



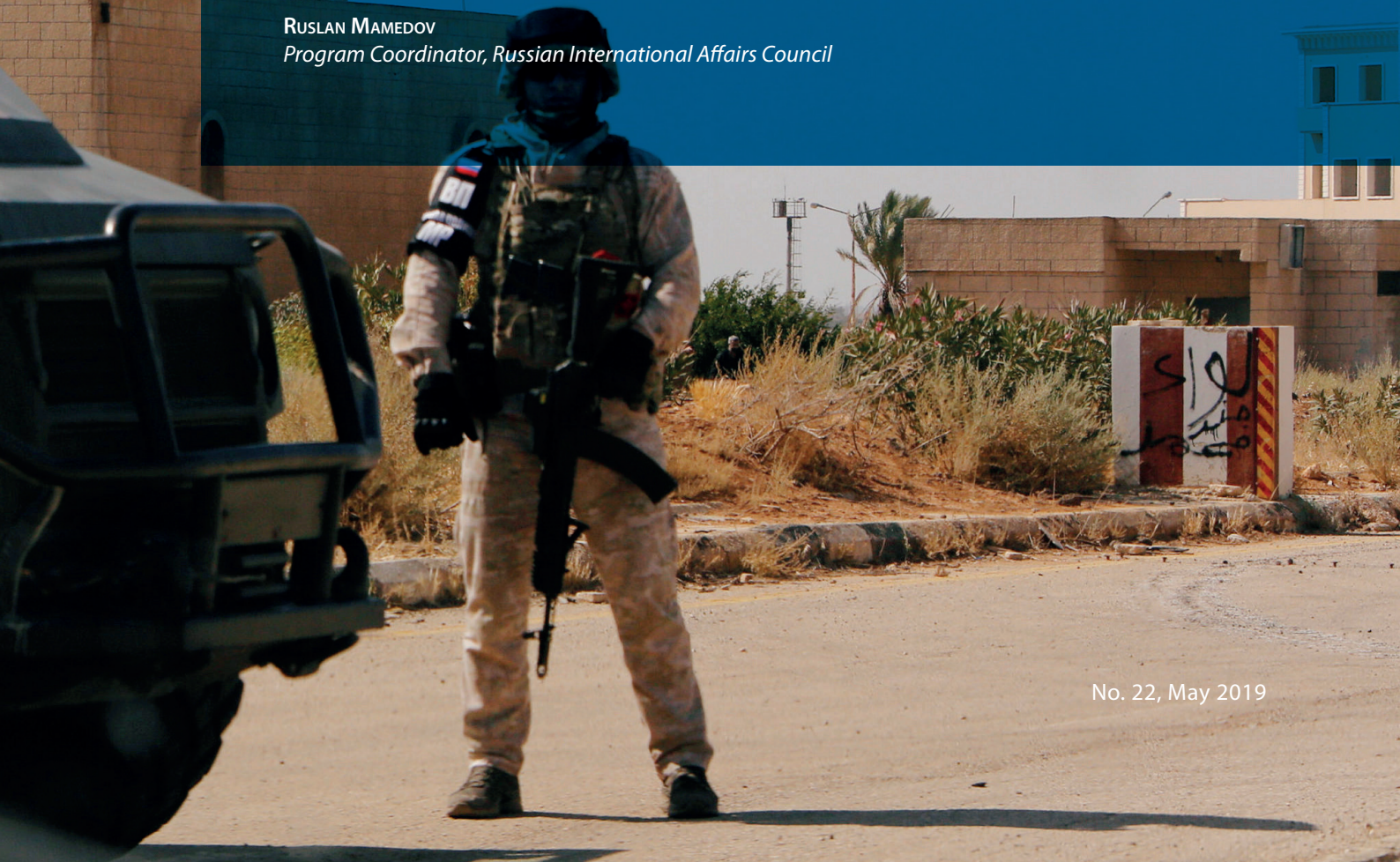
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POLICY BRIEF

Russia and the Arab Mashreq: The Post-Conflict Period in Syria

TIMUR MAKHMUTOV
Ph.D. in Political Science, RIAC Deputy Program Director

RUSLAN MAMEDOV
Program Coordinator, Russian International Affairs Council



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Introduction

The multiplicity of crises in West Asia and North Africa requires an integrated approach to their possible resolution. One possible solution could be the creation of a collective regional security system that would address the challenges and threats facing the countries in the region.

