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Russia and Iran in Syria and Beyond: Challenges Ahead

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This paper aims to analyze the pivotal points of the Middle Eastern crises and to which extent the interests of Moscow and Tehran overlap or contradict each other. Some of the key issues of the political situation in the region were assessed, such as the situation in Idlib, the prospects for a political process in Syria, Israel's role in the region's future, the path to Syria's reconstruction and the impact of U.S. policies on the emerging new order in the Middle East. Both Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran regard each other as necessary components of the regional architecture that they envision for the Middle East. The paper attempts to shed light on the views of Moscow and Tehran on these issues.

The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Russian International Affairs Council.

The full text of the working paper is available on RIAC's website. You can download it or leave a comment via this direct link – russiancouncil.ru/en/paper59

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Introduction

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The ongoing Syrian crisis had a profound impact not only on Syria itself and on the Middle East region, but also on the broader geopolitical environment. In many ways, the crisis became a turning point in Russian-Iranian relations. It has brought the two countries closer to each other, intensified bilateral contacts in various fields and at various levels, provided for a better understanding and more trust between Moscow and Tehran. Syria turned out to be not only a critical test for Russian-Iranian cooperation, but also a major catalyst for deepening this cooperation further, including areas not directly linked to the Syrian conflict itself.

The Russian-Iranian interaction over Syria has demonstrated significant resilience. Many analysts and politicians – especially in the West – argued that this interaction is mostly situational, tactical and unsustainable. They pointed out that Russian and Iranian interests in Syria are not identical, that the two countries are not only partners, but also competitors not only in Syria, but in a broader regional framework as well. Skeptics anticipated a major crisis in this relationship, which in reality never happened.

At the same time, it would be at least premature to say that Russian-Iranian relations have already evolved into a truly strategic partnership – in Syria or elsewhere. There are many bumps on the road to such a partnership. Russian and Iranian interests in Syria overlap, but they do not fully coincide. The attitudes of the two countries to regional security, terrorism and a multipolar world are very similar, and the perceptions that the two sides have of the Syrian future are close to each other, but not identical. Differences in their respective approaches reflect differences in history, political culture, geography and many other factors. Besides all these factors, it is important that the Russian-Iranian partnership was fruitful, obtained most of its goals and can be an example of partnership in other cases and aspects. Iran and Russia have experience in fighting terrorism and protecting the legitimate Syrian government. It is also essential to provide and coordinate after-war political regulations that are usually more complicated.

This is exactly why the paper “Russia and Iran in Syria and Beyond: Challenges Ahead” prepared jointly by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies (IRAS) seems so timely and important. Distinguished experts from the two countries engage themselves in a comparative analysis of the Russian and the Iranian approaches to the Syrian crisis, with the goal of articulating both converging and diverging dimensions of these approaches. They do not intend to present a rosy picture and to cover existing problems or disagreements between Moscow and Tehran; on the other hand, they do not follow standard prejudices or stereotypes about the inevitable breakdown of Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria and beyond. Let us briefly summarize some of the paper’s findings.

Major challenges and threats

A new wave of escalation. Russian and Iranian experts share the opinion that the crisis taking place in Syria has already passed its main war-fighting phase and has evolved into the political dimension. Both of the sides are concerned about certain circumstances that have the potential to cause another wave of escalation; the Kurdish problem is recognized by both sides, but at the same time, the Russian experts highlight the territories of Idlib and Eastern Euphrates as possible flashpoints for the new confrontation.

Terrorist threat. Despite the elimination of the major forces of ISIS, the ideas of creating the Islamic Khalifate are still very much alive, which, along with the ambitions of some of the Middle Eastern states, can lead to the revival of terrorist activities. Thus, the stabilization of the liberated areas is considered a high-priority objective by the experts from both Russia and Iran.

The complexity of the post-war reconstruction. The reconstruction of Syria's political system and lifting of the economic sanctions are regarded as significant problems of the current and future stages by the experts from both sides. Iranian experts express their concerns about the fact that the possible stabilization of the situation in Syria would create public demand for the improvement of living standards, the absence of which can provoke a new wave of unrest. Russian experts stress the need for international action to resolve the problem and the necessity to involve Arab states. The latter is regarded as a point of concern by the Iranian side which sees the strengthening of the Arabic influence in Syria as a threat for Iran.

Setting the goals. Participating in the crisis, both states define their goals differently. Russian goals are manifested in the transformation of military victories into political and economic dividends. At the same time, Iranian experts use the wording of supporting the regime, defined as maintaining a “key link in the axis of resistance.” They also underline enhancing the economic ties between the countries as one of their central goals.

The negotiation process and post-war reconstruction of Syria

Astana process. Both sides highlight the significance of trilateral negotiations between Russia, Iran and Turkey for effective problem resolution. Iranian researchers make a high bid on the Astana process, considering the aforementioned trilateral cooperation as “not one of the ways to manage the Syrian crisis, but perhaps the only way to do so.” Iranian experts also suggest involving European states and China as interested parties to the process in order to create a platform for the exchange of views.

Involvement of foreign states. The Russian research does not underestimate the role of trilateral negotiations, highlighting their importance and concentrating attention on the Russian interest in influencing the region and, first of all, Syria, without being heavily involved in the regional problems. Taking the aforementioned reasons into account, the expedient decision for Russia within

the restoration process is to involve the regional partners, represented by the Arab countries, concerned about the growing Turkish and Iranian influence in the region, which can become an additional incentive for them. The involvement of the European colleagues, from the Russian point of view, is unlikely to happen at the current state, but cooperation in the humanitarian domain can become the foundation for launching this cooperation.

New constitution. The political structure of Syria is also a matter of concern for experts from both countries. Both sides agree on the lack of efficiency of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The Russian expert's research stresses that absence of inclusivity in the committee is one of its major problems due to the fact that such a powerful party as Kurds are not represented there as it could cause a possible aggravation of the relations with Turkey.

Change of power. The Iranian experts suppose that the 2021 presidential election in Syria could be postponed in accordance with the current constitution, if the new one was not developed and adopted; it would allow Bashar Al Assad to maintain his power for a longer time. The Russian position on this matter is distinct due to the assumption that the complex set of problems represented by the economic crisis, international intervention and general pressure would influence the position of Damascus and would push it towards a compromise. In the end, a relatively stable Syria is of utmost interest for both Moscow and Tehran.

Refugee problem. The opinions of the experts drift apart on the matter of resolving the refugee crisis. Iranian experts believe the resolution of the problem in the near future is impossible because of the current state of affairs in the country, while the Russian experts believe that repatriation of refugees is required for the restoration of the Syrian national economy. At the same time, the experts do not deny the possible problems with the implementation of the process.

International intervention estimate

Turkey. Both sides pay extraordinary attention to the Turkish factor and are concerned by the growth of the country's influence. At the same time, they realize its importance as a partner in trilateral cooperation on the further restoration of Syria. Russian experts highlight the "annexation" of Idlib and insufficiency of measures taken by Turkey to tackle the terrorism and radicals, which are possibly caused by the willingness of Turkey to have additional leverage during the negotiation process.

