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# Settling the Syrian Conflict Amid the Ukrainian Crisis: Political Economy Perspective



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**RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL**

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The restoration of economic ties in Syria, coupled with the decentralization of state power and the development of local self-government, may be key in resolving the Syrian crisis. Economic reintegration may prove to be a catalyst for the peace process. This working paper presents a political economy model for the settlement of the situation in Syria. The author explores the positions of Russia, Iran and China in Syria and their points of interaction. Possible scenarios for the development of the situation in Syria are analysed in detail, as are the modalities of the impact of the Ukraine crisis on the configuration of external actors of the Syrian conflict.

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/paper67](https://russiancouncil.ru/paper67)

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Internal and External Challenges to Syria</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Internal and External Challenges to Areas of Control</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>SWOT Analysis of the Positions of Russia, Iran, and China in Syria</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Points of Interaction for External Actors in the Syrian Conflict</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Future Development Scenarios for Syria</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Sources</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Terms</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Annex</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)</b>	<b>45</b>

# Introduction

The Syrian conflict has been raging for 11 years and counting, having evolved into what is literally the most massive tragedy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Amidst the stalled peace process, the most critical imperative for the Syrian people themselves, as well as for external actors friendly to the Syrian Arab Republic, is the search either for alternative frameworks and modes of reconciliation or those that could be complementary to political dialogue.

This brings about the need for a restored integrity of economic ties throughout the country, coupled with the decentralization of state power and the promotion of local self-government. We regard this political model as a possible key to resolving the Syrian conflict. Economic reintegration can serve as a catalyst for an inclusive nationwide dialogue, its launch unifying the official and parallel economies, integrating local elites into the power vertical, and ensuring a broad consensus of external actors over the matters of support and involvement in the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria.

However, the Ukraine crisis unfolding against the backdrop of Russia's special military operation started on February 24, 2022 has seriously adjusted the way such a model can be implemented. The situation around Ukraine has become an unpredictable and subjective factor that affects the configuration of external actors in the Syrian conflict, as well as their positions and actions. The new scenarios offer both challenges and opportunities for Russia and Syria.

They all call for an individual analysis, both in current circumstances and in the longer term, which is why this situation analysis appears to be highly relevant.

This study considers the dynamics of the “economy—state” dichotomy through a systemic analysis of the economy across Syria: in the area under government control, and in those controlled by the opposition and Turkey. The external environment is viewed as a system of international relations and its actors at the global level (Russia, China, the United States, the European Union), the regional level (Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey) and the sub-regional level (Syria's Arab neighbours: Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, as well as Israel). This approach further enhances the relevance of the situation analysis, making it comprehensive and multifaceted.

On a practical level, this work aims to illustrate the varying ways in which the Syrian conflict has evolved and how the Ukrainian crisis has affected this process. To this end, the following challenges are diagnosed in light of the developments around Ukraine: external and internal; objective and subjective; Syria-wide and those specific to the SAR- and opposition-controlled areas. The political economy model of settlement is described in detail, including the best possible ways and methods of changing the nature of relationships within the “economy—government—society” and “Syria—external actors” paradigms. The prospective configurations of external actors in the Syrian conflict and their interrelationships in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis are characterized.

The author addresses the above list of challenges by combining a SWOT analysis, content analysis, and empirical studies, and formulating a conceptual model with the functions of description, explanation, and forecasting. The complexity of the topic calls for emphasis to be placed on the method of visualization: for the reader's convenience, most of the information, as well as the author's assessments, are presented in the form of tables and figures.

References to sources are provided in each case, where necessary. They include domestic and foreign sources of information and analysis, statistics made available by international organizations and electronic databases, and the author's conversations with Syrian officials, businesspeople, public figures, advisors, and experts and researchers from Russia, Lebanon, the United States, France and Egypt. The sources are listed in the conclusion.

# Internal and External Challenges to Syria

It makes sense to start our analysis of modalities of the impact that developments in Ukraine have produced on the evolution of the situation in the SAR with an overview of external and internal factors. This is primarily about the challenges Syria has faced since the localization of the hot phase of the conflict—which took place even before Russia’s special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine—and the changing conduct of external actors. This approach will reflect the resonant negative impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the intricate situation in which Syrians have found themselves during the years of bloody conflict.

Following the sweeping victories of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies over Islamic State\* and armed opposition units since the spring of 2020, fighting has been limited to the north/northwest of the country, with sporadic flashpoints in the south and in the Syrian desert (the Badia). However, the authorities have so far succeeded in regaining control of only two-thirds of the country’s territory.<sup>1</sup> Parallel (local) economies have long emerged in areas beyond Damascus’ control—those under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). The massive damage and losses caused by the conflict against the backdrop of sanctions have naturally given rise to acute humanitarian and deep economic crises, which have become permanent and undeniable.

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate external and internal challenges to Syria.

Therefore, the most dangerous objective Syria-wide challenge is the country’s territorial fragmentation, which prevents the revival of the peace process. Although the Astana format (the 18<sup>th</sup> round of talks was held in the Kazakh capital of Nur-Sultan on June 15–16, 2022) remains viable, no full nationwide direct dialogue has been ensured between the SAR authorities and the opposition. In this regard, Syria has failed to adopt the positive experience of Tunisia, where the National Dialogue Quartet was established just two years after the 2011 Jasmine Revolution. The efforts of the Quartet to build a pluralistic democracy won its members the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>2</sup>

The work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) remains stuck, and the main stumbling blocks remain, namely the future form of government (the choice in favour of maintaining a presidential republic or changing to parliamentary republic, the political future of incumbent president Bashar al-Assad), and the dispute over how to resolve the Kurdish issue. As Alexander Lavrentyev, the Russian President’s Special Envoy to Syria, rightfully noted, now that Switzerland

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

<sup>1</sup> As of December 2020, the authorities controlled 63.38 per cent of Syrian territory: according to the author’s calculations based on data available from multiple sources. For more details see: I. A. Matveev, *The Hard Way to Recovery*, vol. 2. P. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Tunisia National Dialogue Quartet Wins Nobel Peace Prize // Interfax. October 9, 2015. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/472287>

