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International actors in the Syrian conflict

Eight years after it began, Syria's long and bloody civil war is edging to its conclusion. The various domestic forces challenging President Bashar al-Assad's rule have largely been defeated, and those that remain in the field are fighting for survival in distant pockets rather than threatening Damascus. Rebel forces, who initially took up arms in response to al-Assad's repression of peaceful protesters in 2011, retain only the northern province of Idlib and the eastern border town of al-Tanf. The so-called Islamic State (IS) has been ejected from its former stronghold of Eastern Syria. Meanwhile, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who defeated them, now fear conquest by either al-Assad or Turkey.

Al-Assad may not yet control all of pre-war Syria, but he has vowed to recapture 'every inch', and with his enemies looking spent this no longer seems impossible. However, much will be out of al-Assad's hands. His relative victory, and his enemies' defeat, has been shaped by the actions of external powers, whether his allies Russia and Iran, or his enemies the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. While Syrian forces have not been the puppets of foreign powers, they have frequently been enabled or hindered by external backers. This will remain so as the conflict enters its endgame, with regional and international governments playing a key role in determining how, if at all, Syria's war ends.

I. Moscow and Washington

At the international level, Russian and American interventions have played a major role in determining the conflict, and their

machinations will shape whatever outcome emerges. Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to send forces to Syria in September 2015 was a key turning point in the war. This shored up the government from what looked like an impending collapse, reviving al-Assad's fortunes against the rebels and IS. It also ultimately positioned Russia as the leading external power in Syria, accepted – however reluctantly – by regional powers and the US.¹ Yet Moscow impacted the war before 2015 too, providing al-Assad with key diplomatic, economic and military support. As early as October 2011, a few months into the anti-al-Assad rebellion, Russia deployed its veto at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to protect Damascus from international condemnation, and with it harsher sanctions and possibly military action. It would go on to protect Syria by veto eleven more times. Russia similarly frustrated Western and regional powers from engineering al-Assad's departure via UN-led mediation efforts, such as the 2012 Geneva summit. Economically, Moscow helped Syria circumvent Western sanctions and provided a generous line of credit on vital new arms purchases.²

After 2015 Russian military support was key to al-Assad's reconquests. The Russian air force and special forces supported Syrian and Iranian-backed forces in a string of military victories in 2016-18, including the capture of Eastern Aleppo, Ghouta and Deraa from the rebels, and Palmyra and Deir-Es-Zor from IS. Yet Moscow's involvement went far beyond the military. It deepened its physical presence in Syria, building a major new air base in Khmeimim near Lattakia, expanding its

¹ Katz, *Balancing Act*, 2018.

² Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 2016, 147-150.

existing naval base in Tartus, and reportedly building several smaller outposts in southern and eastern Syria. It strengthened its institutional ties with Syria's military, training and equipping a new division of the Syrian army, the Fifth Corps, and forging close ties with al-Assad's crack troops, the 'Tiger Forces'.³ Economically, Russian companies are expected to play a leading role in Syria's reconstruction, with energy companies in particular being courted by Damascus and promoted by the Kremlin.⁴ This presence was broadly welcomed by many al-Assad supporters, preferring secular Russia to al-Assad's other key ally, Islamist Iran.⁵

The depth of its involvement in Syria, and the sense that it is there to stay, greatly enhanced Russia's leverage as the conflict's key international broker. Moscow initiated its own mediation, the Astana process, which heavily favoured al-Assad, unlike earlier UN talks. Turkey was persuaded by concessions in northern Syria to join Russia and Iran as guarantors of 'de-escalation zones', which al-Assad then broke, with Russian acquiescence, to retake all rebel areas bar Idlib. Thereafter Moscow presented al-Assad's continued rule as a *fait accompli*. It oversaw a deliberately laboured process of drawing up a new Syrian constitution, which would still keep al-Assad in charge, while urging former foes to re-open ties with Damascus and provide much needed reconstruction aid.