The USA. Experts from both countries underline the role of the U.S. in the conflict and the region in general. It is stated that despite the announced withdrawal of American troops from the country in 2018, the United States is still supporting the Kurdish and Syrian Democratic forces. The experts from Russia suppose that at the current moment, the U.S. is not interested in a resolution of the Syrian conflict and it might be a reason for a dead-end in the negotiation process; Iranian experts estimate activities taken by the USA-Israel block as a way of putting pressure on Tehran, the examples of which are represented by the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, killing of general Soleimani, attempts to extend the embargo against

Iran, Israel's aerial attacks on Iran's positions in Syria etc. All these actions are estimated as provocations with the objective to further drag both Iran and the entirety of the Middle East into escalating regional crisis. According to the Iranian experts, Tehran is ready to resist them and considers its position as strategic patience, which for now allows them to avoid the brewing conflict. Iran would take more assertive actions in case if the U.S. continued its policy of maximum pressure.

Israel. The significant distinction of views is represented in the positions of the sides on the problem of Israel. Russian experts stress that Russia conducts negotiations with Iran and Turkey on the one side and the countries of the Middle East, including the traditional allies of the U.S. on the other one, Israel being one of them. This fact allows Russia to maintain the role of an honest broker in the region, being equidistant and impartial towards the key regional actors. Iranian experts consider the problem of Israel as the only problem in Iranian-Russian relations in Syria, stating that numerous attacks of the Israeli air forces on the Syrian positions happened due to neglect or condonation from Russia's side, which causes certain conjectures in Iranian expert community. At the same time, Iran stresses that in the process of conflict resolution negotiations, it refrains from disagreements with Israel.

Regional significance. Both of the sides admit that the Syrian crisis is an important problem for all the states of the MENA. The goals of Russia and Iran, in accordance with the aforementioned positions, are manifested through playing a role of a mediator in the region and transforming the country's military successes into political and economic gains for the Russian Federation and supporting the friendly regime in Syria, allowing the strengthening of its positions in the region for Iran.

The joint RIAC-IRAS paper does not cover in detail every single dimension of the Russian-Iranian interaction in Syria or about Syria. This very broad and controversial subject calls for more focused research and more discussions between Russian and Iranian scholars. Unfortunately, until today these scholars have limited access to each other. In their research, they tend to rely primarily on indirect sources and often on quite biased opinions that they borrow from the West.

It would be highly desirable to upgrade the current modest second track dialogue between our two countries significantly – not only on Syria, but also on other important dimensions of the bilateral relations, as well as on Russian and Iranian perceptions of the regional and global trends, challenges and opportunities. After all, an open and candid dialogue is an indispensable prerequisite for mature cooperation. We hope that this brief paper might become a practical, albeit a modest step in this direction.

The Future of the Middle East: the Battle of Wills Continues. The Iranian Point of View

Mahmood
Shoori

Introduction

For many years, the Middle East has been known for its governments selling oil and buying weapons. In recent decades, issues such as terrorism and extremism have also been added to these two traditional features. The deep-rooted insecurity in the region, linked to the unresolved issue of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, has provided a fertile ground for the growth of extremism and terrorism due to the irresponsible intervention of Western powers, especially in recent years.

In recent decades, a feature that clearly distinguishes the Middle East from other regions is the diversity of different approaches to influence and shape the future of the region using all legitimate and illegitimate hardware and software tools. All players from major world powers such as the United States, Europe, and Russia to regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and even to small and large groups of militants in the region (several times the number of countries in the region) try their best to increase their share of power in the region amid regional developments. Today after the Islamic Revolution of Iran (more than four decades ago), which changed the power relations based on the rules of the Cold War in the region, and introduced a new plan to the political currents in the region, and after the controversial and interventionist plan of the former U.S. President George W. Bush (about two decades ago) to create a so-called more democratic and prosperous Middle East, the region is facing the clear will of Turkey to expand its power in the region, the will of Saudi Arabia (and some of its allies) to maintain the former order, the will of the Kurds to form an independent state and even the will of extremist groups to revive the Islamic Caliphate. Moreover, Israel's will to impose peace on Palestinian factions and to stabilize the occupied territories, and Russia's will to ensure its security interests in the region and to play a more effective role in regional power relations can also be mentioned here. The result of the confrontation between these approaches so far has been the spread of armed conflict, the growth of extremism, the displacement of millions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, and the dire economic situation in many countries.

Although these conflicting approaches make any crisis in the region seem daunting and disturbing, at least two issues are likely to have an immediate impact on future developments in the Middle East: the first is the future of developments in Syria, and the second is the future of tensions between Iran and the United States.

The Crisis in Syria: Challenges Remain Serious

Since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011 which turned into a full-blown civil war as the United States and its regional allies misused some legitimate political demands, Syria has virtually become a place for political settlement and, more

importantly, for a shift in the regional balance of power. For the United States and Saudi Arabia, the developments in Syria were an opportunity to take revenge on the Assad family who for more than three decades were the main obstacle to the cohesion and unity of the Arab states against the Islamic Republic of Iran. For Israel, the Assad government had to be thrown out, because it was the most important link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The leaders of Turkey and Qatar were also greedily hoping that a regime change in Syria would enlarge the circle of countries under the influence of elements close to the Muslim Brotherhood. These various demands led these countries to use any political, military and economic means to achieve the goals, ultimately causing the greatest harm to the Syrian people. Iran's initial reactions to the developments in Syria were paradoxical. On the one hand, there was general and principled support of the Iranian leaders for the developments in the Arab states in 2010-11 (known in Iran as the Islamic Awakening), and on the other hand, there were strategic ties between Iran and Syria. However, the transformation of the protests in Syria from political unrest to an armed conflict and the open arms support of some countries in the region for opponents of the Assad regime left no doubt that Syria had become a place for these countries to achieve their ambitious goals.

Nine years after the start of the political crisis in Syria, the position of Iran in this country and, in general, in the regional balance of power has significantly improved compared to the early years of the crisis. Despite numerous concerns over the future, the red lines which Iran paid huge political, economic, and military costs of staying in Syria for keeping them are, to a great extent, no longer red lines. The Assad government continues to function, and it remains a key link in the axis of resistance. Shiite holy sites in Syria and Iraq are safe from the threat of ISIS, and Iran's land access to the Eastern Mediterranean has been made possible by the opening of the Abu Kamal-Al Qa'im border crossing. These are significant achievements for Iran, but the more important issue is how to maintain them in the future.

The Syrian crisis, almost after a decade, has still a long way to be completely settled. Some parts of Syria are still in the hands of groups that owe their lives to a fight with the central government, and as there is some regional and international support for them, they are unlikely to be willing to simply withdraw. Kurdish-controlled areas will remain a contentious issue both in the Kurds' relations with Turkey and in their relations with the central government for an unknown future. Perhaps most importantly, there is the issue of more than ten million Syrian refugees who either have lived in neighboring countries or have been displaced inside Syria. Any solution for the future of Syria must first consider the scenario in which these refugees are able to return to their homes, but the realities of Syria have made it almost impossible to use such kind of solution in the near future. Iran and Russia, at least until then, as the two supporters of the central government in Syria, must address the following two major challenges.