**Table 1.** Internal challenges to Syria

INTERNAL CHALLENGES	
OBJECTIVE	SUBJECTIVE
<p><b>Territorial fragmentation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Areas beyond the control of the SAR authorities; parallel (local) economies: AANES, SIG, SSG; al-Tanf 55-km “deconfliction zone” under U.S. control.</li> <li>• Limited access of the SAR authorities to the state border.</li> <li>• Broken unity of economic relations: extraction of raw materials, production cycles, foreign and domestic trade, infrastructure (oil and gas sector, energy, transport, communications).</li> </ul> <p><b>Stagnation of the Syrian peace process</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disagreements between the authorities and the opposition over the future state structure of Syria, constitutional reform, and interpretation of decentralization (al-la markaziyya).</li> </ul> <p><b>Scarcity of domestic economic resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Damage (adzar) and losses (khasair) inflicted on the economy by military clashes (which, according to expert estimates, totalled USD 442–530 billion as of 2020, and has expanded ever since).</li> <li>• Limited access of the authorities to mineral resources and cropland: the main oil deposits and wheat crops are to the east of the Euphrates River, i.e. in the area controlled by the AANES.</li> <li>• Depletion of gold and foreign exchange reserves (to less than USD 1 billion in 2021 from USD 20 billion in 2010).</li> <li>• General business decline, ongoing capital flight, and unwillingness of the domestic private sector (medium and small-sized businesses) to contribute to recovery.</li> </ul> <p><b>Persistent economic crisis</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deterioration of macroeconomic performance, inflation, depreciation of the national currency: the pound has lost 58 times its value at the official exchange rate from 2011, and 77.5 times at the unofficial rate.</li> <li>• High unemployment and poverty rates.</li> <li>• Shortage of energy resources and commodities.</li> <li>• Disrupted food security.</li> <li>• Growth of the shadow economy, corruption.</li> </ul> <p><b>Humanitarian crisis</b> (the problem of internally displaced persons).</p>	<p><b>Coronavirus pandemic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of a unified national strategy to combat COVID-19, with only sporadic engagement between the government-controlled area and AANES.</li> <li>• Fragmented diagnostic and treatment arrangements: treatment protocols, laboratory tests, hospital treatment, quarantine measures, and vaccinations.</li> <li>• Complications with situation monitoring and lack of uniform statistics on COVID-19 due to territorial fragmentation.</li> <li>• Lack of specialized health institutions, specialists, and protective equipment, medicines, equipment, tests, and vaccines amid economic devastation and damages that the conflict has inflicted on the national healthcare system.</li> <li>• Underreporting of COVID-19 cases by the population for fear of losing jobs.</li> <li>• Poor use of personal protective equipment due to inadequate awareness campaigns conducted by the authorities in all areas, as well as shortages of protective equipment (masks and gloves).</li> </ul> <p><b>Natural disasters</b> (fires, droughts, and floods)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wildfires in the government-controlled area in 2020: according to UN data, 9,000 hectares of cropland and forests were destroyed, 25,000 people were internally displaced; the 2021 drought (the worst in 70 years, according to the UN).</li> </ul> <p><b>Stonewalling of reconstruction by part of the Syrian business elite</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unwillingness to repatriate capital (the R. Makhlof case); persistent outflow of funds from the country earned by the private sector in all areas from import/export operations and shadow sales of humanitarian aid.</li> </ul>

Source: compiled by the author based on open sources



**Table 2.** External challenges to Syria

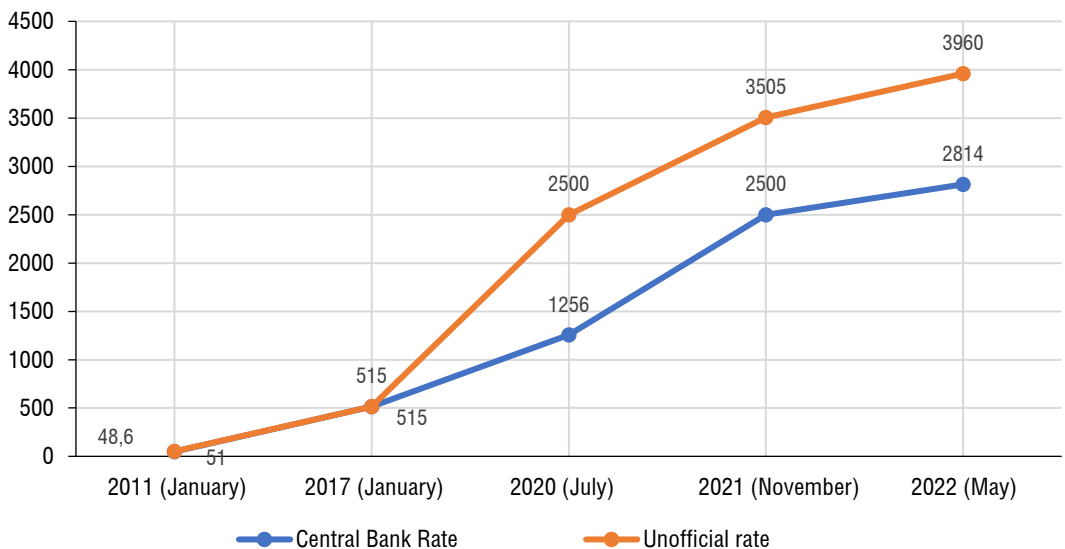
<b>INTERNAL CHALLENGES</b>	
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>
<p><b>Lack of an international consensus on economic recovery in Syria</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shortage of investment and financial aid; failed policy of the “economic opening” (<i>infitah</i>) of Syria by the GCC countries.</li> <li>• Politicization and fragmentation of humanitarian support: differences in the approaches by Syria/ Russia/China (sovereignization of humanitarian aid) on the one hand and the collective west (maximizing the used of the cross-border aid mechanism) on the other.</li> </ul> <p><b>Tightening of external sanctions</b> (“the Caesar Act”)</p> <p>The shift from “paper” to real-life secondary sanctions (2020): the deterioration of the relationship between Syria and Lebanon (the withdrawal of Lebanon-based Bank Audi from Syria; the detention by the Lebanese customs of a ship with 4 million litres of petrol bound for Syria in September 2020).</p> <p><b>Domestic crisis in Lebanon</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited access of Syrians to deposits with Lebanese banks (USD 42 billion); an increase in demand for U.S. dollars and the resulting accelerated depreciation of the Syrian pound; reduced foreign exchange receipts due to the drop in remittances by Syrian expats from Lebanon.</li> <li>• Frustration of plans to turn Lebanon into a “hub” for the involvement of third countries (primarily China) in the economic recovery of Syria.</li> <li>• Increased pressure on the economy and social services due to the return of refugees from Lebanon.</li> </ul> <p><b>Humanitarian crisis</b> (refugee problem)</p>	<p><b>Change of the U.S. administration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unclear scenarios for Washington’s relations with Tehran in the context of the JCPOA and Iran’s nuclear dossier (sanctions against Iran might be mitigated, remain unchanged, or tightened) as a crucial factor either expanding or curtailing Iran’s capacity to engage in economic reconstruction in Syria.</li> <li>• U.S. plans not to apply anti-Syrian sanctions to the AANES as a possible obstacle to Syria’s economic reintegration on a nationwide scale.</li> <li>• The uncertain prospects of Syria’s inclusion in the U.S.-backed collective projects to aid Lebanon (it is not clear whether the project to transit electricity generated in Jordan from Egyptian natural gas through the SAR to Lebanon is a one-off initiative). This stops Syria from properly assessing prospective sources of foreign currency to finance post-conflict reconstruction.</li> </ul> <p><b>Propaganda against the SAR authorities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The increase in Western media pressure on Damascus due to Syria’s support for Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine.</li> <li>• Damage to Syria’s business reputation: negative impact on partners and investors from neutral countries.</li> </ul> <p><b>Emergencies</b> (explosions in the port of Beirut in 2020, temporary difficulties caused by the obstruction of the Suez Canal by the Ever Given megaship in 2021).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher logistics costs.</li> <li>• Decrease in import deliveries in both volume terms and range of products, higher import prices.</li> </ul>