While some observers saw Russia's successes in Syria as a US defeat, in reality Washington had very different aims and interests to Moscow. Syria had been Moscow's ally dating back to the 1960s, with Tartus its only Mediterranean naval base, and

as such, Russia was likely to fight hard to defend al-Assad. In contrast, the US shifted its priorities. Early in the war it called for al-Assad's departure, launching sanctions against him and supporting rebel forces to achieve this goal. Yet toppling al-Assad was never the only priority. The Obama administration also wished to prevent the usage and proliferation of al-Assad's chemical weapons (CW), limit the power of Jihadists and avoid damaging the president's geostrategic goals, notably negotiating a nuclear disarmament agreement with al-Assad's ally, Iran. The ebbing and flowing of these priorities produced inconsistent US policies that frustrated the rebels and Washington's anti-al-Assad regional allies, like Turkey. For example, Obama was reluctant to arm the rebels, fearing weapons would fall into the hands of Jihadists among them, yet eventually relented – only to discover that by this point the moderate rebels were already too weak.⁶ He likewise threatened al-Assad with a 'red line' if he used CW, but then pulled out of a prepared strike in September 2013, accepting instead a Russian mediated deal to remove Syria's stockpile. He then did launch strikes on Syria the next year, but against IS in the east instead of al-Assad, and favoured arming and training the Kurdish-led SDF rather than the rebels. Such policies shaped the conflict and contributed, alongside the machinations of regional powers, to the weakness of the rebels that aided al-Assad's victory.

Russia's intervention combined with the coming to office of President Donald Trump in early 2017 saw further shifts in US priorities. Though Trump did launch two punishing missile strikes when al-Assad was

³ Waters, *The Tiger Forces*, 2018.

⁴ Hille, Foy and Seddon, *Russian business first in line*, 2018.

⁵ Lazkani, *Local actors in the Syrian coast*, 2018.

⁶ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 2015, 1-10.

alleged to have used CW in violation of the 2013 agreement, he appeared even less committed to toppling the Syrian president than Obama was. Brash and unpredictable, in July 2017 Trump abruptly ended Timber Sycamore, the CIA-led programme that armed and trained moderate rebels. A year later he said little when al-Assad and Russia disregarded a US-guaranteed ceasefire to force them out of southern Syria. Trump's immediate focus instead was expanding Obama's anti-IS campaign, upping the arms to the SDF and increasing US forces to 2,000. For a while this allowed Kurdish-led eastern Syria to become a US-protected fiefdom, with hawkish officials such as National Security Advisor John Bolton drawing up plans to use the region as a permanent buffer against Iran.⁷ Yet in December 2018, Trump suddenly announced his intention to withdraw all US forces from Syria. Washington's shifting priorities, in this case Trump's desire to fulfil election pledges to bring troops home, once again had shaped the conflict on the ground, leaving the Kurds to the mercy of Turkey or al-Assad and seemingly removing the last major obstacle to Russia's dominance.

II. Regional players

At the regional level, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have all played a role in the conflict, whether sponsoring different actors, directly intervening or both. Regional powers had taken the lead earlier in the war, especially Iran, Turkey and the Gulf powers, but tended to balance one another out, creating a stalemate.⁸ After the involvement of the US and Russia from 2014-15, the regional powers' impact was reduced, though Iran and Turkey especially continued to play a sizeable role.

II.1 Iran

Iran was the most significant regional power involved in Syria's civil war and its actions arguably saved al-Assad. The Islamic Republic allied with Syria shortly after its 1979 revolution and saw preserving the al-Assad regime as both a historical duty to a long-term ally and a strategic necessity to preserve a keystone link with its allies in Lebanon and Iraq. While Iran did initially caution al-Assad against excessive violence in 2011, when this advice was ignored Tehran still doubled down. Like Russia it sent vital economic and military support, including loans of USD 4.6bn, heavily discounted oil and extensive weaponry. Yet most important was personnel. With al-Assad facing military setbacks alongside severe manpower shortages, Iran sent its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, to fight alongside the Syrian army in 2012. Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, was dispatched to Damascus to shore up the war effort. He helped reorganise Syria's military, established new paramilitary forces – including the new National Defence Forces (NDF) – and brought in foreign Shia fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These Iranian-led forces played leading roles in key battles such as Qusayr (2013), Qalamoun (2013-14) and East Aleppo (2016). Suleimani was also partly responsible for Russia's 2015 actions, having flown to Moscow to plead for assistance.⁹

