part of a network of PKK-linked factions in Syria, although its leaders deny any such relationship.<sup>184</sup> Over the years, this PKK network has spawned several closely related factions, including:

- The Women's Protection Units (YPJ), a women-only equivalent of YPG.
- The Democratic Unity Party (PYD), a political party.
- The Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), a social and political umbrella movement that links various PKK-friendly forces.

All of these groups are hostile to Turkey, which holds an equally dim view of them. Syria's Turkish-Kurdish conflict has turned into a political headache for Washington, which views Turkey as an indispensable NATO ally and has designated PKK as a terrorist faction, but bases its anti-IS strategy on using SDF as a ground force.

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<sup>181</sup> Figures from the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team, September 2018, made available to the author. Note that humanitarian and UN population figures in Syria have often skewed high, likely due to over-reporting by local sources eager to secure foreign assistance.

<sup>182</sup> "Northern and Eastern Syria Autonomous Administration formed," ANF News, September 6, 2018, online: <https://anfenglishmobile.com/kurdistan/northern-and-eastern-syria-autonomous-administration-formed-29464> (retrieved September 17, 2018); Interview, Ilham Ahmed, Syrian Democratic Council co-chair, online messaging service, September 2018; Hediye Yusuf, Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, online messaging service, September 2018.

<sup>183</sup> "Department Of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Mattis and General Dunford in the Pentagon Briefing Room," U.S. Department of Defense, August 28, 2018, online: <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1615116/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-mattis-and-general-dunford-in> (retrieved September 17, 2018).

<sup>184</sup> Interview, Redur Khalil, YPG spokesperson, email via intermediary, September 2013.

Syria's Kurdish areas are known in Kurdish as Rojava ("the West," for Western Kurdistan), but YPG seeks decentralized self-rule or federalism, not independence. The group stresses its Syrian identity and has moved away from nationalist nomenclature in order to make SDF work as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious movement.<sup>185</sup>

A genuinely ideology-driven group, YPG leaders promote a socialist, secularist, and feminist vision based on the thought of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan and his concept of "democratic federalism."<sup>186</sup> The basic political order is nevertheless authoritarian, with PKK loyalists overseeing major decisions and public criticism suppressed by Asayish, an internal security force.

While political control rests in Kurdish hands and SDF control over northeastern Syria's oil fields provides some economic leverage, SDF's administrative apparatus lacks the means to rebuild and govern effectively on its own. In the absence of U.S. funding and support for a major nation-building effort, the institutional and economic functioning of northeastern Syria has therefore remained linked to Damascus. Even though the cold peace between SDF and the Syrian army is occasionally punctured by clashes and there is considerable suspicion between the two sides, the central state continues to pay salaries and fund certain institutions in Kurdish-held areas, and Baathist enclaves have been allowed to remain inside SDF-held Qamishli to control Arab populations and operate a variety of institutions and services.

As awkward as the situation may be, Syria's Kurdish leaders appear quietly resigned to their continued dependence on Assad's government, even while leveraging the American presence to maximize their own autonomy.

## 5.5 Residual Islamic State Activity

IS continues to operate on a lower level in Syria after losing nearly all its territory in 2017, including through clandestine cells in areas controlled by others.<sup>187</sup> A Coalition member government estimated in mid-2018 that IS had approximately 1,000 fighters left in Syria.<sup>188</sup> U.S. military estimates and UN reports have circulated far higher numbers.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Interview, Muslim.

<sup>186</sup> Interview, Muslim.

<sup>187</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *The CTC Sentinel*, December 2017, Vol. 10, Issue 11, online: <https://ctc.usma.edu/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attrition-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond> (retrieved: October 13, 2018).

<sup>188</sup> Interview, official from a Global Coalition Against Daesh member state, 2018.

<sup>189</sup> Jeff Seldin, "Far From Dead: Tens of Thousands of IS Fighters Linger in Iraq, Syria," *Voice of America*, August 14, 2018, online: <https://www.voanews.com/a/far-from-dead-tens-of-thousands-of-is-fighters-linger-in-iraq-syria/4527452.html> (retrieved September 21, 2018).