Source: compiled by the author based on open sources

has joined the Western sanctions against Russia, the search for a new venue for SCC meetings to replace Geneva has acquired a political dimension.<sup>3</sup>

Equally detrimental to the situation in Syria is the expanding deficit of domestic resources in the context of the protracted socioeconomic crisis and economic breakdown (see Table 1 for damage and loss statistics).<sup>4</sup> Many of the Syrian people the author has conversed with acknowledged that the situation had even deteriorated in terms of energy and electricity supply to businesses and households compared to when the conflict escalated and peaked in 2014–2017. The chart illustrating the depreciation of the Syrian pound alone will suffice to illustrate the rapid growth of crisis phenomena in the economy.

Diagram 1. Dynamics of the Exchange Rate of the Syrian Pound



Source: compiled by the author based on material available at:  
Commercial Bank of Syria. URL: <https://cbs-bank.sy/en/home-en>;  
Syrian Pound Toda. URL: [https://sp-today.com/en/currency/us\\_dollar](https://sp-today.com/en/currency/us_dollar)

The most alarming subjective factor is the COVID-19 pandemic, as its current status and aftermath are hard to assess objectively due to the territorial fragmenta-

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Concerning the figure of USD 442 billion: "Losses Exceeding \$442 Billion and Millions in Need of Humanitarian Assistance: The Catastrophic Repercussions of 8 Years of War in Syria" // ESCWA press release. Beirut. September 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.unescwa.org/news/losses-exceeding-442-billion-and-millions-need-humanitarian-assistance-catastrophic>; Concerning the figure of USD 530 billion: "530 Billion Dollars and 40 Percent Destruction to Infrastructure: Syria's 9 Years of Losses" // The Syrian Observer. May 28, 2020. URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/features/58238/530-billion-dollars-and-40-percent-destruction-to-infrastructure-syrias-9-years-of-losses.html>; Information on the impact of wildfires: "OCHA Syria Flash Update No. 1: Humanitarian Impact of Wildfires in Coastal Areas," Executive Summary // UNOCHA. October 11, 2020. P. 1. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ocha-syria-flash-update-01-humanitarian-impact-wildfires-coastal-areas>

tion of Syria, absence of a nationwide anti-COVID-19 programme and the damage caused by the conflict to the healthcare system in all areas controlled by various actors. In this context, assessments, such as those made by experts at specialized agencies of the United Nations, appear to be fragmented and inexhaustive.

Next, we analyse external challenges for Syria in its entirety (Table 2) and collectively by areas of control (parallel economies, Table 3): in the government-controlled area in the west of the country, Central Syria, the south and partly in the east; in the area of the self-proclaimed Kurdish autonomy in the northeast and partly in the east (AANES); in the de facto Turkish protectorate (SIG) in the north; and in the north-west (SSG: Lesser Idlib).

We should acknowledge here that the simmering conflict in Syria calls not only for a nationwide dialogue, but also for a genuine consolidation of the business elite, since some of its members are reluctant to return capital to their homeland and play a full role in post-conflict reconstruction amid the internal economic crisis. The SAR authorities are taking countermeasures—at times quite harsh—in an attempt to encourage private business to adopt a patriotic stance. This applies primarily to the “progenies of those in power” (Arabic: *Awlad al-Sulta*), as the Syrians refer to the *nouveaux riches*, who back in the 2000s amassed their wealth thanks to connections with the government and bureaucracy. The high-profile campaign against the Syrian president’s cousin, Rami Makhoul, who has been legally prosecuted on corruption charges since August 2019 and stripped of control of his major assets, is a vivid example.<sup>5</sup> However, as risks of new restrictions keep growing for domestic businesses on the back of Damascus’ open support for Russia’s SMO in Ukraine (on June 29, 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic officially recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics<sup>6</sup>), the Syrian government’s ability to achieve a quick breakthrough in its dialogue with private business and Syrian business communities in countries that have backed anti-Russia sanctions looks increasingly doubtful.