Like Russia, Iran established a far deeper presence in Syria than it had prior to 2011 and is unlikely to withdraw as the war winds down. Before the conflict Iran mostly dealt with regime officials, although it had boosted its ties with Syria's tiny Shia community (1% of the population). Yet as a result of the war

⁷ Lund, *The making and unmaking of Syria strategy under Trump*, 2018.

⁸ Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 2016, 232.

⁹ Filkins, *The shadow commander*, 2013.

Iran's influence spread. Bilateral trade jumped from USD 300m in 2010 to USD 1bn in 2014, making Iran Syria's biggest trade partner, while Iranian companies were given preferential treatment and tax exemptions.¹⁰ At a social level, Suleimani fostered a small but loyal cadre in the Syrian population, sometimes providing citizenship for foreign Shia fighters and settling them in strategic locations, especially around the Shia shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab in southern Damascus. At a military level, Iran built up to 10 bases inside Syria, used for training its militia, resupplying Hezbollah and keeping pressure on neighbouring Israel.¹¹

Alongside potential clashes with Israel, discussed below, Iran faces competition from its ally Russia for influence in post-conflict Syria. Both favour al-Assad's continued rule, but priorities and approaches differ. While Russia has sought to strengthen al-Assad's state, boosting Syria's military and institutions, Iran has favoured sub-state militia. As a result they have different military allies in Syria: Moscow is close to the military, Tehran to the NDF and other militia. Geographically, Russia concentrates its forces on the coast near its bases in Latakia and Tartus, Iran prioritises southern Damascus and the connecting roads that link Damascus Airport, the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine and the Qalamoun mountains into Lebanon, while Hezbollah has taken effective control of the border town of Qusayr. How much al-Assad seeks to regain direct control of these areas, especially the Iranian-dominated ones, may be a future source of tension. Similarly, Russia's desire to gain economic reward from Syria has come at Iranian cost, with Russian companies now gaining preference over Iranian ones in some key sectors. Though this will unlikely end the Russia-Iran-al-Assad alliance, it may cause friction and occasional violence between proxy forces.

II.2 Turkey

Turkey's decision to turn on Bashar al-Assad, calling for his removal in late 2011 despite formerly enjoying close ties, was a major boost for the rebels. Turkey sponsored the exiled political opposition, notably the Syrian National Council (SNC) and its successor the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), and facilitated the arming of numerous armed rebel groups. Turkish Prime Minister (and later President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan believed al-Assad's fall was inevitable and hoped that by backing the opposition, especially those aligned with his favoured Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a pro-Turkish government would emerge. However, when al-Assad clung on and the US did not then intervene as hoped, Ankara grew frustrated. With Russia intervening in 2015, Erdoğan shifted his priorities. Though he still called for al-Assad's departure, privately Turkey's priority in Syria was reduced to the security situation on its southern border: preventing the collapse of Idlib and containing Kurdish militia.

Turkish intransigence on the Kurds contributed to the rebels' weakness as an opposition. Ankara insisted that the Syrian Kurdish PYD, an affiliate of the Turkish Kurdish separatists of the PKK, be excluded from any Syrian opposition groupings. As a result, the PYD – which was already distrustful of the SNC/SOC – pursued its own path, opposing al-Assad but using the civil war to pursue Kurdish autonomy rather than joining the main rebel groups. The PYD's militia, the YPG and YPJ, trained and armed by the PKK, emerged as the most powerful Kurdish fighters and soon dominated eastern Syria as al-Assad's forces withdrew to fight the rebels elsewhere, alarming Ankara. Even more worrying was Washington's decision in 2014 to arm the YPG to fight IS, helping it

¹⁰ Al-Saadi, *Iran's stake in Syria's economy*, 2015.