As mentioned in a piece published by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) in 2017, the issue of determining the area and geographical boundaries of the regional security system continues to be relevant.¹ The authors of the document thought it would be appropriate to limit the study to the Arab Mashreq region, given that it includes the nexus of a major global political crisis, namely Syria. For the purposes of this study, we will discuss the Arab Mashreq as comprising the Levant States (Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) and Iraq.

Current trends in the (primarily English-speaking) analytical environment erode the significance and role of Russia and the former USSR in the security of the Arab Mashreq region. Back in the 20th century, the Soviet Union, as one of the two key global security actors, was an integral to the regional security system in West Asia. The fledgling USSR was one of the first states to recognize a number of nations in the region. The USSR supported the desire of these countries to achieve independence from the colonial regimes, mainly from the British Empire and France. Suffice it to mention the “Appeal of the Council of People’s Commissars to the Muslims of Russia and the East” on dated November 20, 1917.²

As for the neighbours of the Arab Mashreq, history offers us various examples. Soviet special-

ists used their channels to provide specific material assistance for the foundation of the independent Turkish Republic headed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In 1926, the USSR was the first country to recognize the independence of Saudi Arabia under its founder Abdulaziz Al Saud, supplying the country – one of the poorest in the Arab world at the time – with staple commodities, including fuel.³ Soviet Russia was also among the first nations to recognize Israel. These and other examples invariably turned out to be failures for the USSR’s foreign policy. And there were various reasons for this, including the opposition of the pro-American camp, infighting among the region’s elites, and the ever diminishing capability of the Soviet Union to sustain its satellite states. And there was also the Soviet messianism, which periodically got in the way.⁴ That said, one thing remained unchanged – the scope and level of contacts, including defence cooperation, the training of highly qualified specialists across the region, and assisting countries in their industrialisation efforts. All this eventually led the USSR to dominate regional security.

The Arab elites relied heavily on Moscow for their security. One example was the Suez Crisis of 1956 (or the Tripartite Aggression of France, the United Kingdom and Israel against Egypt, historically one of the most important countries in the Arab world, after Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power and nationalized the Suez Canal) that was prevented from further escalation thanks in no small part to the tough stance of the USSR.⁵ It is worth mentioning, however, that the United States did nothing to support its allies, because it wanted to strengthen its own position in the region. Itself an erstwhile colony, the United States was viewed positively in the

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Timur Makhmutov, Ph.D. in Political Science, RIAC Deputy Program Director.

Ruslan Mamedov, Program Coordinator (MENA), Russian International Affairs Council.

¹ Makhmutov T.A., Mamedov R.Sh. Proposals on Building a Regional Security System in West Asia and North Africa. Working Paper. No. 38 / 2017//; Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). Moscow: NP RIAC, 2017.

² Appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the East [address by the Council of People’s Commissars] // NPP Garant-Servis. Originally published by the Newspaper of the Provisional Worker and Peasants Government on December 7 (November 24), 1917. Collection of Statutes of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), 1917. N 6, Appendix 2.

³ Nikonov O.S. The role of the USSR in the Establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a Sovereign State // Prepodavatel XXI Vek. No. 1 (Part 2). 2017. Pp. 302–316.

⁴ Vasiliev A.M. Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism. Moscow: Nauka, 1993.

⁵ Ibid.

region. The example of the Tripartite Aggression is indicative, because similar plots are being concocted as we speak. In April 2018, in violation of international law, the United States, the United Kingdom and France mounted an attack (or a new tripartite aggression⁶) on Syria over the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, something that was never proved.

Despite the devastation and the need to restore the USSR after World War II, Moscow managed in the second half of the 20th century to work an economic miracle that resulted, among other things, in the accumulation of experience in the industrialization of the economy. The USSR shared its experience with any country that would turn to it for support. Soviet specialists were instrumental in building major factories and infrastructure facilities in Egypt (for example, the Aswan Dam in 1971, the Helwan Metallurgical Combine in 1973 and a number of other major enterprises), Syria (the Euphrates Hydro Complex in 1978, etc.), Iraq (the thermal and hydroelectric power plants in Nasiriyah, Najiba and Dukan, Baghdad–Basra petrochemical pipeline built in the 1980s, etc.).⁷ Thus, the USSR played a critical role in shaping the system of international relations and in the regional security system.