A small pocket of IS control remains in the Albu-Kamal region of eastern Syria, where the group exploits security gaps created by the intersection of the Euphrates, the Iraqi-Syrian border, and Russian-American deconfliction agreements.<sup>190</sup> In September 2018, SDF launched an offensive against this holdout region.<sup>191</sup>

While IS appears to be broken as a military force, analysts warn that the group has considerable experience of underground operations and that continuing instability in Syria and Iraq may offer opportunities to rebound.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Hassan Hassan, "The ISIS triangle which allows militants to disappear calls for a joint operation between Iraq, Syria and the US," *The National*, April 25, 2018, online: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-isis-triangle-which-allows-militants-to-disappear-calls-for-a-joint-operation-between-iraq-syria-and-the-us-1.724641> (retrieved September 14, 2018).

<sup>191</sup> "US-backed force attacks last IS pocket in eastern Syria," BBC, September 11, 2018, online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45484091> (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>192</sup> Hassan, "Insurgents Again."



## 6 Emerging Key Questions

### 6.1 Will Chemical Weapons or Iran Trigger Escalation?

As of 2018, the Syrian war appears likely to be allowed to wind down on Assad's terms. Nevertheless, an unexpected escalation, military accidents and miscalculations, or a disruptive internal event on the loyalist side could still change the course of the conflict. As unlikely as they may be, possible game-changers could include leadership deaths and sudden illnesses, coups and internal splintering, or social unrest in Damascus, Tehran, or Moscow.

In addition, two issues in particular could conceivably trigger escalatory measures by powerful external actors: conflict over Syria's chemical weapons, or over the role of Iran.

Investigations by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have found Assad's forces guilty of using poison gas on at least four occasions between 2014 and 2017, although the OPCW has documented many other attacks without pointing to a perpetrator. In June 2018, the OPCW voted to declare that Syria has "failed to declare and destroy all of its chemical weapons and chemical weapons production facilities."<sup>193</sup>

Chemical weapons use is one of the few issues in Syria that the United States has warned that it will police militarily, even after stepping away from the war to overthrow Assad. Furthermore, Russia's vetoing of UN investigations in Syria in 2017 has left the international community without a consensual mechanism to handle chemical attack allegations through investigations and sanctions, which, paradoxically, incentivizes unilateral Western military action.<sup>194</sup>

Western missile attacks on Syrian government installations took place in April 2017 and April 2018. In August 2018 the United States, France, and the United Kingdom jointly declared that they will "respond appropriately" in the event of another chemical attack.<sup>195</sup> Although the 2017 and 2018 strikes were narrowly targeted and gave the impression of wanting to avoid an escalatory spiral, an unconfirmed account claims Trump initially called for Assad's death in response

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<sup>193</sup> "Decision: Addressing the threat from chemical weapons use," OPCW, C-SS-4/DEC.3, June 27, 2018, online: [https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-SS-4/en/css4dec3\\_e\\_.doc.pdf](https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-SS-4/en/css4dec3_e_.doc.pdf) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>194</sup> Lund, "Russia has finished off..."

<sup>195</sup> U.K. Government website, "Chemical weapons attack in Syria."



to the April 2017 sarin attack.<sup>196</sup> True or not, a strong U.S. reaction to reports of another chemical attack in Syria, or a military miscalculation on either side, could conceivably trigger an unpredictable chain of events.

Another vulnerability for the loyalist camp is Assad's heavy dependence on Iranian support. As of 2018, Tehran is under severe economic pressure, and the United States is piling on new sanctions. If at some point the socio-economic crisis in Iran were to grow unmanageable, the repercussions could soon be felt in Syria.

In addition, the expanding Iranian role in Syria is viewed as a major irritant by several pro-opposition nations, whose pushback tends to spill over on Assad. The United States has since summer 2017 re-committed itself to stay in Syria and undermine the Syrian government through economic sanctions, but motivates that strategy mostly by pointing to Assad's alliance with Iran. For its part, Israel has launched numerous air strikes against alleged Iran-linked targets in Syria and continues to warn that it will act unilaterally as needed, although Russia's presence in Syria acts as a formidable obstacle to large-scale operations against Syrian government targets.