The external challenges considered in this situation analysis (see Table 2) are equally menacing, both on a national scale and by areas of control (in terms of parallel economies). These include the government-controlled area in the west of the country, Central Syria, the south and partly in the east; the self-proclaimed Kurdish autonomy in the northeast and partly in the east (AANES); the de facto Turkish protectorate (SIG) in the north; and the north-west (SSG: Lesser Idlib).

As Table 2 shows, the split in the global community on the Syrian conflict remains a key challenge, which de facto torpedoes all possible efforts contributing to post-conflict reconstruction in the foreseeable future. The war of sanctions waged on Russia by the collective West, originally triggered by the Ukraine crisis, is likely

<sup>5</sup> Knecht E., Blair E. (ed.), “Syrian Court Orders Syriatel Placed Under Judicial Custody” // Reuters. June 5, 2020.  
URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-makhoul-idUSKBN23C0Q3>

<sup>6</sup> “Syria Decides to Recognize the Independence of the DPL and LPR” // RIA Novosti. June 29, 2022.  
URL: <https://ria.ru/20220629/donbass-1799024677.html>

to further polarize the views of external actors on Syria, and propaganda against the SAR authorities will intensify.

We cannot rule out the possibility that many previously neutral and wavering countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Serbia, South Africa, as well as Brazil and other Latin American states, will have to make a hard choice under the intense pressure from the United States and European Union to join the anti-Damascus camp. As part of this process, Lebanon will likely have to cool its relations with Damascus as a precondition and payment for international assistance needed to overcome its own crisis.

Chances are that the Syrian government, with diplomatic support from Russia and China, will take counter steps in response to the Western acts of hostility seeking to minimize the likelihood of using the cross-border humanitarian mechanism within the framework of its national concept of sovereignization of humanitarian aid. This, for its part, will limit donor opportunities and channels of support for Syrian internally displaced persons by Western countries, via the UN and NGOs, thereby exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and at the same time evolving into a new round of consolidated sanctions pressure on Damascus by Washington and its allies.

Subjectively, much will depend on the logic of the Biden administration's foreign policy moves concerning Syria, which are difficult to predict at this point. On the one hand, the Syria issue has not been on the list of the U.S. chief priorities in the Middle East throughout the entire conflict, unlike Israel, the GCC, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. On the other hand, because Russian and U.S. military contingents are present in Syria (and only there) and come in contact when patrolling the Kurdish north-east, U.S. troops are tempted to sting Moscow by provoking incidents between the militaries—which were not uncommon even before Russia's SMO—"in revenge" for Ukraine. It is no coincidence that media reports have appeared about a possible war between Russia and the United States in Syria: it was reasonably noted that any false step or misunderstanding might light the fuse of this powder keg.<sup>7</sup> And, conversely, in mid-June 2022, the Russian Aerospace Forces launched an airstrike on the positions of the Syrian opposition fighters in the U.S.-controlled Al-Tanf area on the border with Iraq in the Syrian Homs governorate in response to their attack on the SAA troops.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> D. Dmitrova, "Newsweek Columnist Writes about Possible war between Russia and U.S. in Syria" // Gazeta.ru. July 2, 2022. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2022/07/02/18048260.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> K. Semyonov, "Assault on Al-Tanf: Rumours about Russia Leaving Syria are Premature" // News.ru. June 21, 2022. URL: <https://news.ru/near-east/udar-po-at-tanfu-sluhi-ob-uhode-rf-iz-sirii-prezhdevremenny/>

# Internal and External Challenges to Areas of Control

The challenges posed to the areas of control and parallel economies share some common features and have certain features (see Table 3). For instance, the government-controlled zones are faced not only with a lack of consolidation among the business elite as a destabilizing factor, but also with frictions within the local power structures, caused by the competition for influence and at times hostile feelings towards the allies—Russia and Iran. Paradoxically, in the light of the recent developments in Ukraine, there is reason for cautious optimism here. Despite Moscow indicating that it is unwilling to phase down its military presence in Syria (Alexander Lavrentyev said in an interview with *Kommersant* on June 21, 2022 that “there is absolutely no talk of reducing Russian forces in Syria”<sup>9</sup>), there have still been some reports about the rotation and redeployment of Russian military units. Some observers believe this is due to Moscow’s desire to focus on counter-terrorist operations, rather than maintaining the status quo in territorial control.<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, IRGC forces and members of pro-Iran Shiite umbrella militias are reported to have returned to the northern province of Aleppo, including the Al-Nayrab military airbase and the Shiite towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa in the vicinity of Tell Rifaat, and have even reached the governorate of Al-Hasakah in the north-east (the government enclave of al-Qamishli), controlled by AANES.<sup>11</sup>

However, in terms of stability, especially in the south of Syria, much will continue to depend on whether Russia is willing to actively serve as a guarantor of local reconciliation (*almusalihat*). Specifically, this refers to Daraa governorate (the Old Town area in the administrative centre with the same name), where in the summer of 2021, Russia successfully acted as a mediator to put an end to the armed confrontation between the SAA and the reconciled rebels from the former Southern Front affiliated with the Free Syrian Army.<sup>12</sup> In the future, Russia’s “security matrix” engagement may also be in demand in the neighbouring As-Suwayda governorate. Such a scenario is likely if the Druze authorities refuse to live with the difficulties in exporting agricultural products (e. g. apples to Egypt<sup>13</sup>) and the lost profits caused by the return relocation of industries temporarily deployed there during the escalation period, and if the presence of Hezbollah erupt into mass protests (anti-government rallies were staged there in January and June 2020).