The weakening and collapse of the USSR effectively decided the fate of the region. Moscow was unable to maintain the same level of contacts with the countries of Western Asia. The elites of the Arab countries had to restructure and survive without support from Moscow. The United States, the only external security guarantor left, was no longer eager to participate in the Arab “game” of deriving benefits by oscillating between Washington and Moscow. The Americans came to rely on several principles and approaches in the region, the key one involving attempts to “change (undesirable) regimes.” This is how the “influence vacuum” was filled after the collapse of the USSR.

The Arab Mashreq had to bear the brunt of U.S. politics in the region. The strategic interests of the United States in the 1990s and 2000s remained unchanged: it wanted to ensure the

security of logistics and infrastructure in the Persian Gulf, which continued to be an important resource, and protect Israel as its key partner in the region. This meant a permanent weakening of the states that posed a threat to the aforementioned U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean. In forming its Middle Eastern policy, the United States was historically led by a strong pro-Israeli lobby. After Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), and the US-allied Gulf Cooperation Council came into being on May 25, 1981, the United States came to perceive Iran, Iraq and Syria as the key threats in this sense.⁸

1. Russia and Middle Eastern Security in the 21st Century

With the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, Russia found itself unable, economically and politically, to play the same role in the region it had played after World War II. In addition, Moscow no longer made decisions based on the interests of Middle Eastern countries, which, as Russian researchers note, was something that had happened frequently in the Soviet era. In addition, the Communist ideology was gradually being replaced by political pragmatism. This was essentially a new policy, which was considered pragmatic by some and erroneous by others. Moscow’s diplomacy of the 1990s was based on the realization of its limitations, and on the low priority of the Middle East in Russian international affairs.

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However, over time, Russia understood that it needed to restore contacts with the countries of the region. This realization came about as a result of threats inside the country, including terrorism. Nevertheless, the new edition of Russia’s foreign policy made it possible to discard the negative part of the Soviet legacy regarding the Middle East. This created the opportunity to

⁶ Naumkin V.V. Vitaly Naumkin on the New Trilateral Aggression in Syria // Valdai Discussion Club. 14.04.2018. URL: <http://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/naumkin-agressiya/>

⁷ Glebova A., Sukhova S. Trade with Iraq // Kommersant Vlast magazine. No. 33. 23.08.1993. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/8540>

⁸ The literal translation from Arabic is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCA), but Russian official agencies use the term Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf.

⁹ Vasiliev A.M. Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism. Moscow: Nauka, 1993.

maintain and develop working contacts even with those countries that had never had diplomatic relations with the USSR (for example, the Russian and Saudi Arabian diplomatic missions only resumed their work in 1991). A separate factor was that Russia stressed the secular nature of its state and promoted the freedom of religion. This helped Moscow establish new contacts with the predominantly Muslim region and raise its status in the eyes of the countries in the region. In 2005, Russia was made an observer state in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).¹⁰

The USSR had been a key defence partner for many countries in the region. The sanctions introduced by the United States and the United Nations (as well as the European Union) against a number of countries in the Middle East have had a negative effect on the state of their military equipment and the quality of their military training, and have also impacted the socio-economic status of their societies. External actors, specifically the United States, have posed a permanent military and political threat to the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Iraq was the most obvious example of a combined policy of sanctions and permanent military threats (in the form of U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf). Moscow did not support the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which was carried out under a false pretext. The European Union also found itself split over this operation, with most of the countries refusing to support it and some even vocally opposing it.

The series of steps taken by the United States following the overthrow of President of Iraq Saddam Hussein in 2003, including, among other things, banning the Ba'ath Party and dissolving the army and security services – and the way in which they were implemented – led to horrific consequences. The de facto occupation of Iraq prompted the most radicalized and marginalized groups of the country's population to act. This significantly worsened the security situation and facilitated the spread of terrorist groups, which started building ties among themselves.

Socio-economic problems demanded both economic and political changes in the region. This

resulted in the events of 2011–12, which the media called the Arab Spring. Mass protests and demonstrations spread across the Arab world, which only worsened the situation in the region. Russia urged non-regional players to be wary of the situation. Subsequent developments demonstrated the fragility of the political regimes in the region, undermining government institutions and resulting in unsuccessful interventions by external powers.