## 6.2 Will Russia and Turkey Cut a Deal Over the Northwest?

As shown by the Russian-Turkish Sochi agreement on September 17, which deflected or at least postponed a planned Syrian military offensive, the fate of the northwest now rests on decisions made in Ankara and Moscow.<sup>197</sup> But Turkey has never clearly defined its plans for the area, and Russia balances contradictory interests.

Turkey shows no sign of wanting to relinquish the Efrin and al-Bab regions, and is working to shore up its hold on Idlib. Erdogan has never made an explicit claim on northwestern Syria, but says Turkish troops will stay until Syrians have had an election, effectively deferring any questions about Turkey's presence to the other side of the UN's jammed transition process.<sup>198</sup>

As for Russia, it remains hostile to the Syrian opposition and is publicly committed to restoring central government control across the country. But Putin certainly

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<sup>196</sup> Tal Axelrod, "Trump wanted to assassinate Assad after chemical attack: Woodward book," *The Hill*, September 4, 2018, online: <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/404936-trump-wanted-to-assassinate-assad-after-chemical-attack-on-civilians> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>197</sup> Ece Göksedef, "Behind the scenes of the Turkey-Russia Idlib deal," *Middle East Eye*, September 21, 2018, online: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/deal-behind-idlib-deal-890229553> (retrieved September 26, 2018)..

<sup>198</sup> "Turkey will not leave Syria until Syrian people have an election, Erdoğan says," *Reuters/Yeni Safak*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/turkey-will-not-leave-syria-until-syrian-people-have-an-election-erdogan-says-3462699> (retrieved October 18, 2018).

knows that Assad could survive in power without reclaiming peripheral, resource-poor, and rebel-friendly regions like Idlib, Efrin, and al-Bab. Russia also needs Turkey's assistance if it hopes to minimize fighting and influence Syrian peace talks. Last but not least, Moscow treasures its improving ties to Ankara for economic and strategic reasons that resonate far beyond Syria.

Ultimately, all or some of the northwest may return to Syrian government control through military action, land swaps, or other types of negotiations. But judging by the situation in autumn 2018, some of these areas appear more likely to be left in Turkish hands indefinitely, creating a long-term "frozen conflict" in which the unresolved state of the northwest evolves into a new normal, with or without some form of political track to determine their status. Of course, this would add pressure on Turkey to solve the problem of Tahrir al-Sham and other terrorist-listed groups operating in Idlib.

### **6.3 Will the United States Invest in Kurdish Self-Rule?**

For Assad and his allies, ousting the United States from northeastern Syria is a highly prioritized goal, both because Damascus needs the region's oil and agricultural wealth and because gaining leverage over SDF may create diplomatic openings with Turkey. But it is not a goal they can accomplish by military means, as long as U.S. troops are stationed in the region.

Russia's Lavrov has accused the United States of "trying absolutely illegally to create a quasi-state" in northeastern Syria.<sup>199</sup> For its part, the United States insists that it is "committed to the unity and territorial integrity of Syria" but argues that a solution must come through the UN talks in Geneva – which creates a basically unlimited timeline, since the Geneva talks are not going anywhere.<sup>200</sup>

While all sides wait for the United States to make up its mind about what it wants to do with northeastern Syria, the Trump White House has tipped back and forth between two largely incompatible policies: it wants to use the U.S. troops in Syria to pressure Iran, but also reduce U.S. exposure to the conflict.

Policy has swung sharply between these extremes. Trump's initial view of Syria was that the sooner the United States could withdraw, the better. However, in late 2017, he approved then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson's plan for an indefinite U.S. presence in Syria, to bleed Assad economically and frustrate Iran. Tillerson

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<sup>199</sup> "Excerpts from Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answers to questions from RT France, Paris Match and Figaro, Moscow, October 12, 2018," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, October 12, 2018, [www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3373322](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3373322).