<sup>9</sup> M. Belenkaya, “There is Absolutely No Talk of Reducing Russian Forces in Syria” // *Kommersant*. June 17, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5420967>

<sup>10</sup> K. Semyonov, “Assault on Al-Tanf: Rumours about Russia Leaving Syria are Premature” // *News.ru*. June 21, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.ru/near-east/udar-po-at-tanfu-sluhi-ob-uhode-rf-iz-sirii-prezhdevremenny/>

<sup>11</sup> K. Semyonov, “Iran is Growing Stronger in Syria amid Russia’s Operation in Ukraine” // *News.ru*. June 7, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.ru/near-east/iran-ukreplyaetsya-v-sirii-poka-rossiya-provodit-operaciyu-na-ukraine/>

<sup>12</sup> K. Semyonov, “Maintaining the Status Quo: Why Russia Protects Syrian Rebels from Assad” // *News.ru*. August 3, 2021.  
URL: <https://news.ru/world/pochemu-rossiya-zashishaet-sirijskih-povstancelov-ot-assada/>

<sup>13</sup> Legal Briefing—January 2021 // SLJ. February 13, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.syria.law/index.php/legal-briefing-january-2021/>

**Table 3.** Challenges to the Government-Controlled Area**Conflict within the business elite**

Redistribution of liquid business assets among the “progenies of those in power”; the struggle for the cellular market: Rami Makhoul lost control of the national mobile phone operator *Syriatel*; the change of ownership of *MTN Syria* due to the withdrawal of its principal shareholder, based in South Africa, and the launch of a third mobile phone operator, *Wafa Telecom*; strengthened the influence of tycoon Samer Foz.

**Various power groups within security agencies**

Analysts point to certain divisions within the security services in terms of their orientation towards either Iran (the 4<sup>th</sup> Division) or Russia (the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, the intelligence community). Personnel reshuffles have become regular in the army and security agencies with a view to strengthening the Syrian president’s control.

**Frictions between Syria and Iran**

The establishment of *Wafa Telecom* by Syrian entrepreneurs prevented an investor, Iranian Telecommunications Company, from carrying out a similar project—the latter is believed to be affiliated with the IRGC (although the IRGC withdrew as a shareholder in 2018). In the east, pro-Iran militias are still present in Deir ez-Zor Governorate, competing for control of cross-border trade with Iraq. The presence of Hezbollah causes protests in the southern governorate of Al-Suwayda, which used to be loyal to the authorities, incited by local Druze opinion leaders: the Al-Liwa political party was established in July 2021, and self-defence militias are being set up.

**Potential contradictions between Russia and Iran/Hezbollah**

- Contradictions in strategies: Russia stands for the full restoration of the sovereign Syrian state, with the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, whereas Iran favours a horizontal security system with areas of control and the influence of non-state actors under the aegis of the IRGC. Tehran’s objective is to keep Syria as a link within the Shiite Crescent (although local experts believe its efforts have become less aggressive since the death of General Qasem Soleimani).
- Russia is unhappy about Hezbollah’s presence in southern Syria, as it provokes Israel into launching strikes against Syria. However, should Israel drift towards explicit support for the Ukrainian authorities and in conditions of accelerated economic convergence between Russia and Iran, Moscow may take a more benign stance on Tehran and Hezbollah.
- For now, the economic *modus operandi* remains in place: Russia is interested in Syria’s natural resources, Iran is keen on trade, construction, and industry; the “sharing” of seaports: Iran has leased part of Latakia, and Russia has leased Tartus. Iran has made attempts to “shield” itself from Israeli strikes by placing its economic facilities close to Russian military bases. However, the conflict of interests between Russia and Iran may well deepen if the Iranian leadership reaches an agreement with the Biden administration on easing the sanctions, thus freeing up resources to strengthen Iran’s presence in Syria.

**Tightening of anti-Syria sanctions**

The transition of the United States in 2020 from “paper” to secondary sanctions (the Caesar Act) and its consequences: delayed reconstruction of Syria and launch of the Infitah policy by the GCC countries; deterring investors from neutral countries; obstacles to repatriation of Syrian capital.

*End of the Table 3.*

**Limited access of the authorities to state borders**

Reason for lower budget revenues, growth of the shadow economy.

**Security challenges**

Confrontation hotspots in the south (Daraa), the challenge of urban terrorism, risks of a resurgence of Islamic State.\*

**Problem of the social integration of opposition fighters**

- Former fighters have nowhere else to evacuate.
- The SAR authorities' distrust of the "reconciled" opposition: the conflict in the south in Daraa al-Balad in the summer of 2021; "professional" fighters are not ready to integrate, hoping that confrontation with the authorities will enable them to retain foreign sponsors.

**Economic devastation**

Energy shortages and resulting rolling power cuts; fuel crisis; food insecurity; rising drug prices amidst the coronavirus pandemic; shortage of qualified staff and workers.

**Growing social protest sentiment**

Confrontation with local opinion leaders in the south and liberated Idlib Governorate; discontent of al-Suwayda businesses at the loss of the "safe haven" status that originally came on the back of the relocation of manufacturing lines and factories during the hot phase of the conflict.

**Natural disasters**

Damage from wildfires in western Syria in the autumn of 2020.

*Source: compiled by the author based on open sources*

In the AANES-controlled area (see Table 4), future scenarios largely depend on any adjustments that the Biden administration may choose to make to its stance on the Syrian crisis. The official U.S. position has remained contradictory throughout the conflict, given Washington's reluctance to complicate its relations with Turkey (a NATO member), and the imperative to fight Islamic State\* alongside the Kurds, as well as the positive attitude towards the Kurds among the U.S. political community and in public circles. It is unclear how Washington will treat Turkey's new military operation in northern Syria announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in June–July 2022:<sup>14</sup> it is possible that the neutrality of the United States was part of a package of tacit agreements as a condition for Ankara to withdraw its objections to Sweden and Finland becoming NATO members.

It should come as no surprise that mixed signals are also coming from Washington over assistance in the post-conflict recovery of the economy in the AANES-controlled area. President Joe Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, sought to shift this responsibility onto the GCC countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates: back in August 2018, it was reported that Riyadh, at

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

<sup>14</sup> "Erdogan Announces Military Operation in Northern Syria" // RIA Novosti. June 30, 2022.  
URL: <https://ria.ru/20220630/siriya-1799368267.html>

Washington's urging, had allocated USD 100 million for the reconstruction of the U.S.-controlled areas in north-eastern Syria.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 4.** Challenges to the AANES-controlled area

#### **Economic devastation**

The petroleum industry and infrastructure remain either non-operational or not fully operational; the A37 oil pipeline from the Karatchok Field in Al-Hasakah Governorate to the port of Tartus is not working, having been split 50/50 between the authorities and the AANES.