The first challenge is how to rebuild the Syrian political system – there is still no clear vision of it. Assad's presidency will end in 2021, and it will be very difficult for him to remain in power. Although many efforts have been made so far within the Astana process and beyond, with the support of the United Nations,

to form the Syrian Constitutional Committee, it is very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to come up with a mechanism that satisfies everyone. Some players want to achieve on the negotiating table what they could not get on the battlefield. For this reason, the next round of political negotiations in the coming year is likely as difficult and breathtaking as military conflicts. For Russia, which in some cases ignored Assad in the past, removing Assad and replacing him with a figure who does not have his problems, and yet preserves his legacy, is probably a better option. Of course, this is not a smooth path, and there is almost no reliable alternative to Assad. There is also a clear contradiction between the Astana process and the Geneva process as to which one has the legitimacy to draft the new constitution, and it is not easy to reach an agreement on a new constitution even within the Astana process. Near ten years of civil war and the diverse ethnic-religious structure have made it difficult to reach an agreement on the most important principles of peaceful coexistence within Syria.

Although no one can be as trustworthy as Assad for Iran, there is no doubt that, first, Assad cannot be kept in power forever, and second, Iran has in principle always supported a national agreement in Syria. For this reason, Iran continues to constructively cooperate with the Astana process and the efforts to form a Constitutional Committee. If the drafting of the new constitution is not influenced by distress, propaganda, and external pressure, it is unlikely that the Pro-Assad forces will not have a significant share of power in the most democratic way possible. Another possible scenario is that if the committee fails to reach a conclusion on Syria's new constitution by 2021, either elections may be postponed, which subject to Article 87 of the current constitution, the current government will continue to work until elections are held, or new elections may be held under the current constitution. In such circumstances, it is possible that Bashar al-Assad would run for another seven-year term, despite the objection of opponents and even many allies of him.

For Iran, of course, the government [of Syria] is not everything. The experience of working in the Middle East has taught Iranian leaders that active role-playing in regional developments requires multiple choices. Iran's advisory presence in Syria over the past few years has provided an opportunity for Iran to engage effectively with various religious and social groups and build capacity to prevent the formation of threat centers against it. Until peace is fully restored in Syria, all terrorist currents are eliminated, and the central government's control is expanded on the entire territory of Syria, Iran's interaction with these groups will remain as one of the tools to ensure regional security. Given that the Astana process is not the result of demands of all powers and forces influencing developments in Syria, including Saudi Arabia, the United States and some opposition groups, any future government formed within this process is likely to continue to be pressured and opposed by these powers. For this reason, the countries guaranteeing the Astana process have to maintain their support tools for the new government.

The second challenge facing Syria during the next year is the economic problems caused by the war, sanctions and, of course, inefficiencies and corruption. After the start of the war, the Syrian government's sources of revenue have

been severely limited, and many production centers have been either destroyed or closed for lack of raw materials and other problems. With the relative stabilization of the political and security situation, the demands for a better life will begin to increase, and if the basic needs of the people are not met, new protests may break out in the country.

Unfortunately, Syria still faces several obstacles to its reconstruction. Countries that are able to invest in the reconstruction of Syria are reluctant to do so for political reasons, and countries that are willing to do so lack the necessary capital to rebuild Syria. At the same time, some countries are trying to use the issue of reconstruction as leverage to gain political concessions. In addition, Syria is facing sanctions problems, and in recent months, new U.S. sanctions against 39 Syrian officials and institutions under the Caesar Act have made it even more difficult for this country to return to normal. The sanctions target foreigners who provide significant financial, material and technical support to the Syrian government, and specifically threaten to impose various sanctions on those who agree to participate in the reconstruction of areas under the control of the Syrian government. Given that any dealings with Syrian institutions and banks have been sanctioned by the United States for years, these sanctions seem to target the scope of action of those officials who can play a serious role in the future of Syria, whether in the elections or the drafting of the Constitution.

Although immediately after the sanctions took effect, the first vice president of Iran announced that Iran would not hesitate to “take any action” to reduce the pressure on Syria, the economic situation in Iran after the return of U.S. sanctions as well as the U.S. policy of maximum pressure on Iran do not leave much maneuvering room for this country. The Islamic Republic of Iran, despite its interest to be more involved economically in Syria, has limited capacity to play an active role in the Syrian reconstruction process due to both sanctions and its internal economic problems. However, the economic cooperation between Iran and Syria has gained more momentum over the past few years. An agreement was signed for long-term strategic economic cooperation between the two countries at the beginning of 2020 during the visit of the first vice president of Iran to Damascus. During this visit, a group of Iranian businessmen and manufacturers also had the opportunity to closely examine the areas in which they could be more effectively engaged in the Syrian market.

All Hopes Are on the Astana Process

Since the beginning of 2017, when efforts for regional cooperation to manage the Syrian crisis came to fruition and trilateral talks among Iran, Russia and Turkey were held under the name of the Astana process, there have been significant achievements in managing conflicts and reducing military conflicts in Syria. This not only restored security to many parts of the country, but also called into question many assumptions about the improbable cooperation in the region.

Cooperation among Iran, Russia and Turkey is not one of the ways to manage the Syrian crisis, but perhaps the only way to do so. These three countries have

capacities and interests in the region that are neither possible nor rational to be eliminated or ignored. Of course, there are areas and reasons for these countries, beyond the management of the Syrian crisis, to enjoy extensive bilateral cooperation, but currently the issue of Syria is the most important reason for their strategic dialogue. The promising point of this cooperation is that its resultant interests are important and strategic for all three countries, and the non-cooperation can have negative strategic consequences for them. As the ideological reasons for friendship and enmity disappeared in the post-Cold War era, strategic cooperation among states is now based on either gaining a strategic advantage or preventing strategic loss. For Iran, Russia and Turkey, cooperation in the management of the Syrian crisis means both an opportunity to gain a strategic advantage and an opportunity to avoid a strategic loss. This statement is true for the cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria, but it seems that after the incident of November 24, 2015, during which a Russian fighter jet was shot down by Turkey, and, as a result, the relations between the two countries were frosty for a short period, Turkey realized the importance of this issue. The negative consequences of their severed relations for the economies of both countries, on the one hand, and that the Turkish leaders believed that insisting too much on removing Bashar al-Assad from the Syrian political scene not only leads to continued war and insecurity in this country and the whole region, but also expands the Kurds' sphere of political and military power, especially in the neighboring areas of Turkey, on the other hand, have paved the way for initiating tripartite cooperation to manage the Syrian crisis.

Cooperation among Iran, Russia and Turkey is a unique example of cooperation among regional powers in the post-Cold War era. There is no denying that these three countries are following very different principles and goals, but fortunately, all of them have accepted that they cannot ignore each other. And more importantly, they have accepted that the escalation of conflict and enmity among themselves will practically destroy the limited interests existing in the cooperation. Historically, in the past few centuries, differences and animosities among the three powers – Iran, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire – have only led them to lag behind in terms of industrialization and economic development.

As long as the Iran-Russia-Turkey triangle is an equilateral triangle, it can be expected that all three countries pay equal attention to the continued cooperation. Currently, the Iran-Russia cooperation side is more based on political interests, while the Russia-Turkey cooperation side is more based on economic interests. Cooperation between Iran and Turkey, despite the obvious and numerous political differences and at the same time extensive economic interactions between them, is mostly based on the premise that turning competition into conflict does not benefit any side.