<sup>200</sup> Interview, U.S. State Department official, online messaging service, September 2018.

also supported limited U.S. civilian aid to SDF-held areas, on the argument that unless basic services and policing are restored, the region will be vulnerable to Syrian government and IS subversion.<sup>201</sup>

In spring 2018, Trump abruptly fired Tillerson. He also called for troop withdrawals from Syria and ordered cuts in the aid package for SDF, saying Gulf Arab rulers could pay for it.<sup>202</sup>

Deeply alarmed, SDF leaders scrambled to start negotiations with Damascus over a “federal state” while U.S. troops still added weight to their arguments.<sup>203</sup> Syrian authorities were less than forthcoming, with Foreign Minister Moallem insisting that the Kurds will never be granted federal rule, although he said dialogue remained preferable to a military confrontation.<sup>204</sup> The United States raised no objection to the Kurdish diplomatic gambit, saying only that it was “aware of” but “not involved” in the talks.<sup>205</sup>

U.S. policy then shifted again. In summer 2018, Saudi Arabia and other Coalition members agreed to fund \$300 million worth of aid, which allowed the United States to eliminate its own Tillerson-era stabilization package (as Trump had requested).<sup>206</sup> In what may have been a quid-pro-quo, Trump green-lighted a U.S. troop presence in Syria through 2018.<sup>207</sup> Around the same time, staffing changes at the State Department gave another boost to the stay-in-Syria camp, with the new U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey telling reporters U.S. troops will stay in Syria until Iran leaves.<sup>208</sup> SDF leaders initially tried to hedge by continuing talks with Damascus even as they applauded the U.S. decision, but eventually withdrew from the negotiations.

It remains to be seen whether or how long the Iran-focused, high-pressure policy heralded by Jeffrey’s appointment will last, what sort of risks U.S. personnel may

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<sup>201</sup> Tillerson, “Remarks on the Way Forward.”

<sup>202</sup> “Trump still wants US troops to leave Syria 'as quickly as possible' - White House,” *Sky News*, April 16, 2018, online: <https://news.sky.com/story/assad-accuses-us-uk-and-france-of-waging-campaign-of-lies-to-launch-syria-air-strikes-11333212> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>203</sup> “Syrian Kurdish group ready to talk to Damascus,” Associated Press/Gulf News, June 6, 2018, online: <https://gulffnews.com/news/mena/turkey/syrian-kurdish-group-ready-to-talk-to-damascus-1.2233026> (retrieved September 14, 2018); Interview, Yusuf.

<sup>204</sup> “al-moallem li-RT: la-natatallaa li-muwajaha maa turkiya lakin alay-ha an tafham anna idleb souriya,” *Rusiya al-Yawm*, September 1, 2018, online: [https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/967045-sورية-إدلب-أن-تفهم-أن-عليها-لكن-تركيا-مع-لمواجهة-لا-تنتطع-ال-المعلم](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/967045-sورية-إدلب-أن-تفهم-أن-عليها-لكن-تركيا-مع-لمواجهة-لا-تنتطع-ال-المعلم) (retrieved September 17, 2018).

<sup>205</sup> Interview, U.S. State Department official, online messaging service, September 2018.

<sup>206</sup> “Saudi Arabia contributes \$100 mln to Global Coalition fighting ISIS,” Saudi Press Agency/al-Arabiya, August 17, 2018, online: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/08/17/Saudi-Arabia-contributes-100-mln-to-Global-Coalition-fighting-ISIS.html> (retrieved September 22, 2018).

<sup>207</sup> Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts To Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS,” U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2018, online: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285202.htm> (retrieved September 18, 2018).

<sup>208</sup> Labott, “US Envoy to Syria.”

face in Syria, and how Trump would react to casualties, other setbacks, or long-term costs. How long northeastern Syria can remain as an SDF-ruled breakout region now seems likely to be decided by an Iran-centric American debates, which are largely detached from SDF's own problems.