¹¹ Bachner, *Iran has 10 military bases in Syria*, 2018.

forge the broader SDF with some Arab fighters. With the US strategy successful and IS pushed back, Ankara faced the prospect of a US-supported PYD-dominated government all along its southern border. To prevent this, it launched two incursions into Syria. Firstly, Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, which targeted IS positions along the border but was designed to wedge Turkey's rebel allies between two PYD positions: Afrin and Manbij. Operation Olive Branch in 2018 then attacked Afrin directly, using a combination of Turkish military and rebel proxies to eject the PYD. Officially these provinces were then ruled by rebel forces, but they were effectively controlled by Ankara. Many accused Turkey of ethnically cleansing Kurds to permanently transform the region into a pro-Turkish satellite.

Erdoğan therefore reacted positively to the Trump administration's decision to withdraw US forces – something Turkey had long demanded. Without US protection the SDF may face a Turkish onslaught, with Erdoğan long threatening an attack on Manbij. However, Russia is key. Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch had Russian approval, part of wider deals with Moscow, and any future attack would need it too. However, Putin's preference is for al-Assad, not Ankara, to take control of eastern Syria. Moscow has long favoured a PYD-al-Assad deal in which the Syrian state peacefully retakes the east, with the YPG folded into al-Assad's military. The PYD's leadership were split on this, though most preferred it to Turkish attack. Despite his hawkish rhetoric at home, partly geared towards 2019 municipal elections, Erdoğan may have to accept al-Assad's return to the east if and when the US eventually withdraws, rather than attacking the YPG.

Russian-Turkish ties also hold the key to Idlib. By early 2019 it was believed that up to two to

three million civilians lived in the last rebel province, swelled by fighters and their families fleeing other fallen rebel areas. Turkey worries many would flee over the neighbouring border were Idlib to fall, adding to the three to four million Syrian refugees it is already struggling to host. It also fears that Jihadists from Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), formerly the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, will cross with them. Ankara adopted a two-fold strategy to prevent this. Firstly, it sought to unify the remaining moderate and non-Jihadists rebels in Idlib, hoping to weaken HTS and deter an al-Assad attack.¹² Secondly, it negotiated with Russia to hold off any al-Assad invasion. The latter worked, with Russia agreeing to a ceasefire in September 2018. However, the former failed, with HTS decimating moderate forces in early 2019, leaving it as the dominant actor in Idlib. The Russia-Turkey agreement explicitly called for, "radically minded groups, including al-Nusra," to be withdrawn from the frontline, so Moscow may well use the HTS advance as an excuse to let al-Assad off the leash. Once again, much will depend on Turkey's ability to negotiate with Russia and much could be determined by what is agreed or not between the two on the east.

II.3 Israel

Israel was the least involved of Syria's neighbours for most of the conflict. Its border was closed due to the formal state of war that still exists with Damascus, though a handful of refugees were allowed through for medical assistance. Israel had no love of the regime, a long-standing enemy, but it was also cautious of the rebels – conscious that a new government, possibly dominated by Islamists, might re-open the long dormant Golan front. As such it was relatively happy for two foes to waste resources fighting each other, and for a while even welcomed Hezbollah's

¹² Haid, *Turkey's Gradual Efforts to Professionalize Syrian Allies*, 2018.

involvement as it drained and distracted the Lebanese militia too. Israel actually gained from the early conflict when it successfully lobbied the US to remove al-Assad's chemical weapons stockpile, which Damascus had initially built to counter Israel's nuclear advantage and Israel feared might fall into the hands of Hezbollah or Jihadists.