#### **Lack of resources for post-conflict reconstruction**

The oil sector has thus far failed to ensure any increase in the AANES budget revenues due to the reluctance of the United States to provide financial, technical, and engineering assistance for the recovery of the oil and gas sector. The situation could improve for the AANES if the area is removed from the sanctions regime.

#### **Complicated relations between the elites in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan**

Entrepreneurs close to the Iraqi Kurdish Barzani family seek to dominate in the AANES trade with the Kurdistan Region (KRI) and through KRI with the outside world, specifically Turkey. This has disrupted the stability of Semalka, the only official border crossing from the AANES.

#### **Military confrontation of the SDF / Kurdish People's Defence Units with the Turkish Armed Forces and pro-Turkey Syrian opposition groups**

- Problems with the water supply from the SIG-controlled area (Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abyad [RAATA] sector) to Al-Hasakah, instigated by Turkey-allied Syrian opposition groups.
- Keeping SDF units on alert is very burdensome to the AANES budget.

#### **Insufficient resources for combating COVID-19 (worst performance in Syria)**

Sporadic cooperation between the AANES and the central government in 2021 to deliver vaccines to Al-Hasakah via Qamishli airport (run by the Syrian authorities) and by land to the AANES-controlled part of Raqqa Governorate.

#### **Inter-ethnic tensions**

The tightening of the struggle for raw materials with Arab tribes in the AANES-controlled area in eastern Syria; increased overall confrontation between Kurds and Arabs.

#### **The problem of internally displaced persons (IDPs)**

- Increased pressure on the social system due to the influx of IDPs from the SIG-controlled area.
- Clusters of former ISIS\* fighters and their families (Al-Hawl refugee camp).
- Difficulties with deliveries of humanitarian aid due to the remoteness of the AANES from Bab al-Hawa, the only crossing of the cross-border mechanism in the SSG-controlled area, from which the AANES is separated by the hostile SIG-controlled area. According to experts, INGOs operating in the AANES area are often involved in information collection, rather than actual delivery of humanitarian aid.

*Source: compiled by the author based on open sources*

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

<sup>15</sup> "Saudi Arabia Says It's Given \$100 Million to Northeast Syria" // VOA. August 17, 2018.

URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/saudi-arabia-says-it-s-given-100-million-to-northeast-syria-/4533602.html>



Biden initially went even further. In May 2021, he revoked the authorization—de facto a sanctions waiver (the Caesar Act)—originally granted to the American company *Delta Crescent Energy* by the Trump administration a year previously to develop local oil fields, which affected the AANES revenues.<sup>16</sup>

With scarce domestic resources, wholly unproductive spending on the SDF and other security services, and no tangible progress in restoring the oil and gas sector (productivity of fields, pipeline transport capacity) as the main source of budget revenues, the Kurds are naturally interested in re-establishing economic ties with Damascus. In their opinion, this should not be about maintaining the pre-conflict status quo, when the lion's share of revenues was channelled to the central budget, but about a "fair" profit distribution scheme.

Over the years of the conflict, the groundwork has been laid for mutually beneficial co-operation between the areas controlled by the government and the AANES. Two enclaves (the towns of Al-Hasakah and Qamishli, the latter with an international airport) still remain in the SDF-controlled Al-Hasakah Governorate with the presence of the SAA and Syrian security forces. The Kurds continued to sell wheat to the authorities for Syrian pounds (the east of the Euphrates or Jazira has long been considered Syria's breadbasket) and, while maintaining de facto control over the hydroelectric network on the Euphrates, kept using the electricity generated by employees assigned by the Syrian Ministry of Electricity. In our view, if economic reintegration is a success, this would help maintain the self-sufficiency and significance of the AANES area compared with the two parallel economies in the SIG- and SSG-controlled areas that are becoming increasingly dependent on Turkey.

However, as a subjective factor, the Ukrainian crisis is capable of inhibiting the objective recovery of the unity of economic ties between the government-controlled area and the Kurdish "autonomy." For example, in March 2022, Washington announced sanctions waivers that would only benefit the AANES-controlled area. The U.S. Department of State requested that the Department of the Treasury provide USD 125 million to finance efforts to stabilize the socioeconomic situation in the Kurdish "autonomy." The media cited U.S. diplomat Ethan A. Goldrich, in charge of Syria, as explicitly saying that the decision should be viewed as a "pressure signal" to Moscow and Damascus in the light of the events in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> This might discourage Syrian Kurds from pursuing a broader dialogue with the centre any time soon, while motivating them to seek closer contacts with Western-backed Iraqi Kurds (the relationship between Kurdish elites in Syria and Iraq are currently complicated by the competition for political and economic influence in the AANES area).

The main challenges to the SIG's parallel economy (see Table 5) are associated with its role as Turkey's raw material appendage and the consequent overdepend-

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

<sup>16</sup> "U.S. Decides not to Extend Oil Deal between U.S. Company and Syrian Kurds" // Interfax.ru. May 25, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/768682>

<sup>17</sup> "U.S. to Grant Kurdish-Controlled Syrian Areas a Sanctions Waiver" // TASS. March 14, 2022.  
URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14057375>

**Table 5.** Challenges to the SIG-controlled area**The weak economic development of northern Aleppo Governorate**

During the pre-conflict period, the local industry and agribusiness were almost exclusively focused on servicing the needs of the “economic capital” of Syria, Aleppo.

**Linking of the SIG area economy to Turkey as a raw material appendage**

- Syrians have been forced to change to the Turkish lira as their main means of payment.
- Single-source supplies of Turkish fuel and electricity; purchases of cotton, olives and wheat by Turkish importers (except grain, at reduced prices) from local producers.

Dependence of local municipal councils on the administrations of neighbouring Turkish provinces (*il*).