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State security institutions in a number of Middle Eastern countries degraded, the number of terrorist organizations started to multiply and there were no instruments available for resolving ongoing conflicts. In 2014, the Islamic State (IS, a terrorist organization that is banned in the Russian Federation) spread into Iraq and Syria, announcing the establishment of a "Caliphate" and launching a powerful propaganda and recruitment campaign around the world. Many of the foreign terrorists in the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria, including in the Al-Nusra Front branch of Al-Qaeda, came from Russia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These new regional challenges demanded new tactics from Moscow.

For Moscow, which had its own problems in the North Caucasus, it was important to fight international terrorism not only as part of its foreign policy, but also for the sake of its domestic politics. Prior experience tackling these challenges informed Russia's approach to the regional problems.

¹⁰ Kosach G.G. Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Priorities and Policies // Russian International Affairs Council website. 15.01.2015. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/organizatsiya-islamskogo-sotrudnichestva-prioritety-i-politi/>

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By 2015, the main actors had lost control over Syria both locally, regionally and globally, which resulted in a deeper crisis and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation.

Over time, it became clear the only way to effectively combat terrorism was in cooperation with the special services of various states, including in the Middle East. According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation dated November 30, 2016, "The growing threat of international terrorism is one of the most dangerous realities in today's world. The spread of extremist ideology and the activity of terrorist groups in a number of regions (primarily, in the Middle East and North Africa) are the result of systemic development problems that globalization processes have laid bare. External interference has also played a major role. Combined, these two factors have led to the destruction of traditional governance and security mechanisms and the illegal spread of weapons and ammunition at an even larger scale."¹¹ In 2015, Russia decided to deploy its Aerospace Forces in Syria in order to support the national government in its fight against terrorism.

2. Russia and the Syrian Settlement. Setting up and Transforming De-Escalation Zones in Syria

As the Syrian crisis unfolded, the relations between the key actors in the region began to deteriorate. Despite a spate of successful joint operations (primarily the 2013 withdrawal of chemical weapons), the United States and Russia, these two global players, never reached a compromise on the issue.

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As the Syrian crisis unfolded, all attempts by the international community to establish a ceasefire failed one after another. The Geneva process, which was supposed to result in a political resolution, ended up stalling. The situation on the ground continued to worsen. In 2015, the Syrian government requested Russian military assistance in its armed conflict with individuals and groups that local laws and UN resolutions identified as terrorists.¹² Russia–Syria relations are governed by a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed by the Soviet Union and Syria on October 8, 1980 (in December 1991, Syria recognized Russia as the successor to the USSR). Under Article 102 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the issue of deploying the Russian Armed Forces outside of the country falls under the jurisdiction of the upper house of parliament (the Federation Council). The President of the Russian Federation submitted such a proposal for consideration, which was unanimously supported on September 30, 2015. The fact that the Russian Armed Forces launched operations against terrorist groups in Syria in 2015 provided another opportunity for a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis.¹³

The introduction of de-escalation zones on May 4, 2017 with the support of the three guarantors of the Astana process (Iran, Russia and Turkey) and the participation of the United States and Jordan as observers, led to a decrease in violence in Syria and even a freezing of hostilities in certain areas.¹⁴

The de-escalation zones included the southern cities of Daraa and Quneitra, the Idlib Governorate, the southern part of the Homs Governorate and Eastern Ghouta. Residents of some of these areas were given access to humanitarian aid and medical services. The idea was not to turn these

¹¹ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation // Russian Presidential Decree No. 640 "On Approving the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" dated November 30, 2016. URL: http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6Z29/content/id/25422m48

¹² Hereinafter, "terrorist groups" are understood to mean organizations listed in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015).

¹³ Moscow's contacts with Washington did nothing to improve the situation: the United States was unable to influence the situation in Syria, which would have been perceived by Moscow as a tangible positive achievement. Russia insisted on the United States taking an active part in separating the so-called moderate Syrian opposition from the terrorists, all the more so as the two powers already had positive prior experience of joint work on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons under the 2013 agreements. Nevertheless, Moscow's demands with regard to separating the Syrian opposition from the terrorists remained unfulfilled for a long time.