However, with the war turning in al-Assad's favour, Israel became alarmed by how embedded Iran and its proxies were becoming in Syria. Hezbollah in particular was a worry, having adapted to the challenges it faced. Despite losing 1,000-2,000 fighters, it had more than doubled its number to 20,000 since 2011.¹³ Likewise, its battle-hardened soldiers gained new urban warfare experience that could be deployed against Israel. Iran has also used the war as cover to boost Hezbollah's arsenal, now up to 130,000 rockets and missiles, compared with barely 15,000 during the 2006 war.¹⁴

An Israel-Hezbollah-Iran war is far from inevitable however. Hezbollah still sufficiently fears a domestic backlash to avoid unnecessarily provoking Israel, while Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu is instinctively cautious and wary of the damage any new conflict would bring. Russia's presence in Syria has also inserted a new mediator on good terms with Israel, Iran and Hezbollah, which might de-escalate any potential clashes. Indeed, Russian pressure following Israeli lobbying ensured that Hezbollah withdrew from positions captured by rebels on the Golan border in 2018. Even so, Israel has made it policy to launch dozens of attacks on Hezbollah and Iranian forces throughout the war, targeting weapons convoys and commanders to act as a warning. New 'rules of the game' are still developing in southern

Syria between the protagonists, and once again much will depend on Russia's ability to mediate if any red lines are crossed.

II.4 Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both seen their once considerable influence over the conflict diminish in recent years. Each were enthusiastic backers of the anti-al-Assad opposition and sponsored various rebel fighting groups in the early years of the war. They contributed to the rebels' weakness by backing multiple rival groups rather than a single entity, with Qatar especially deploying a 'scattergun' approach. Rivalry between these two Gulf powers also split the opposition, with Doha favouring the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), like its ally Turkey, while Riyadh has long opposed the MB and backed its rivals.¹⁵ Saudi Arabia ultimately ended Qatar's serious involvement in Syria when it wrestled control of the SOC from Doha in 2013.

Yet eventually Saudi influence waned too. Some of this was beyond Saudi control: after Russia intervened, Riyadh came to recognise the shifting conditions on the ground. At the same time, Saudi Arabia was distracted elsewhere with the Yemen war from 2015 and its blockade of Qatar from 2017. Increasing tension with its once ally Turkey, which displaced the kingdom as the leading rebel sponsor, and alignment with the policies with Donald Trump also had an effect, and Riyadh ultimately cut its support for the armed rebels soon after Trump did.¹⁶

Since 2013, Qatar has played only a minor role in Syria, largely echoing and supporting Turkish policy. Saudi Arabia, however, has changed tack. In late 2018, its close ally the UAE announced it was reopening its

¹³ Blanford, *Hezbollah's Evolution*, 2017.

¹⁴ Sheikh and Williams, *Hezbollah's missiles and rockets*, 2018.

¹⁵ Phillips and Valbjorn, *What's in a name*, 2018.

¹⁶ Lund, *How Assad's Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition*, 2017.

Damascus embassy, closed in protest alongside other Arab embassies in 2011. Other Saudi allies, Bahrain and Kuwait, stated they too would soon follow. While the UAE had its own motives, this was also a test balloon for Saudi Arabia to reopen ties. There were even suggestions that Saudi Arabia may approve al-Assad's return to the Arab League, having been suspended in 2011. Saudi Arabia and the UAE seem motivated by the hope that reengaging al-Assad and providing some reconstruction investment might lessen Damascus' reliance on Riyadh's arch-enemy, Iran. They may also wish to outmanoeuvre Turkey, whose support for the MB and Qatar continues to rile. Improving its influence in Syria at a time when Ankara is looking increasingly powerless beyond its borderlands may have some advantages. However, al-Assad is unlikely to abandon Iran and his regime has decades of experience in taking money from the Gulf without ultimately delivering much in return.

III. Endgame?

How these shifting external and internal factors will interact and play out moving forward is difficult to forecast, but one of three broad scenarios seems most likely: a negotiated compromise, al-Assad is victorious, or the war re-opens.