A poorer chance of reintegrating the SIG area into a unified Syria compared to the AANES and SSG areas.

**Inflows of IDPs from the SSG-controlled area**

Increased burden on social services; impediments to the operations of international and national NGOs imposed by Turkey; limited contribution of European NGOs due to their solidarity with the Kurds.

**Isolation of RAATA from the rest of the SIG area**

The area is separated from the rest of the SIG-controlled area by the Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) sector, under AANES control.

**Growth of the shadow economy**

Businesses are increasingly driven to the shadow economy; growth of cross-border smuggling, which was widespread even before the conflict, serving the interests of Syrian opposition warlords and businessmen associated with Turkey.

**Security concerns**

Armed confrontation between Turkey and its Syrian allies and the SDF / Kurdish People's Defence Units.

The threat of urban terrorism, where the Turks put the blame on Kurdish fighters.

*Source: compiled by the author based on open sources*

ence on that country that has developed over the years of the conflict. (To be fair, even before the conflict erupted, the north of Syria was by no means economically self-sufficient, serving the country's “economic capital,” Aleppo.) This makes the economic reintegration of the area with the rest of Syria problematic, in contrast to the AANES.

Against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis, a likely short-term scenario—assuming the announced operation of the Turkish Armed Forces is a success—would involve an expansion of the SIG-controlled area. The three sectors of the Turkish protectorate formed as a result of the Operation Euphrates Shield (2016–2017), Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019)<sup>18</sup> will be augmented by a fourth, encompassing four areas around Manbij and Tal Rifaat, creating an additional 30-km security zone close to the border between Syria and

<sup>18</sup> For more detail, see: I.A. Matveev, *The Hard Way to Recovery*, Vol. 2, 187.

Turkey.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the capacity of the SIG’s parallel economy is projected to increase in terms of agricultural production, which will have a favourable impact on local export opportunities.

In the medium term, we cannot rule out the hypothetical scenario in which the Lesser Idlib area (currently under the SSG) would accede to the SIG-controlled zone, which would undoubtedly produce a negative impact by additionally creating a heavy social burden on the local economy and Turkish donors. However, this remains unlikely even in the light of the Russia—Turkey package deal on Ukraine, let alone the uncompromising attitude of both Damascus and Tehran. They are both capable of escalating the situation by taking advantage of Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.

In the SSG-controlled area, the challenges posed by the strong dependence on Turkey, similarly to the SIG, are compounded by the sheer lack of local resources to build a full local economy. The population in this part of Syria therefore relies almost entirely on external humanitarian aid, which comes through the cross-border mechanism from Turkish donors and INGOs.

As Table 6 shows, three scenarios are likely, the worst of which is for Lesser Idlib to turn into an equivalent of the Gaza Strip, with radicals actively influencing local economic life, and a flourishing shadow economy. This will impede the reintegration of the SSG area with Syrian government-controlled regions, although informal economic links between them have remained in the form of trade across the “frontline” and the transit of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, should the best-case (third) scenario prevail, Syria authorities would not have access to the state border, specifically to the major Bab al-Hawa crossing.

**Table 6.** Challenges to the SSG-controlled area

<b>Radicalism</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Interference of radical Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)* fighters in local socio-political and economic life, which causes an armed response by the SAA with the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces.</li><li>• The confrontation between HTS* and the pro-Turkey Syrian opposition group Faylaq al-Sham.</li></ul>
<b>Unclear future of Lesser Idlib (three scenarios)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It turns into a “grey zone”—a sort of equivalent of the “Gaza Strip” (a hypothesis put forward by French expert Fabrice Balanche), with is fraught with negative consequences for Syria and Turkey;</li><li>• It joins the SIG area, which would place an even greater burden on Turkey as the main donor;</li><li>• It formally reunites with Syria (this appears to be the best-case scenario) based on the 4 Ds: de-radicalization, de-ideologization (rejection of jihadism), demilitarization and decentralization.</li></ul>

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

<sup>19</sup> “Turkey is Ready for a Military Operation in Northern Syria” // Vesti.ru. June 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2805067>

*End of the Table 6.*

### **Economic devastation**

- Damage and losses caused by the fighting. The economy lies in ruins, except for olive production and the services sector (the town of Sarmada is a foreign exchange “hub” used to finance exports/imports and profiteering).
- Acute shortage of resources necessary for reconstruction; local elites preying on foreign humanitarian aid and transit between Turkey and the government-controlled area.

### **The problem of internally displaced persons (IDPs)**

- Evacuation of uncompromising fighters and their families from local reconciliation areas from across Syria to Idlib in 2016–2018. Hence a heavier burden on local social services (which has reduced, though, as some of them have been moved to the SIG area).
- Significant shortages of foreign humanitarian aid (the Bab al-Hawa crossing mostly services transit flows); local needs are not fully met by the Turkish Red Cross, INGOs and private donors.

*Source: compiled by the author based open sources*

Footnotes to tables 4–6.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Aspects associated with the division of Syrian security services into supporters of Russia and Iran, as well as reshuffles within the SAR security agencies, including in relation to security issues in Deir ez-Zor and other governorates, are being actively discussed at the expert level: Abdullah Al-Ghadhawi, “Al-Assad’s Strategy to Avoid Becoming a Puppet of Russia and Iran” // Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy. March 11, 2021.

URL: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/al-assads-strategy-to-avoid-becoming-a-puppet-of-russia-and-iran/> ;

“Syria Security Situation (Report)” // European Asylum Support Office—Country of Origin Information. July 2021.

URL: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021\\_07\\_EASO\\_COI\\_Report\\_Syria\\_Security\\_situation.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021_07_EASO_COI_Report_Syria_Security_situation.pdf);

On ITC’s connection with the IRGC: D. B. Grafov, “The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Supreme Leader’s Administration and Islamic Charities in the Iranian Economy” // Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, No. 2. (2018), P. 39. URL: <https://www.elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=36819187&>;

On Druze protests: K. Y. Oweis, “Druze Protests in Syria’s Suweida Fly in the Face of Regime Strategy” // The National. January 21, 2020. URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/druze-protests-in-syria-s-suweida-fly-in-the-face-of-regime-strategy-1.966998>;

M. Hardan, “New Druze Political Party, Military Faction Take Shape in Suwayda” // Al-Monitor. July 18, 2021.

URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/new-druze-political-party-military-faction-take-shape-suwayda>;

On differences between Russia’s and Iran’s security strategies for Syria: “Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict,” ed. by A. B. Tabrizi and R. Pantucci // RUSI. August 2016, 13.