¹⁴ Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.S. The Syrian Crisis in the Context of Transforming the System of International Relations. Dissertation for the degree of Ph.D. (History): 07.00.15 / Maria Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva; research advisor Marina Saponova. MGIMO University. Moscow, 2019. P. 365.

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areas into clearly demarcated territories, as local and external actors may have otherwise attached a political significance to these boundaries. The de-escalation zones did not establish any boundaries between the official authorities and the opposition forces. On the contrary, they were intended to put an end to the violence and create a negotiating platform for the opposing sides. As it turns out, this attempt succeeded in stabilizing the situation. At the same time, the establishment of de-escalation zones never implied a complete ceasefire, so infighting continued as there were still terrorist groups in Syria.

The de-escalation zones do not contradict the Geneva process. On the contrary, they create new opportunities to advance this process. All the parties to the Astana process remain committed to the Geneva process and to UN Security Council Resolution 2254 dated December 18, 2015. The parties proceed from the premise that, according to the resolution, the fight against terrorist groups must be continued and that the independence, unity, territorial integrity and secularism of Syria preserved.

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The joint statement made by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and President of the United States Donald Trump in Da Nang on November 11, 2017 in which the two leaders reiterated their intention to cooperate for the sake of a political settlement to the Syrian conflict was of particular importance.¹⁵ Calls for significantly increasing humanitarian assistance to Syria have since been growing more insistent.

The risk of humanitarian assistance becoming politicized is particularly critical in the context of the Syrian situation and the de-escalation zones. Seeing as the external actors have differing interests, humanitarian aid is usually spread unevenly across the country. In addition, disagreements between Syrian government agencies overseeing humanitarian operations and personnel on the ground are hampering the work of international organizations that are seeking access to the areas where humanitarian aid is being channelled.

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The numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons need to be assessed. In the context of the de-escalation zones, Syria's territorial integrity must be preserved and Syrian citizens must be allowed to move freely within the country. The question of who is responsible for ensuring security and delivering humanitarian aid in the so-called "grey zones" (areas that are not controlled by the government or the opposition) has yet to be addressed.

The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation is using a comprehensive approach to the

¹⁵ Statement by the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the United States of America // President of the Russian Federation website. 11.11.2017. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5252>

Syrian conflict on the ground. The establishment of the four de-escalation zones facilitated the creation of checkpoints with Russian military police officers as observers. The de-escalation lines were supplemented by security areas complete with observation posts. Russian specialists were on call to provide medical, humanitarian and alimentary assistance as required. Russian mobile medical teams were deployed, and part of the infrastructure was then handed over to Syria. One successful example of peaceful settlement on the ground is the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, which is situated at the Khmeimim Air Base and whose personnel are engaged in building a peaceful dialogue in the country. National reconciliation centres, which involve representatives of Syrian provinces, use both direct talks and teleconferences. Frequent contacts between local councils and local self-administration bodies are of particular importance to the settlement process.

The de-escalation zones were originally meant to be a temporary, flexible solution until the situation stabilized. From a legal point of view, the establishment of de-escalation zones had no effect on the status of the areas they covered. These territories continued to be integral parts of sovereign Syria. On the other hand, once certain political issues have been ironed out, humanitarian deliveries could be stepped up. Any qualitative changes in the Syrian humanitarian situation would require serious political improvements.

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On the whole, the example of the Syrian de-escalation zones is unique in that these zones help to stabilize the situation in the conflict zones. The de-escalation concept creates a new environment for relations between the conflicting sides and representatives of humanitarian organizations. They allow for the development of a new humanitarian policy.

3. The Restoration of Syria for Russia and the Role of Potential Partners

The restoration of Syria is far from a key issue for Russia. It only matters in a more global context. Russia does not stand to gain or lose from whether external investment begins to flow into Syria.

External investments into the restoration of Syria can be separated into three different channels. The first (and most obvious) is the limited process of restoring the country using its own resources, with the help of Damascus' allies (Iran would play a leading role here). The second stream would involve the lifting of the EU sanctions and the active participation of Brussels in the restoration process as a chance for Europe to wield at least some political weight in the region and settle the migration problem. That said, the European Union itself says its involvement must only come after a political settlement. The third and most promising path for Russia and Syria involves getting the Persian Gulf states to help finance reconstruction efforts: this would allow the latter to counterbalance the influence of Iran and prevent Syria from being separated completely from the Arab world, while precluding China and India from assuming key positions in the restoration process. The latter case involves a logic that differs from the EU approach of first securing a political settlement and only then considering any financial investment. Financing the process of rebuilding Syria would contribute to the political stabilization process and help consolidate society in the country.