## 6.4 Will Assad Secure Reconstruction Funding?

Syria has suffered immense material, social, and economic destruction since 2011. GDP decreased by four fifths in the 2010–2016 period, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics.<sup>209</sup> A World Bank investigation of eight conflict-hit governorates in 2017 found that 8 percent of the housing stock had been fully destroyed and another 20 percent damaged.<sup>210</sup> Many hospitals have been destroyed, medical staff has fled abroad, and gaps in vaccine coverage has revived infectious diseases like measles and polio.<sup>211</sup> One in three schools have ceased to function, some 180,000 teachers and other educational personnel have left their posts, and two million Syrian children are out of school.<sup>212</sup> Brain drain has been severe, and pro-government businessmen complain that it is difficult to find trained staff even for basic secretarial work.<sup>213</sup>

To stabilize the country and put Syria on the path to recovery, the government will need to construct new housing, rebuild infrastructure and public services, create jobs, restore the education and health sectors, and find a way to demobilize armed groups in a safe and sustainable manner. It is an enormously expensive undertaking, but funding is nowhere in sight.

In a May 2018 interview, Assad said a reconstruction program could run into the \$200–\$400 billion range – far beyond the capacity of his government, whose state budget for 2018 was worth approximately \$7.3 billion.<sup>214</sup>

Neither Russia, Iran, nor China have been willing to offer much in the way of direct economic assistance for civilian reconstruction, though all three seem eager to position themselves to pick up contracts in the event that Assad's Western and

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<sup>209</sup> “Syria’s GDP at Only a Fifth of Pre-Uprising Level,” The Syria Report, May 15, 2018, online: <http://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/syria%2525E2%252580%252599s-gdp-only-fifth-pre-uprising-level> (retrieved September 24, 2018).

<sup>210</sup> World Bank, “The Toll of War.”

<sup>211</sup> Email communication with the WHO office in Damascus, September 2018.

<sup>212</sup> Email to the author, Tamara Kummer, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, September 2018.

<sup>213</sup> Interview, pro-government businessman, Damascus, November 2016.

<sup>214</sup> “President al-Assad to Greek Kathimerini newspaper: Syria is fighting terrorists, who are the army of the Turkish, US, and Saudi regimes-video,” Syrian Arab News Agency, May 10, 2018, online: <https://sana.sy/en/?p=137019> (retrieved September 12, 2018); “President Assad issues law on 2018 state budget set at SYP 3,187 billion,” Syrian Arab News Agency, December 10, 2017, online: <https://sana.sy/en/?p=120756> (retrieved September 24, 2018).

Arab enemies were to provide financing. Nations critical of Assad already finance virtually all of the emergency humanitarian assistance offered to Syrians, including in government-held areas.<sup>215</sup>

However, these mostly Western and Gulf Arab nations have so far refused to do the same when it comes to post-war reconstruction, which would entail long-term investments in Syrian infrastructure, economic development, and housing. Any such program would need to be coordinated with the Syrian government and while it would alleviate humanitarian suffering, it would also directly contribute to shoring up Assad's position. Western donor states have voiced concerns about government-organized theft and diversion of aid money if they were to fund a reconstruction program, noting a well-documented pattern of exploitation of UN humanitarian programs by senior regime leaders.<sup>216</sup>

In September 2017, a group of nations that collectively finance the vast majority of humanitarian aid in Syria – including the United States, the EU, Norway, Canada, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – met in New York to jointly declare that they will never fund a reconstruction program in Syria unless Assad agrees to a transition.<sup>217</sup>

U.S. and EU sanctions on Syria also remain highly problematic for the government, and detrimental to the economy as a whole.<sup>218</sup> A UN rapporteur has warned that sanctions hurt civilians and deal unintended damage to humanitarian operations, partly due to the “chilling effect” on companies faced with having to navigate murky, overlapping sanctions regimes.<sup>219</sup>

Assad has shown himself no more willing to bend to economic strangulation than to military pressure, but he still needs money and investments to revive the Syrian economy and sustain regime patronage networks.