These features, connecting the three sides of the triangle in an unbalanced way, offer minimal reasons for continued cooperation, but do not eliminate differences. In recent years, Turkey has pursued an ambitious and aggressive foreign policy at the regional and international levels, and has proudly sought to pursue its interests in areas ranging from the Caucasus to Syria, Iraq, Libya and even to the Persian Gulf. Turkey's Syria offensive (October 2019) was practically not

met with serious opposition from Iran and Russia, but their support for terrorist groups in Idlib a few months later even led to a direct confrontation between Iran and Russia and Turkey. In early March, the counseling center of Iran in northern Syria issued a statement warning Turkish forces to stop shelling their positions. The statement stressed that Iranian forces were ordered by their commanders to be tolerant and take no countermeasure against the Turkish troops who were at shooting range. Two days before the clashes, 33 Turkish soldiers who were outside their posts and with terrorist groups were killed in Syrian airstrikes on the outskirts of Idlib.

That these events did not lead to a complete separation of Turkey and Russia and Iran, and that despite Erdogan's threat to withdraw from the Astana process, the sixth summit of the three countries was held virtually on July 1 suggest that the Astana process is still alive, and is possibly the solution to problems.

The Negative Role of Israel

The mysterious role of Israel in the Syrian crisis, from the beginning up until now, is something that may be addressed better and more accurately in the future, but there is one issue that at least is clear for Iranian analysts: Israel is the only dark point in Iran-Russia relations in Syria.

Since the presence of Russian forces in Syria, the Israeli army has repeatedly targeted some bases of the Syrian army or those of its allied militias by air or missile strikes. So far, a large number of Syrian army forces or forces of their allies have died, and many facilities have been destroyed. In at least one of these attacks on T4 base in Homs, Syria, (April 2018) seven Iranian soldiers lost their lives. Israeli attacks on Syria have also affected Russian forces there. The incident in which a Russian plane was mistakenly targeted by the Syrian air defense, killing 14 Russian soldiers, according to Russian military officials, was the result of a deception operation by Israeli fighter jets on Syrian soil. Following this incident, Russia announced that it would deliver the S-300 system to Syria in order to strengthen its air defense and increase its accuracy. However, Israeli airstrikes on Syrian bases continued in the following months, and in fact, the S-300 systems did not effectively counter these attacks. These events have led many Iranian analysts to speculate that repeated Israeli attacks on Syrian territory may have been carried out with Russian tolerance. Heshmatollah Falahat Pisheh, the then head of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, said in an interview: "Russia's S300 air defense systems established in Syria are deactivated during the Israeli attacks on this country. It is a serious criticism of Russia. If the Russian S-300 system works properly, the Zionist regime will not be able to carry out attacks on Syrian soil easily."¹

No reason can be given for the accuracy of the speculations, but Iranian analysts' concerns cannot be underestimated as well. To address some of these concerns,

¹ Apparently, Russia is not activating the S300 missile system during Israel's attack on Syria (in Farsi) // Euronews. 25.01.2019.

URL: <https://per.euronews.com/2019/01/25/s300-russian-missiles-not-working-while-israel-has-air-strike-in-syria>

Iran has sought to strengthen Syria's air defense capabilities directly. According to reports released after the visit of Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff for the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to Syria in early July, it is possible that Iran would deploy a number of its indigenous air defense systems – Khordad 3, Khordad 15 and Bavar 373 – to the Syrian army. The expensive American Global Hawk drone was also shot down by Khordad 3 in June 2019 near the Hormuz waterway in the Persian Gulf.

Immediately after the news of the Iran-Syria military agreement became public, some Western diplomats tried to interpret it as a signal to Russia and a sign of a rift between Iran and Russia in Syria.² If the Israeli airstrikes on Syria can be considered as the result of tolerance or even the green light of Russia, then the military agreement between Iran and Syria can be interpreted in this way. However, despite some differences in approach and implementation, Iran and Russia have no reason to go their separate ways in Syria, and this separation will certainly have irreversible negative consequences for both sides. Another point that should be mentioned here is that the Islamic Republic of Iran has so far tried not to allow the crisis management process in Syria to be affected by the regional conflicts between Iran and Israel. This has led to Israeli officials' misunderstanding and abuse in some cases, which could be very dangerous if continued.

Escalating Tensions Between Iran and the United States: Waiting for Disaster?

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), the conflict between Iran and the United States has been one of the main elements and features of the security situation in the Middle East. After the JCPOA agreement, there was hope that at least in some areas, tensions between the two countries would decrease and even lead to reduced tensions in other areas, but Trump's role as the U.S. President did not leave much room for this optimism.

In the few months to the end of the first term of Trump's presidency, and specifically to the time of the upcoming U.S. elections, many issues in the Middle East will depend on U.S. and Israeli efforts to impose a policy of maximum pressure on Iran and make the Trump-Netanyahu joint achievements in this regard irreversible. These efforts, which began with the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement in May 2018 and then culminated with the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, have been continued in recent months by U.S. efforts to extend Iran's arms embargo beyond October 2020 as well as by its efforts to take some other dangerous measures. The assassination of General Soleimani in the first days of 2020 pushed the region to the brink of another major war. Although Iran's response to the U.S. action was limited, Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that they reserve the right to retaliate. Given the overt and covert efforts of the United States and Israel to intensify pressure on Iran before the U.S. election, any irreversible event can be

² Israel warns Russia against new risks in Syria // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. 23.07.2020.
URL: https://www.ng.ru/world/2020-07-23/1_2_7919_israel.html

expected in the Middle East. The recent suspicious explosions in Iran, one at the military-industrial complex East of Tehran (June 25) and the other (a week later) at the Natanz nuclear facility, could possibly be parts of efforts to push Iran to the corner of the ring. So far, Iran has preferred not to allow the U.S. and Israel to drag the region into a new conflict by building tensions repeatedly. However, it is unclear how long Iran's policy of strategic patience can be continued. If all doors are closed to Iran, it will surely be looking for new avenues. In the short term, things do not seem to be going in Iran's favor. The sharp drop in oil revenues and that many of Iran's ways of foreign economic interactions are closed, along with the fact that Iranian allied forces in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria are under pressure, have severely limited Iran's regional maneuvering power, but this does not mean that Iran would back down from its positions. The bases and elements of Iran's domestic and regional power are still strong enough to withstand these pressures. In addition, the United States and Israel will not be able to continue these pressures for an unknown future. Even if Trump is re-elected, he will probably have to choose between a military confrontation with Iran or a change in policy. The policy of maximum pressure will lose its effect in the long run if it does not work in the short term. So if Trump is re-elected, he will either have to look for tougher options or have to change his policy of maximum pressure.

Miscalculations have always been the biggest cause of unwanted conflicts at the international level. U.S. officials and their Israeli counterparts have misunderstood that removing General Qassem Soleimani from the regional equation and the sharp drop in Iran's oil revenues and the increased regional pressure will force Iran to back down from its positions, but this can also lead Iran to use the capacities that have not been used yet. So far, Iran has not allowed the level of tension between the two countries to increase uncontrollably by adopting a policy of active resistance in the hope that the U.S. election may bring about limited changes in the situation between the two countries, but this policy may change for any reason. Trump's re-election will inevitably change Iran's strategy, but before that, the (possible) success of the United States in extending Iran's arms embargo may cause some changes in the status quo, because it makes it almost impossible even for the next U.S. administration to return to the JCPOA.