The post-conflict period in Syria raises the question of the need to find funds in order to restore the country's economy. As the three key external actors, Russia, Iran and Turkey have limited resources in this sense. They will have to revise their roles in Syria's future, but they will still maintain presence for the sake of ensuring a balance of forces and interests in the country.

The idea that Russia needs Europe for its financial injections into Syria can hardly be considered as viable. Rather, Moscow is studying what everyone wants, looking to ensure a balance of interests and trying to wrap this activity around its own policy. As far as Russia is concerned, it would be better if the European Union were to

participate in and helped fund the reconstruction process in Syria, but it is not absolutely necessary that it does so.

Russia has secured its interests in Syria. Furthermore, Moscow has, since 2015, upgraded its army, improved logistics, tested advanced types of military hardware, increased arms exports and entered major oil and gas projects in the region. The only things that might happen in Syria in the event that the European Union is not involved (including in terms of financial assistance) is that the current situation will stay the same, Al-Assad and Iran will strengthen their positions, and the numbers of returning refugees will remain small.

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Without the support of the United States or the European Union, Russia will have no incentive to even attempt to resolve the issue on its own. Meanwhile, Moscow has without a doubt been sending signals to Europe to the effect that, given a certain level of support, it would be prepared to act and could even organize the resettlement of refugees and persuade Damascus to liberalize its laws to prevent returning refugees from ending up behind bars (including for evading military service).

It was Moscow that introduced effective mechanisms for returning refugees, which are still partially used at present. On July 18, 2018, Russia set up a Centre for the Reception, Allocation and Accommodation of Refugees, with a combined total of 336,500 places having been prepared to

refugees across the country.¹⁶ The centre, in conjunction with the newly established Russia–Syria working group, assists in monitoring and resettling returning refugees and ensures their safety. It would have been impossible to launch the process without first introducing these measures. Many media outlets ignored Russia's efforts, but it is these actions on the ground that have helped to solve specific issues. In November 2018, Russian observers attended the first exchange of captives between the warring sides in Syria. This positive experience helps in building mutual trust. The July 31 communique of the 10th International Meeting on Syria in the Astana format reported the readiness of the conflicting parties to exchange prisoners and the bodies of the deceased.¹⁷

Neighbouring states are involved in the process of normalizing the situation in Syria, and they prefer to maintain direct contacts with Russia. Lebanon and Jordan have proposed their own plans to the Kremlin.

At a 2018 news conference with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants of Lebanon, Gebran Bassil, invited Russia to take part in reviving the Mashreq project (and in a conference on the protection of religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East).

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Bassil said it was not about a union of any specific countries or any sort of organization, but rather about a space that would provide safety, stability and economic prosperity based on cultural and religious diversity, possibly backed by a common market.¹⁸

Lebanon and Jordan are already working directly with Syria. The July 2018 handover of the south-

¹⁶ Russia Sets up Refugee Centre in Syria // TASS. 18.07.2018. URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/5384831>

¹⁷ Russian Military Assist in Syrian Prisoner Exchange // TASS. 24.11.2018. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/5831201>

¹⁸ "Russia needs to convince international community of voluntary prisoner release" // Kommersant. 21.08.2018. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3719094>

western part of Syria and the Nasib Border Crossing to the government was secured thanks to direct talks between Russia, Syria and Jordan. It should be noted that the participation of the United States and the balanced positions of Israel and Iran also played a positive role in stabilizing the situation.

Russian military police have been key security guarantors on the ground. The police force is mostly based in the areas that have recently made peace with the government, and enjoys a favourable reputation among the locals.

The Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic at the Khmeimim Air Base, the Centre for the Reception, Allocation and Accommodation of Refugees, the military police force and the International Mine Action Center under the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation were all set up, and can be used, for the purpose of stabilizing the situation in Syria.