The government has experimented with developing private-public partnerships, courting expat and foreign businessman investments, and selling off resources like land. Reconstruction and slum-clearing laws (chiefly Decree 66 of 2012 and Law

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<sup>215</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Syria Regional Crisis Overview, 2017, [https://fts.unocha.org/emergencies/600/donors/2017?order=total\\_funding&sort=desc](https://fts.unocha.org/emergencies/600/donors/2017?order=total_funding&sort=desc) (retrieved September 24, 2018).

<sup>216</sup> Aron Lund, “The UN Enters Syria’s Moral Labyrinth,” Carnegie Middle East Center, September 9, 2016, online: [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64524](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64524) (retrieved September 23, 2018).

<sup>217</sup> “Joint Statement From the Ministerial Discussion on Syria,” Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, September 21, 2017, online: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274356.htm> (retrieved September 24, 2018).

<sup>218</sup> Angus McDowall, “Long reach of U.S. sanctions hits Syria reconstruction,” Reuters, September 2, 2018, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sanctions/long-reach-of-us-sanctions-hits-syria-reconstruction-idUSKCN1LI06Z> (retrieved September 23, 2018).

<sup>219</sup> United Nations, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights,” A/HRC/39/54, August 30, 2018, online: [https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session39/Documents/A\\_HRC\\_39\\_54\\_EN.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session39/Documents/A_HRC_39_54_EN.docx) (retrieved September 12, 2018).

10 of 2018) have been issued to enable the expropriation and for-profit redevelopment of valuable urban areas, notably in Damascus. However, critics say these laws are geared to the interests of regime-linked businessmen, favor private profits over massive construction, and could be used politically to dispossess refugees.<sup>220</sup> In July 2018, forty pro-opposition nations co-signed a Turkish-German letter to the UN secretary-general warning that Law 10 could “significantly hinder” refugee return.<sup>221</sup>

With time, the taboo against engaging Assad’s government will likely begin to fade, and at least some Western and Arab governments will seek to engage Damascus over reconstruction, refugees, counter-terrorism, chemical weapons, or other issues of concern. Even so, anger with Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran is so strong, and reinforced by U.S. pressure to continue the boycott strategy, that a major reconstruction effort appears unlikely in the foreseeable future.

## 6.5 Will Refugees Be Able to Return?

The reconstruction issue is, of course, closely linked to the issue of refugee return. While some refugees fled political persecution or military conscription and are unlikely to want to return to an Assad-controlled Syria, others left simply to seek safety or shelter, join relatives in exile, or to escape deteriorating economic conditions. So far, however, only small numbers have returned to Syria.<sup>222</sup>

Although the issue of Syrian refugee return is often debated with an eye to Europe’s million-strong Syrian diaspora, that isn’t where the actual impact will be felt. Syrian asylum-seekers in the EU, most of whom are in Germany or Sweden, generally enjoy strong legal protections and comparatively very good economic conditions, and most will with time gain citizenship. They are highly unlikely to ever go back in significant numbers.

However, illiberal regional states like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan – where over five million refugees reside – offer far worse economic conditions and are generally less respectful of legal obstacles to forcible repatriation.<sup>223</sup> Apart from a mostly symbolic effort to naturalize small numbers of refugees in Turkey, all

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<sup>220</sup> Aron Lund, “Dispossession or development? The tug of war over Syria’s ruined slum dwellings,” IRIN News, July 4, 2018, online: <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/07/04/dispossession-or-development-tug-war-over-syria-s-ruined-slum-dwellings> (retrieved September 27, 2018).

<sup>221</sup> “Letter dated 12 July 2018 from the Permanent Representatives of Germany and Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council,” UN Security Council, S/2018/700, online: [undocs.org/S/2018/700](https://undocs.org/S/2018/700) (retrieved October 13, 2018).

<sup>222</sup> For example, between January 2016 and May 2018, just under 17,000 refugees returned from Jordan out of 666,000 refugees in the country. Interview, Juliette Stevenson, UNHCR external relations officer, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>223</sup> David Enders, “Pressure to return builds on Syrian refugees in Lebanon,” IRIN News, August 20, 2018, online: <https://www.irinnews.org/news-feature/2018/08/20/return-syrian-refugees-lebanon-hezbollah> (retrieved September 24, 2018).

regional governments have so far refused to offer any path to permanent integration and citizenship for Syrians. At the same time, they appear to fear that the refugees will over time “Palestinianize” and form a stateless-yet-politicized, multi-generation diaspora that could be profoundly destabilizing, if allowed to stay.