Conclusion

It is difficult to maintain lasting order and security in the Middle East. It is a misconception that the interaction of great powers, as in the Cold War era, can formulate and enforce the rules of regional order. There is no player in the Middle East that can be ignored, and it can be said with certainty that the battle of wills in the Middle East will continue for an unknown future. For this reason, the Middle East problems can neither be taken as hardware problems, nor solved by an engineering effort such as the Greater Middle East Initiative. Under these circumstances, the U.S.-Israeli efforts to implement the deal of the century, which requires incorporating new parts of the Arab territories to the Israeli-occupied territories – already opposed by Mahmoud Abbas, Head of Palestinian Authority – can practically create a new crisis in the region. In this context, even efforts

such as the Israeli-UAE agreement not only will not reduce the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, but will certainly increase the feeling of anger and hatred among significant sections of Muslims, especially the Palestinians.

The threat of terrorism will certainly not leave the Middle East for years to come, but the creation of ISIS is also a failed experience for its architects. It seems unlikely that in the near future any group will be able to recruit from all over the world and seek to achieve its goals through intimidation like ISIS. However, even with the complete elimination of ISIS, two influential forces will not be removed from the region: the first is the idea of reviving the Islamic Caliphate in parts of the Sunni community, and the second is the competition of regional powers to expand their sphere of influence. At one point, these two forces paved the way for the rise of ISIS, and they may create new problems in the future as well.

As the possibility increases for confrontation in the Middle East, not much room is left for positive thinking. However, the elimination of ISIS in many parts of Iraq and Syria has brought normal life back to these areas, making reconstruction a top priority for them. If the reconstruction process is not done in a tangible way in these areas, fresh unrest may erupt.

Unfortunately, in these circumstances, the U.S. attempts to impose various sanctions on countries such as Iran and Syria create not only political and economic stalemates in the region, but also creates new areas for escalation of existing crises in the region. The new U.S. sanctions against Syria, leading to further devaluation of the national currency in this country, which in turn has led to the impoverishment of its people, are expected to cause more problems for Lebanon's crisis-ridden economy. The Lebanese economy is traditionally very much linked with the Syrian economy, so Lebanon will undoubtedly suffer more than any other country from these sanctions. Escalation of the economic crisis in Lebanon can easily plunge the country into a new round of political instability.

In the current situation, the only point of hope in the regional developments is the continuation of the Astana process despite all the existing problems and obstacles. Iran, Russia and Turkey are three influential regional powers that can only bring about change in the region if their capacities are aggregated. In the last year, there have been many reasons for Turkey to secede from the format of trilateral cooperation with Iran and Russia, but fortunately still despite the differences between Turkey (on the one hand) and Russia and to some extent Iran (on the other hand) over the situation in Idlib and northern Syria and some other issues, the will of the leaders of the three countries is to continue trilateral talks.

Simultaneously pursuing the expansion of trilateral economic cooperation will not only help strengthen the political dialogue, but also provide new opportunities for all three countries. Tripartite cooperation in the field of energy and the creation of a free trade zone among Iran, Turkey and the Eurasian Economic Union can be some areas of cooperation among these three countries.

Apparently, Russia, Turkey and Iran, as the guarantors of the Astana process, should have more serious talks on the issue of reconstruction, in addition to

resolving political issues. In the current situation, it seems that an international conference with all interested countries- including China and Europe- should be held on the issue of Syria's reconstruction. Of course, this conference, in the first place, can only be a forum for the exchange of views and not necessarily for the attraction of capital. The cooperative approach of Iran, Russia and Turkey to the political settlement of the Syrian crisis, which is based on the principle of cooperation in common areas and negotiation and bargaining in disputed areas, should also be considered in the field of economic reconstruction.

Moving Towards Stabilization in Syria and Beyond by 2021. The Russian Point of View

Aleksey
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Introduction

After eight years of active military phase, the Syrian conflict has been moving towards the political stage. While the intensity and scale of the military actions have decreased, the risk of military escalation in Idlib and East of Euphrates areas is still there. Apart from this risk, there are plenty of other factors which make stabilization and national reconciliation process in Syria extremely difficult: U.S. and EU sanctions, extreme lack of reconstruction funds, deteriorating socio-economic situation in the country, U.S.-Iran and U.S.-Turkey tensions, absence of political and military/security reforms which could help national reconciliation, COVID-19, etc. – are among plenty of such factors. Moreover, positions which regional, global and local actors will ultimately secure as a result of the Syrian conflict settlement will hugely affect the formation of new security architecture in the region.

This paper will examine challenges and threats which are still present in Syria and how they affect Russia and its policy. It will also discuss prospects for the Syrian political settlement and reconstruction, and what are the prospects for Moscow to enhance its role in the new security architecture in the region and in its partnership with Iran and Turkey.

Major Challenges and Threats

Although the conflict in Syria is entering its final stage and shifting towards the political realm, there are still stumbling blocks that hinder the completion of the military phase. As of today, there are two major issues in the military realm. First, the Idlib province is predominantly controlled by the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham³, radical extremist groups like Hurras al-Din⁴ and the Turkish military. Second, areas East of Euphrates are held by the Kurd-dominated SDF forces backed by the U.S. military, and al-Tanf area on the border with Jordan occupied by US forces. This issue could also be described as the presence of foreign forces in Syria. Thus, neither Turkish nor U.S. forces are present in Syria legally. On top of that, there is an issue of Israeli strikes on the Iranian/pro-Iranian targets inside Syria which are caused by Iran's growing military presence.

In the political realm, there are three major challenges as well. The first is the inability of the Syrian Constitutional Committee to start constructive work in

³ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (banned in Russia), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front), is an UN-designated terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaeda // United Nations Security Council Consolidated List. URL: <https://scsanctions.un.org/fop/fop?xml=htdocs/resources/xml/en/consolidated.xml&xslt=htdocs/resources/xsl/en/consolidated.xsl> (accessed September 1, 2020)

⁴ Hurras al-Din is a radical extremist armed group active in Syria which is affiliated with al-Qaeda (banned in Russia) and designated as a terrorist organization by different states, including the U.S. Terrorist Designations under Amended Executive Order to Modernize Sanctions to Combat Terrorism // U.S. Department of State. 10.09.2019. URL: <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designations-under-amended-executive-order-to-modernize-sanctions-to-combat-terrorism/>

order to catalyze the political process in Syria due to inflexibility of both Damascus and opposition. The second is lack of progress in reconciliation process in south Syria and stalemate in Kurds-Damascus talks. And the third is the absence of full-scale reconstruction which will help to stabilize the country economically and politically. Without finding a proper compromise on these issues between all parties involved, it is going to be almost impossible to move further with conflict settlement and stabilization of Syria.