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Russia is demonstrating (primarily to the West) its readiness to promote Western interests, while at the same time taking the interests of Russia and Syria into account. The four-nation summit on the resolution of the Syrian crisis held in Istanbul on October 27, 2018 involving Russia, France, Germany and Turkey was also aimed as a demonstration of this. Iran also views the Istanbul process as useful, since it would be far more optimistic about EU finance and efforts in Syria than it would about strengthening the positions of the Persian Gulf monarchies in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. France and Germany are interested in the stability of Syria, and Russia and Turkey want the same. However, Syria is still under strict EU sanctions. The sanctions have hit a number of individuals and com-

panies and include a ban on travel, a freezing of assets, an “oil embargo, restrictions on certain investments, a freeze of the assets of the Syrian central bank held in the EU, and export restrictions on equipment and technology that might be used for internal repression as well as on equipment and technology for the monitoring or interception of internet or telephone communications.”¹⁹ Syria is not going to allow the European Union to participate in the reconstruction efforts unless at least some of these sanctions have been lifted first. The sanctions themselves make it necessary to keep many financial operations of the Syrian elites in the shadows, which negatively affects the country’s economy and the welfare of its population.

Any actual European involvement is deemed non-pragmatic in terms of a possible political settlement. Furthermore, the humanitarian nature of this particular EU policy is dubious, as it is ordinary Syrians that suffer and not the Syrian elites. Seven years of war have shown that sanctions lead to the emergence of covert schemes, degrade the administration and result in destruction and migration. And they do nothing to change the actions of their intended targets.

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In this situation, Moscow will continue to search for alternatives. Numerous actors are interested in a post-conflict restoration in Syria, and China and India might become key players in this respect. Nevertheless, Russia is currently attempting to legitimize Syria as part of the League of Arab States. As the closest allies of the Syrian government’s most consistent opponent the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have already opened their official representative offices in

¹⁹ Syria: EU Adds Eleven Businessmen and Five Entities to Sanctions List // European Council of the EU. 21.01.2019. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/01/21/syria-eu-adds-eleven-businessmen-and-five-entities-to-sanctions-list/>

the country, despite the possibility of extraterritorial sanctions from the United States.²⁰ It is still unclear whether or not the United States is going to crack down on its allies in the region. One way or another, the Syrian elites are prepared for all eventualities, including the lack of funds to help restore the country. The only result of such a scenario would be Syria's unwillingness to welcome back refugees currently residing in other countries, whose number the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees puts at up to 5.6 million. In 2018, the High Commissioner reported that over 1.4 million internally displaced persons (out of a total of 6.2 million) and more than 56,000 refugees had returned to their homes.²¹ The European Union could benefit from establishing direct contacts with Syria in order to share its concerns and possibly reach certain agreements. Failing that, Europe is running the risk of losing its dwindling influence, while other actors are actively building their presence in Syria and the region as a whole.

China's role in Syria may grow in the post-conflict period. Beijing is believed to be driven by two factors in its Syrian policy. The first one is related to security and the fight against terrorism, seeing as the anti-government groups in Syria include many Uyghur fighters (up to several thousand, according to some sources).²²

Most of these belong to the Turkistan Islamic Movement, which is a well-organized terrorist structure. The second factor is the Belt and Road Initiative, which Beijing hopes will link China to Europe, including via the Middle East. Throughout the Syrian crisis, China has blocked any draft UN resolutions aimed at imposing sanctions on Damascus. China's special envoy for the Syrian crisis Xie Xiaoyan was in constant talks with various regional actors in attempts to find a political and diplomatic solution to the conflict. In the summer of 2017, China held its first Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects, with Chinese officials promising to spend \$2 billion on the reconstruction of the country.

China has already invested heavily in Syrian businesses. In particular, the country's telecoms sector is largely owned by Huawei, and the Chinese national oil corporation owns a large stake in Syrian Petroleum Company and in Al Furat, the country's two largest oil corporations.

The only obstacle to Chinese participation in the Syrian rebuilding process could come in the form of U.S. sanctions against Damascus. Also, Syria is of less interest to Beijing as major regional oil-producing actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Any rapprochement with Syria would require China to run its position by Israel, in which Beijing is also heavily invested.