Unsurprisingly, the refugee issue is now starting to crop up as a central issue in Russian and Syrian government rhetoric. In summer 2018, both Moscow and Damascus created government organs to promote refugee return and offered to coordinate with regional and Western capitals.<sup>224</sup> The fact that only a functioning economy that offers jobs, schools, and housing can incentivize refugees to return voluntarily is not lost on either side of the debate, and Damascus clearly hopes to leverage the refugee problem to re-legitimize Assad’s presidency and lead the discussion back to reconstruction and sanctions relief.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> “Joint Coordination Centre of Russian Defence Ministry and Russian Foreign Ministry for refugees returning to Syria holds planning meeting in Moscow,” Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, July 20, 2018, [eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12186855@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12186855@egNews) (retrieved September 23, 2018).; “al-hukouma al-souriya tushakkil lajnat tansiq li-iadat al-lajein min al-kharej,” *al-Hayat*, August 6, 2018, online: [www.alhayat.com/article/4596599/سياسة-العرب-الحكومة-السورية-تشكل-لجنة-تشكل-السورية-الحكومة-العرب-سياسة](http://www.alhayat.com/article/4596599/سياسة-العرب-الحكومة-السورية-تشكل-لجنة-تشكل-السورية-الحكومة-العرب-سياسة) (retrieved September 23, 2018).

<sup>225</sup> “Refugees have become a pawn in the struggle for Syria,” *The Economist*, August 2, 2018, online: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/02/refugees-have-become-a-pawn-in-the-struggle-for-syria> (retrieved September 24, 2018).

## 7 Conclusions

As the Syrian war heads into its eighth year, Bashar al-Assad appears to have won a strategic victory, even as lower-level conflict continues. Domestic and international resistance to his rule has receded and calls for his resignation now ring hollow. Russia has forcefully established itself as the primary external influence on the conflict since 2015, which offers Assad added protection against externally-driven escalation.

Even so, the social and political ills that paved the way for conflict in 2011 are emphatically unresolved, and Assad's regime has rejected all demands for genuine reform, compromise, or accountability. Although opposition forces are largely exhausted and broken, the current conflict may simply have laid the groundwork for the next one.

As the conflict moves into 2019, several key questions will determine not only Assad's future but also the form and functioning of the country he governs – and many of these questions are in the hands of foreign actors.

- Though unlikely, a withdrawal of support by allies or escalation by external enemies could still, in theory, break Assad's winning trend. Potential triggers include real or alleged chemical weapons use and conflicts related to Iran's regional role.
- If the September 17 Turkish-Russian agreement on a long-term ceasefire and a buffer zone in Idlib turns out to be sustainable, all or part of the rebel-held northwest could stay under Turkish protection for the foreseeable future. If so, it would create a long-term unresolved "frozen conflict" whose intra-Syrian hostilities are limited and mediated by Turkish and Russian interests.
- Similarly, U.S. policy choices are key to the future of the Kurdish-held northeast and the Tanf border area. Internal U.S. debate over Syria is increasingly removed from Syria itself, focusing instead on Iran's role in the region. After considerable confusion, summer 2018 saw Washington settle on the idea of an indefinite presence in northeastern Syria to weaken Assad and counter Iranian influence, potentially creating yet another "frozen conflict." However, given the relentless Turkish hostility to America's Kurdish allies and the continued volatility of U.S. policymaking under Trump, it remains very unclear whether these decisions will translate into a sustained strategy that carries over to the 2020s.
- Whatever the future geographic shape of an Assad-ruled Syria, the Syrian president will be hard pressed to restart his resource-starved, sanctioned, and broken economy. Major reconstruction support is very unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future, and may never come. In an environment



of scarce resources and weakened central control, state policies may bend in politically and financially irrational directions to satisfy constituent interests, including rent-seeking business and militia strongmen empowered by the war.