Therefore, **Russia faces serious key challenges in Syria:**

- to reach and maintain a final status deal with Turkey on Idlib, and North Syria which are de-facto occupied by Turkish forces, and also on areas East of Euphrates which are controlled by the Kurds;
- to begin economic reconstruction in Syria with regional Arab countries on board (and Europeans at best);
- to at least preserve the status quo and at most to find common ground with the U.S. and EU on Syria in order to lift or ease sanctions and launch the reconstruction process;
- activate political process and intra-Syrian reconciliation including with the Syrian Kurds;
- to ensure the actions of Damascus and Tehran are well-coordinated and do not sabotage Moscow's initiatives, like the work of the Constitutional Committee;
- to transform its military success into economic and political dividends.

Until these goals are reached, Moscow will keep investing in Syria without receiving meaningful economic benefits and without a chance to showcase a success story to the world. Apart from that, unresolved military issues of Idlib and East of Euphrates increase the risk of escalation between Russia, Turkey, the U.S., the Kurds, Iran and Damascus, which contradicts Moscow's interests.

Today's strategic challenge for Russia is to find a way to transform its military success in Syria into political and economic success in the country and the broader region. Without striking a comprehensive deal with other major actors involved, this goal seems quite unrealistic.

Stalemate in Idlib

The Idlib agreement, which Russia and Turkey struck in September 2018, appeared to be practically dysfunctional as Turkey failed to separate terrorists from the moderate opposition. As a result, by 2019, Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham (HTS) took control over 90 per cent of Idlib (in 2020 its grip weakened due to the internal infightings and Hurras al-Din departure from its ranks). Even the additional protocol, which was signed on March 5, 2020, has so far failed to deliver on its main stipulations. A 20 km-long security-zone along the M4 highway is still not established, the road is not safe and civil transit is still not opened, terrorist and radical groups are still present in the buffer zone and to the south of the M4 road which was supposed to be taken by the Russia-backed Syrian Army, as well

as Syrian and Russian military infrastructure have been under constant attacks⁵ coming from HTS-controlled areas. This includes more frequent attacks on the joint Russian-Turkish military patrols. This issue provided ground for Moscow and Damascus to conduct limited military operations against terrorist groups in South Idlib for over a year now. At the same time, Russia doesn't seek a large-scale military operation in Idlib, which will exacerbate tensions with Turkey.

Thanks to the Idlib deal struck by Putin and Erdogan on March 5, 2020, in Moscow, Russia and Turkey established rules of engagement in Idlib, which so far allow them to avoid major escalations like the ones back in fall 2019 and winter 2020. Luckily, they found a way how to avert these risks, although they are not excluded altogether.

As for Turkey, it is also reluctant to conduct a large-scale military operation in Idlib as it will spoil relations with Russia and cause another wave of Syrian refugees towards Turkish borders. At the same time, Ankara is also unwilling to solve the issue of HTS and other radicals in Idlib. This essentially means that the March 5 agreement with Russia has not been implemented. In fact, since the beginning of 2020, Turkey amassed about 15-20,000 soldiers⁶ in the Idlib province and over 5,000 military hardware units, which is enough to handle the terrorist issue there. However, Ankara is still reluctant to do so, as it wants to maintain leverage over Moscow and use Idlib as a bargaining chip in dealings with Northeast Syria and Libya. Moreover, de-facto, Ankara has already annexed northern Idlib. Since May/June 2020 Turkish lira has become⁷ the main currency there, Turkey has been investing in the reconstruction of the region, humanitarian aid and developing infrastructure there for months already. It is hard to believe it can easily abandon this territory. In addition, there have been attempts lately to rebrand HTS by switching the focus to the more radical group Hurras al-Din, which broke away from HTS back in 2018. The hope is that the most radical elements of HTS will eventually join Hurras al-Din, making the former more moderate and ultimately merging it with pro-Turkish Syrian opposition which is a part of the political process. Although Russia vocally opposes the rebranding of terrorists, it is a potential opportunity for Moscow to keep bargaining with Ankara about Northeast Syria and the Kurdish issue.

Essentially, the situation in Idlib has practically come to a stalemate. On the one hand, Russia, as well as the Syrian regime, want to get Idlib and especially the M4 highway under their control, all while avoiding a large-scale operation. The opening of the M4 road will reconnect Aleppo with Latakia and East Syria, which is essential for restoring economic and trade activities in the country. According to a senior Russian diplomat who talked on condition of anonymity, Moscow's plan was to take control over the M4 and M5 highways, to seal remaining areas

⁵ Presidents of Russia and France made press statements and answered media questions // Presidential Executive Office. 19.08.2019. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61336>

⁶ The numbers derive from the author's own calculations based on the Turkish experts, military and media reports about the forces' entry to the Idlib province.

⁷ Syria's Idlib adopts Turkish lira in place of plummeting pound // France 24. 15.06.2020. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200615-syria-s-idlib-adopts-turkish-lira-in-place-of-plummeting-pound>

of Idlib and let them become Turkey's problem. At the same time, regular military attacks⁸ coming from HTS-controlled Idlib on Damascus-controlled areas and on Russia's military objects pushes Moscow to respond with force. Although Russia doesn't seek tensions with Ankara as it remains an important partner in the Astana process (which will lose much of its legitimacy once Turkey is out), it still has influence on a big and important part of the Syrian opposition and armed groups, it is still in talks with the U.S. on Kurdish-held areas, and Russia-Turkey bilateral ties are on the rise (important projects are being implemented – the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, Akkuyu nuclear power plant construction, S-400 deliveries). In addition, over the last year, the conflicts in Syria and Libya have become increasingly intertwined. Today the Turkish policy in Syrian Idlib or in the Syrian Northeast is also conditioned by the developments in Libya, where Russia also plays an important role. This is why Idlib has become not just a separate issue within the Syrian conflict, but an issue connected with the East of Euphrates and Libya. This requires a great deal of restraint from Moscow and Ankara to ensure the situation does not escalate, allowing both sides to play further.

As for Turkey, it wants to maintain its influence in Idlib as it could be used as a bargaining chip in striking a deal with Moscow and Damascus on the issues of the Syrian Kurds and/or Libya. Eventually, the situation looks like both actors are testing each other's limits, balancing on the verge of escalation. Ankara's reluctance to take practical steps in Idlib is defined by the uncertain status with the North Aleppo areas of Tel Rifaat and Manbij, the Kurdish-held areas towards the East of Euphrates and the U.S. approach to it. According to a senior Russian diplomat, an option for some sort of exchange deal between Moscow and Ankara on Idlib, Manbij and Northeast Syria is still on the table.

All that being said, any serious confrontation between Russia and Turkey over Idlib is highly unlikely, since neither of them are interested in any serious escalation. At the same time, the practical implementation of the March 5 Idlib deal requires a very cautious but resolute approach on Russia's side.

Uncertainty East of Euphrates and with Kurds

One of the major challenges for Russia in Syria is the U.S. presence in Kurdish-held areas towards the East of Euphrates. Despite the December 2018 announcement to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria, such steps have not been taken. Instead, the U.S. left limited contingent of its forces in Eastern Syria to safeguard the oil infrastructure which is under SDF control. By doing this, Washington kills three birds with one stone: the U.S. military serves as a deterrent against the Turkish military offensive against the Kurds, against the expansion of SAA/Russian control to the country's East, and against the growing Iranian presence. The mere fact that Syria's East involves so many external and local forces present on the ground – Iran, Turkey, Russia, the U.S., the Syrian Army, Kurds, Arab tribes – makes this region perhaps the most complicated in Syria. So far, all major actors

⁸ Russia Says It Repelled an Attack on Its Main Syrian Air Base – Reports // The Moscow Times. 20.05.2019. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/20/russia-says-it-repelled-an-attack-on-its-main-syrian-air-base-ria-a65654>

involved are not capable of changing the existing status quo in the region in their favor. This makes the operational environment extremely difficult for everyone.