²⁰ Bahrain Embassy in Syria Resumes Operations after Seven-Year Break // TASS. 28.12.2018. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/5961108>

²¹ Provision of Life-Saving Assistance and Supporting Communities End of Year Report 2018 // The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2018. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/02/End-of-Year-2018-S.pdf>

²² Duchâtel M. Terror Overseas: Understanding China's Evolving Counter-Terror Strategy. 26.10.2016. URL: https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/terror_overseas_understanding_chinas_evolutionary_counter_terror_strategy7160

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The objective of overcoming the humanitarian crisis in Syria is gradually becoming associated with both the political settlement and the need to restore the country's social and economic infrastructure. Humanitarian assistance to Syria could become an objective in reviving the Syrian economy, regardless of where the political process goes. Several factors immediately hinder the improvement of the humanitarian situation in the country and the welfare of the people, including the unilateral economic sanctions against Syria. Lifting these sanctions would have a positive effect on the overall humanitarian situation in Syria, and would launch the economic recovery process. If Russia and the United States are able to reach common ground on the settlement of the Syrian crisis, as well as on the creation of a joint working group on Syria, this could have a positive effect on the regional actors and the European Union when it comes to the reconstruction of Syria. At the same time, the Syrian government could ensure the security of returning refugees, lift the ban on entry into the country and offer amnesty to those who had evaded military service. In addition to supporting the functioning of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, Russia would do well to support the implementation of social and political reforms in that country based on the 2012 constitution, which could be unilaterally backed by the Syrian government and President Bashar al-Assad as part of the preparations for an agreement with the opposition.
2. The plans to help Syrian refugees and provide donor assistance to the neighbouring countries must be continued with stronger support from international organizations and states. That said, urgent humanitarian activities need to be combined with long-term development efforts not only in neighbouring countries (such as Jordan), but also in Syria itself. Such efforts would help Syrians return home and thus reduce the burden on the neighbouring countries to integrate Syrian refugees into the socio-economic system of the host countries. Joint humanitarian efforts between Russia, the United States, the Istanbul format states (France, Germany and Turkey) and other countries would have a positive effect as well.
3. Humanitarian organizations should coordinate their operations with organizations of the parties involved representing different states that would cooperate with the Syrian government. Such operations could be carried out on a bilateral basis, including with the Agency for Support and Coordination of Russian Participation in International Humanitarian Operations (EMERCOM), with the support of Russia and the Syrian government, as well as on a multilateral basis, such as with the participation of international, Russian and Turkish humanitarian organizations (and also involving organizations representing the United States, Jordan, China, India, the Persian Gulf states and Europe). This would allow a humanitarian budget to be agreed, while at the same time helping to build mutual trust between the parties.
4. Any humanitarian efforts should be coordinated with the Syrian government, which, in keeping with its international obligations, should facilitate the operations of humanitarian organizations and ensure the security and accessibility of humanitarian missions, including in the de-escalation zones. All those involved in the Syrian crisis will need to cease any individual actions and cross-border operations not agreed with the legitimate Syrian government.
5. The Syria de-escalation system was by its very nature a temporary measure only. Despite the ongoing hostilities, Russia, Iran and Turkey are intent on creating opportunities to reduce the violence in Syria. The Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic is continuing its work (including humanitarian assistance) with the use of an intragovernmental networking approach. UN agencies and other NGOs willing to take an active part in ensuring peace and stabilizing Syrian society are welcome to join the effort.

6. All parties should promote confidence-building measures and develop a multilateral approach that does not imply the exclusion of individual actors in the region (as opposed to the attempts to create an “Arab NATO”). Russia could support the idea of holding a security conference in the Mashreq. The main emphasis in such projects should be on the complementary nature of the regional economies and Russia’s economic interests. Political and economic issues aside, it would also be beneficial to hold a conference on religious freedoms and intra-denominational reconciliation, possibly co-chaired by Russia and one of the Mashreq countries (such as Lebanon). This activity would need support via traditional media, internet resources and social networks. Russia could also fall back on the Astana process and the experience of the joint Baghdad information and coordination centre with Iran, Iraq and Syria to promote the idea of a collective security in the region with the focus on the Arab Mashreq.

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Tel: +7 (495) 225 6283
Fax: +7 (495) 225 6284
E-mail: welcome@russiancouncil.ru
119180, Moscow, Bol. Yakimanka St., 1.

www.russiancouncil.ru