Given the dynamics discussed above, the first seems least likely. The drive for a negotiated settlement has been led by al-Assad's external enemies, especially Western states, via the UN. Yet when al-Assad was at his weakest, Russia successfully derailed these. Now that he is in the ascendancy, there is even less incentive for him or his allies to engage. Moreover, external advocates are losing enthusiasm for compromise. Saudi Arabia is entertaining reconciliation, while Turkey is increasingly beholden to Russia. The US under Donald Trump seems disinterested and, when it withdraws troops, will

have less leverage on the ground. The US and EU still hope that withholding reconstruction aid and maintaining sanctions might pressure Moscow to force al-Assad out, but this is unrealistic. Moscow has no desire to see al-Assad leave, nor can it remove him without acquiescence from Iran and other Syrian regime insiders, who have fought an eight-year war to keep the Syrian president in place. Western aid is important, but not essential, and the Syrian regime has shown already that it would rather live in rubble than compromise. Moreover, recent history suggests it is Western states that are more likely to eventually fold.

The most likely outcome, then, is some kind of al-Assad victory. Even if this is packaged by Russia as a 'negotiated settlement' to legitimise external reengagement, it will not likely be more than a new constitution and sham elections that ultimately leave al-Assad in charge. This may not be neat and it could take years for al-Assad to regain control of all of Syria, if he ever does. Afrin and the Euphrates Shield zone may become a permanent Turkish satellite, perhaps including Manbij, while parts of Idlib could remain similarly under Turkish-protected rebel rule. That said, Turkish Syria policy has been highly personalised around Erdoğan and a future leader may opt to withdraw. In al-Assad-ruled Syria, meanwhile, with the West likely to withhold at least some of the estimated USD 400 billion needed to rebuild and Russia, Iran, the Gulf and possibly China unable to fully make up the difference, the economy may struggle. It will also be hindered by the huge brain drain caused by the exodus of over five million refugees. Low-level violence could continue, with attacks from former rebels, Jihadists or Kurds. Similarly, Israel or Turkey could launch limited raids that are destructive if not destabilising. Meanwhile al-Assad and his cronies would likely continue the corrupt and brutal rule that sparked the rebellion in the first place.

Such a scenario would be an al-Assad victory, but a somewhat pyrrhic one.

The third possibility is that the war reopens. This could come from the outside, with an Israeli or Turkish attack escalating into a major conflict that Russia proves unable to contain. Alternatively, it could come from the inside. If Moscow cannot strike a deal, an al-Assad-PYD conflict could break out. The remaining rebels and HTS in Idlib are well armed and, if Russia and Turkey cannot find agreement, a major battle for the province could be long and bloody. There is also the chance of a renewed uprising, especially if al-Assad makes no concessions. Former rebels might be drawn into rebellion once again, as could Jihadists. Alternatively, al-Assad loyalists could pose a potential threat. Having sacrificed a lot to preserve the regime, unrest could break out among those unhappy with the slow pace of economic recovery or a return to pre-war corruption and cronyism.¹⁷ There is also the possibility of sudden shocks, such as the death of al-Assad, which might provoke internal blood-letting among rival segments of the regime over succession. Iran and Russia, for example, may favour different candidates. Likewise, a change of leadership in Russia, though probably not Iran, might prompt an unexpected shift in policy from al-Assad's ally. For the moment, war exhaustion makes this

option less likely, but it cannot be ruled out in the medium term.

IV. Conclusion

However Syria's future plays out, the country's destiny has long been out of Syrian hands alone. Since 2011, regional and international powers have intervened in domestic struggles to shape the outcome of the civil war. As the war winds down, regional powers' once considerable influence has been reduced, especially that of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Israel and Turkey are more able to determine outcomes on the ground, though limited to the south and north respectively. The US, which perhaps could have countered the direction of the war had it ever prioritised al-Assad's defeat over its many other goals, seems increasingly disinterested and is lessening its leverage further by removing troops. This leaves al-Assad's close allies Russia and Iran as by far the most influential players, and of these the former dominates. Putin has positioned himself as the key broker inside and outside of Syria and it seems likely that the endgame of the Syria war, most probably an al-Assad victory, will be shaped as much in Moscow as Damascus. That said, this war has frequently shown itself to be unpredictable, and an unexpected turn could yet reopen conflict and present new challenges.

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¹⁷ Khatib and Sinjab, *Syria's transactional state*, 2018.

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