No one knows whether the U.S. is seriously committed to being a deterrent for all other parties in Syria. So far, Washington's main concerns in Syria are to make sure Kurds are secure, to deter Turkey and the Syrian government from military operations against the Kurds, to keep Iran in check, and to make Syria a burden for Russia. It naturally aggravates all parties, especially the Turks, as they consider Kurdish YPG forces, which dominate SDF, a terrorist organization and a threat to its security. U.S. long-time support to Kurds and reluctance to fulfill all Turkish demands regarding them put Ankara in a quite tricky situation. On the one hand, it doesn't want to go for a large-scale military operation against Kurds for very good reasons. On the other hand, Ankara is looking for a face-saving solution which allows it to effectively address Kurdish issue and not to alienate the U.S. more. That said, Turkey and the U.S. still have serious disagreements⁹ which impede effective settlement between them in Syria's Northeast which naturally affects Russian policy there.

Another important issue in the areas East of Euphrates which came at the forefront about a year ago is risk of ISIS resurgence.¹⁰ The remnants of the Islamic State have been using existing differences and tensions between the actors by launching their own attacks which complicate the operational environment further.¹¹

As of now, it seems that neither Russia nor Turkey and the U.S. have a solid plan/agreement on how to act in Syria. Therefore, the ongoing uncertainty on Idlib and spoiler-role of the U.S. in SDF-held areas complicate Turkey-Russia moves in Syria. Although the talks between Russian and Turkish militaries on Idlib and the East of Euphrates are ongoing, they seem only able to maintain the existing status quo. Russian and Turkish dealings with the U.S. on East of Syria did not bring any substantial result. Anyway, Syria is not a priority for the U.S. at the moment and is unlikely to become one under Biden's administration, which gives little hope for progress.

It is quite evident that all parties involved need to reach a deal on Kurdish-held areas, but how that deal will look is anyone's guess. This remains one of the most challenging tasks for all actors involved for the months ahead.

Constitutional Committee

It's been over a year since Syrian Constitutional Committee was formed, although no real progress on the political track was reached, except holding several meetings in Geneva. Inability of the Committee to become functional is a major obstacle for moving the political process further as drafting a new constitution is one

⁹ How Washington Should Handle Turkey's Summer of Flex // Defence One. 21.08.2020.
URL: <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/08/how-washington-should-handle-turkeys-summer-flex/167909/>

¹⁰ Pentagon report says ISIS is 're-surfing in Syria' following Trump's troop withdrawal // CNN. 08.08.2019.
URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/06/politics/pentagon-report-isis-syria/index.html>

¹¹ A Turkish-Kurdish war in Syria is still possible // Al Jazeera. 13.08.2019.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/8/13/a-turkish-kurdish-war-in-syria-is-still-possible/>

of the key issues to be solved. For a long time, Damascus has been reluctant to compromise on constitutional committee as well as the opposition. However, the situation has changed over the past year. Damascus is under enormous socio-economic, financial and humanitarian pressure caused by nine years of war, tough Western sanctions – all of which was exacerbated by the recent crises in Lebanon and COVID-19 pandemic. It might make Damascus become more flexible and prone for compromises. Moreover, the regional situation is changing which led to partial UAE-Syria reconciliation which was partly caused by rising Turkish influence in Syria and in the Syrian opposition. UAE together with Saudi Arabia might well affect a part of the Syrian opposition in the Committee in order to limit Turkish influence which automatically puts them closer to Damascus. That said, Assad might become more interested in the political process. Certain pressure from Moscow also plays role in making Syrian authorities more negotiable.

At the same time, the Constitutional Committee lacks inclusivity as Turkey is starkly against Kurds involvement.¹² Although a launch of the committee is a good start in any case, it is hard to imagine that it can bring lasting inclusive political solution for the country alone. Without addressing the Kurdish issue – whether by including Kurds into the Committee or by striking a deal between them and Damascus – any attempts to launch sustainable political process in Syria will fail.

That said, it is a big challenge for Russia to ultimately make the political process inclusive and successful. In its recent moves Moscow tries to bridge¹³ the gap between political wing of SDF, Syrian Democratic Council, and some Syrian opposition groups close to Moscow which can allow to revive talks between the Kurds and Damascus and to send a signal to Turkey that Kurds cannot be excluded from the political settlement. Anyway, it is a long way to go and remains a very important challenge.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Reconstruction of the Syrian economy, rebuilding its military/security forces and other institutions, lifting U.S. sanctions, attracting foreign funds, and finding the right way for the national reconciliation are among major issues Russia faces in Syria. One may fairly ask why Russia would want to take care of all these enormously complicated problems and not to leave it to the Syrians to decide. There are several important reasons for that.

First, for Russia, it is important to showcase a success story to the world, pointing to the failed Western approach in conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, etc.

Second, Russia has already made significant investments in Syria, and it needs to reap the economic benefits in the form of different contracts, access to resources,

¹² Syria's constitutional committee still mired in discord // Al-Monitor. 08.08.2019.

URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/turkey-russia-syria-constitution-committee-mired-in-discord.html>

¹³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with representatives of the Syrian opposition // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.08.2020.

URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4306677

exploration of shale oil and gas off the Syrian coast. In order to benefit from that, Moscow needs to get Syria back on track economically.

Third, Russia already secured two military bases in Syria – in Latakia and Tartus – and will maintain its presence for at least another 50 years. In order to make its military and economic presence in the country an asset and not a burden, Moscow needs a stable government with working institutions which will prevent the country from sliding back into chaos. That is only possible if the government, military/security apparatus go through certain changes, if U.S. sanctions are lifted and economic reconstruction is launched with the involvement of international donors.

For months now, Russia has been trying to persuade its European partners to cooperate on returning Syrian refugees and on economic reconstruction. So far, the Europeans are unwilling to work on those issues without political reforms by Damascus. Their concerns are quite legitimate, as once the refugees are back home, they do not have any guarantees for normal life. Their socio-economic situation is terrible, humanitarian access is rather limited¹⁴ and problematic, and they might face prosecution or simply be detained once back home. According to the Regional Director of the UNHCR Middle East Bureau Mr. Amin Awad, who spoke at the 2019 Moscow International Security Conference, 80 per cent of the 5.5 mln Syrian refugees want to go back once certain conditions are met. These include secure housing, work opportunities, physical and legal security and safety. Only 12 per cent are ready to move back to Syria immediately. There are plenty of documented cases¹⁵ of detentions, prosecutions, forced conscription into the army, property confiscations, etc. These quite legitimate concerns make EU countries condition any cooperation with Russia and the Syrian authorities to improve the conditions for return of the refugees and to implement the reforms by Damascus.