- The fate of Syria's refugee diaspora will be of enormous consequence not only to Syria, but also to the wider region. The issue of refugee return is closely linked to economic reconstruction and Assad's perceived international legitimacy, which makes it inherently political and vulnerable to manipulation from all sides, likely to the detriment of vulnerable civilians.

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## 8.2 Interviews

(Anonymous interviewees not listed)

- Ahmed Aba-Zeid, Syrian researcher and opposition member, online messaging service, September 2018
- Ilham Ahmed, Syrian Democratic Council co-chair, online messaging service, September 2018.
- Bashar al-Assad, president of Syria, Damascus, October 2016
- Alexander Bick, U.S. National Security Council director for Syria 2014–2016 and research fellow at the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins-SAIS, phone, October 2018
- Bassam Barabandi, former Syrian diplomat, Washington, October 2018
- Derek Chollet, U.S. assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs 2012–2015, phone, August 2016
- Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy, Stockholm, October 2018
- Dina Esfandiary, fellow with The Century Foundation and international security program research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, phone, September 2018
- Philip H. Gordon, senior fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations and former special assistant to the U.S. president and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region (2013–2015), Washington, October 2018
- Jakob Hedenskog, deputy research director with the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project on Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy (RUFSS), Stockholm, October 2018
- Sam Heller, senior fellow with the International Crisis Group, phone, September 2018
- Abdelhalim Khaddam, former Syrian vice president, Brussels, April 2009
- Kheder Khaddour, fellow with the Carnegie Middle East Center, phone, September 2018
- Redur Khalil, YPG spokesperson, email, September 2013
- Nikolay Kozhanov, former Russian diplomat and nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center and visiting lecturer in the political economy of the Middle East at the European University at St. Petersburg, phone, June 2016
- Pawel Krzysiek, Communication Coordinator at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Damascus, email, August 2018
- Robert Malley, president and CEO of the International Crisis Group and former special assistant to the U.S. president and White House coordinator

for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region (2015–2017), Washington, November 2018

- Hanny Megally, commissioner on the UN’s International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, email, September 2018
- Andrej Mahecic, UNHCR Syria spokesperson, email, October 2018
- Hanna Notte, political officer with the Shaikh Group, phone, October 2018
- Saleh Muslim, TEV-DEM foreign relations executive and former PYD co-chair, Stockholm, March 2018
- Rouzbeh Parsi, director of the Middle East Program at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, Stockholm, October 2018
- Gudrun Persson, associate professor at Stockholm University and program manager for the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project on Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy (RUFS), phone, October 2018
- Adrian Rankine-Galloway, U.S. Department of the Defense spokesperson, email, May 2018
- Michael Sahlin, distinguished associate fellow with the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, email, September 2018, and Stockholm, October 2018
- Alexander Shulgin, Russian permanent representative to the OPCW, email, April 2017
- Juliette Stevenson, UNHCR external relations officer, Amman, April 2018
- Armenak Tokmajyan, fellow with the International Crisis Group, email, September 2018
- Linda Tom, UN OCHA spokesperson, email, August 2018
- Ahmet Üzümcü, OPCW director-general, The Hague, February 2018
- Fredrik Westerlund, deputy research director with the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project on Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy (RUFS), Stockholm, October 2018
- Pieter Wezeman, senior researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), phone, September 2018
- Hediye Yusuf, Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, online messaging service, September 2018
- Eyal Zisser, Tel-Aviv University, email, November 2013



As the Syrian war heads into its eighth year, the government of President Bashar al-Assad appears to have won a strategic victory. Though lower-level conflict continues, domestic and international resistance to his rule has receded and Russia has forcefully established itself as the primary external actor in Syria.

However, Assad's regime has rejected all demands for genuine reform or accountability, and the social, economic, and political ills that paved the way for conflict in 2011 remain emphatically unresolved.

As the conflict moves into 2019, several key questions will determine not only Assad's future but also the form and functioning of the country he governs – and many of these questions are now in the hands of foreign actors.