This creates a serious obstacle for Moscow to convince its European partners to cooperate. In addition to that, the EU is currently preoccupied with its own domestic problems, so foreign policy issues, especially the Middle East and Syria, are not among its top priorities. However, the deteriorating humanitarian and socio-economic situation in Syria which threatens to cause further destabilization might push Russia, Damascus and the EU to shift their positions and become more prone to give concessions to meet halfway, at least in the least sensitive issue like humanitarian aid delivery. Since July 2020, UN humanitarian aid can only flow to Syria via one remaining border-crossing, Bab al-Hawa, which will most likely be closed in July 2021. Therefore, Russia and the EU could work together¹⁶ to create a joint monitoring mechanism which would ensure transparent conditions for humanitarian aid delivery and distribution across Syria. It could well become a first confidence-building step which might lead to further cooperation on Syria between the EU and Russia.

¹⁴ Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South // The International Crisis Group. 25.02.2019. URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/196-lessons-syrian-states-return-south>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Future of Humanitarian Aid Delivery to Syria: What is Russia's Rationale? // The Russian International Affairs Council. 31.07.2020. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/the-future-of-humanitarian-aid-delivery-to-syria-what-is-russia-s-rationale/>

Moscow should use its diplomacy and Track II channels to be in constant dialog with European partners and Syrians, trying to find compromises and match the concerns of both the EU and Damascus. That will allow to see to what degree the parties are ready to lower their demands to accept less than they currently seek. In this regard, Moscow finds itself in a tricky position, as it has rather limited influence on Damascus, while the EU, the U.S. and regional powers believe it is simply reluctant to pressure Assad.

At the moment, Moscow seems focused on getting Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, on board with Syrian reconstruction. Although the process is rather complicated, there are certain positive developments, including the reopening of UAE's and Bahrain's embassies in Damascus, the Syria-UAE Business Forum in Abu-Dhabi and the visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's chief security adviser Ali Mamlouk to Riyadh in late 2018.¹⁷ It underscored the desire of Gulf powers to secure their interests and influence in Syria. Although Saudi Arabia is reluctant to be openly engaged in the reconstruction of Syria and even to reintegrate it back into the Arab family, it realizes the necessity to minimize its losses and secure certain influence in the country. In addition to that, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are concerned about increasing Iranian and Turkish influence in the region and want to be able to keep them in check in Syria. By using their financial tools and participating in reconstruction, they can effectively leave less room for Iran and Turkey in Syria in the economic sphere.

The lifting of U.S. sanctions, especially the Caesar Act, from Syria is another important issue which heavily affects involving anyone, including Gulf countries and the EU, in the reconstruction of the country.

New Regional Security Architecture

Since 2011 the grand transformation process of the MENA region is in full swing. The crisis in Syria and the way how it is going to be settled will play the most important role in defining the new Middle East security architecture which is emerging now. All major regional and global players – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the U.S., UAE, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon – are involved in the Syria context in one way or another. Results of the Syrian civil war and power struggle among the actors involved will define parameters of the newly formed security system in the region. Many scholars agree that turbulent processes which we witness across the Middle East is a clear testimony that a brand-new world order is being born.¹⁸

This is why major regional actors, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, want to stand by their interests and positions in Syria and in the region. It also partly explains Russia's military involvement in the Syrian conflict. In addition, we should consider U.S. unwillingness to be involved in Syria and a broader region and recognize

¹⁷ Assad's notorious chief security adviser 'visited Riyadh' to discuss Syria-Saudi rapprochement // The New Arab. 09.01.2019. URL: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/1/9/assad-adviser-visited-riyadh-to-discuss-syria-saudi-rapprochement>

¹⁸ The Middle East: Birth Pains of a New World Order? // The Valdai Discussion Club. 16.10.2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-middle-east-birth-pains-of-a-new-world-order/>

the situation where regional powers started to flirt with Russia and to develop constructive relations with it in attempt to diversify portfolio of their partnerships. Having conflicting interest (however, it does not exclude that they can have some common interests), Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, attempt to improve their relations with Russia to use it against each other. Moscow's quite effective trilateral format of regional cooperation with Iran and Turkey also demonstrates a proof that actors with a fair number of disagreements are able to form effectively functioning partnership.

At the same time, Moscow evenly develops its ties with traditional U.S. allies in the region – Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, etc. – which allows it to be an “honest broker” in the region. Being equidistant from all sides in the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Palestine-Israeli, and intra-GCC rift, Russia showcases that it intends to become a mediator in the broader regional context. Moreover, Russia is the only country outside of the region which doesn't have a negative colonial past, was not involved in large-scale regional warfare, as in the case of the U.S., and maintains working relations with all regional actors.

It seems that in the coming years, apart from its role in Syria, Russia will focus on developing two major tracks in its regional policy. First, to continue promoting itself as a mediator in the region creating a functioning mechanism which helps major regional powers to solve existing problems (e.g. Libya, Yemen). Second, to develop the ability to influence state of affairs in the region by not being heavily involved, while reaping the benefits provided by the regional environment. In effect, the very recent Russian proposal of the collective security concept¹⁹ for the Gulf well testifies to the fact that Moscow aims at promoting its vision and above-mentioned goals.

Although Russia chose to enhance its ties with the regional actors who have more capacity and power to influence the situation on the ground, the main rationale behind its regional policy is to avoid being too actively involved in the region, thus paying a high cost. That said, Russia predominantly used hard power to achieve its goals in Syria and it succeeded in that. However, Moscow needs to develop a formula which will be able to convert these successes into economic and political influence and dividends in the broader region in the long-run. If Russia manages to succeed in this, it will secure an influential role in the newly emerging regional security architecture.

¹⁹ Russia's security concept for the Gulf area // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 23.07.2019. URL:https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&_101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA_languageId=en_GB

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Russian International Affairs Council

The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is a non-profit international relations think tank on a mission to provide policy recommendations for all of the Russian organizations involved in external affairs.

RIAC engages experts, statesmen, entrepreneurs and members of civil society in public discussions with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of Russian foreign policy.

Along with research and analysis, RIAC is involved in educational activities aimed at creating a solid network of young global affairs and diplomacy experts.

RIAC is an active player on the public diplomacy arena, presenting Russia's vision on the key issues of global development on the international stage.

RIAC members are the leaders of Russia's foreign affairs community – diplomats, businesspeople, scholars, public leaders and journalists.

RIAC President Igor Ivanov, Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation from 1998 to 2004 and Secretary of the Security Council from 2004 to 2007.

Andrey Kortunov is the Director General of RIAC. From 1995 to 1997, Dr. Kortunov was Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies

The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, commonly known as IRAS, founded in 2004, is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental think tank and publisher based in Tehran whose mission is to analyze and promote the understanding of major issues and current affairs of Eurasia and South Caucasus.

The mission of IRAS is to advance an unbiased and realistic understanding of Iranian interests in the Eurasia and South Caucasus, promote the policies that secure them and strengthen the regional cooperation between Iran and neighboring states.

IRAS research is structured around eight topics: defense and security, energy and environment, extremism and terrorism, regional cooperation, peace and conflict, politics and elections, society and culture, and trade and economics, which comprises regional programs on Central Asia, South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, China and Russia.

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All in all, IRAS under the leadership and expertise of some highly distinguished Iranian academics tries to be regarded as the preeminent think tank with a regional focus and Iranian most trusted source for policy ideas and analysis on Eurasian and Caucasian affairs.

Russian International Affairs Council

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