URL: [https://www.academia.edu/27449738/Understanding\\_Irans\\_Role\\_in\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Conflict\\_Edited\\_by\\_Aniseh\\_Bassiri\\_Tabrizi\\_and\\_Raffaello\\_Pantucci](https://www.academia.edu/27449738/Understanding_Irans_Role_in_the_Syrian_Conflict_Edited_by_Aniseh_Bassiri_Tabrizi_and_Raffaello_Pantucci); On the situation in Daraa: K.V. Semyonov, “Maintaining the Status Quo: Why Russia Protects Syrian Rebels from Assad” // News.ru. August 3, 2021.

URL: <https://news.ru/world/pochemu-rossiya-zashishaet-sirjiskih-povstanev-ot-asada>;

On the possibility of Lesser Idlib becoming an equivalent of the Gaza Strip: F. Balanche, “Idlib May Become the Next Gaza Strip” // WINEP. March 26, 2020.

URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/idlib-may-become-next-gaza-strip>

# SWOT Analysis of the Positions of Russia, Iran, and China in Syria

It makes sense to start our analysis of the configurations of external actors in the Syrian conflict with those that are friendly to Syria (Damascus unofficially refers to them as “brotherly”), namely Russia, Iran, and China (see Table 4). Despite the shared priority of supporting the official Syrian authorities, these countries’ current and future interests may differ markedly (see tables 7–10) due to their varied approaches to the restoration of Syrian statehood and post-conflict recovery, as well as their distinct economic capacities.

**Table 7.** SWOT Analysis of the Positions of Russia, Iran, and China in Syria (Strengths)

Russia	Iran	China
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia’s military operation in Syria since 2015, in the best traditions of military technical cooperation with the USSR, has strengthened the positions of supporters of Moscow in Syrian security agencies.</li> <li>The presence of Russian military police (in the west, south, centre, north, north-east, and east of Syria) has sculpted the “security matrix” phenomenon, thanks to its experience in mediating and ensuring local ceasefires, opening corridors for the passage of IDPs, protecting humanitarian aid, joint patrolling with Turkey, and coordinating policies with Iran. This has contributed to the positive perception of Russia among Syrians representing various ethnic and religious groups (Sunnis, Kurds, and Arab tribes), sometimes in contrast to the negative perception of pro-Iran Shiite militias.</li> <li>Russia’s solidarity with Syria in the UN Security Council; President Putin’s diplomacy; support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in contacts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2012, Iran became the first country to provide military assistance to Syria, including ground support by the IRGC forces together with Hezbollah and Shiite militias, which, along with the efforts of the Russian Aerospace Forces, secured decisive victories of the SAA throughout 2016–2017. As a result, Tehran has taken control of areas and facilities in the east, south, and west, and on the border with Lebanon. Pro-Iran groups have emerged among local security agencies.</li> <li>Iran has made extensive use of Syrian territory for logistics, often disguising military facilities as economic infrastructure to support Hezbollah in its confrontation with Israel.</li> <li>Iran has been Syria’s main donor since 2013, extending USD 6.6 billion<sup>22</sup> in loans, supplying crude oil, petroleum products, and using soft power tools. This has bolstered the Iranian lobby in Syrian government agencies and companies, as well as the private sector.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>China had already accumulated extensive B2G / B2B cooperation experience before the conflict broke out; support groups have been formed in the public sector and business communities.</li> <li>China has notably bigger industrial, trade, donor, and investment potential compared to Russia and Iran.</li> <li>In the context of sanctions against Russia and Iran, it is China that is capable of offering Syria technology plus financing, as well as involvement in its global projects such as the <i>Belt and Road Initiative</i>.<sup>21</sup></li> <li>Connections with technocrats cement China’s long-term presence in Syria.</li> <li>Beijing’s support for Damascus in the UN Security Council has boosted the pro-China sentiment among regular Syrians.</li> </ul>

<sup>21</sup> “Vital Importance of the Silk Road Through Syria” // Syrian—Chinese Business Council. April 10, 2019. URL: <http://scbc.sy/en/2019/04/10/vital-importance-of-the-silk-road-through-syria/>

<sup>22</sup> S. Hatahet, “Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria” // The Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House). March 2019. P. 6. URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>

*End of the Table 7.*

Russia	Iran	China
<p>with the United States, the European Union, the GCC, Turkey and Israel; and Russia's mediation in the Syrian peace process (the Astana format, Russia—Iran—Turkey summits, the SCC) have led to a positive attitude towards Russia among some elites and regular Syrians.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humanitarian aid and assistance for the reconstruction of Syria (supply of wheat, COVID-19 vaccines, and the restoration of infrastructure and mosques) have strengthened the pro-Russia sentiment in the country.</li> <li>Building on its contacts with Kurdish entrepreneurs and the Kurdish diaspora, Russia is able to make a difference in the integration of the government-controlled area and the AANES. Russian businesses' B2G and B2B operations in Syria before and during the conflict have given rise to support groups in local government, business communities, and among entrepreneurs and financiers.</li> <li>Russia's solidarity with Syria in the UN Security Council; President Putin's diplomacy; support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in contacts with the United States, the European Union, the GCC, Turkey and Israel; and Russia's mediation in the Syrian peace process (the Astana format, Russia—Iran—Turkey summits, the SCC) have led to a positive attitude towards Russia among some elites and regular Syrians.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tehran has created clusters to further B2G/B2B cooperation in manufacturing (including automobile production), commerce (mass imports of Iranian consumer goods), and agribusiness. Iranians have purchased land plots in Western Syria.<sup>23</sup></li> <li>Iran has been Syria's main donor since 2013, extending USD 6.6 billion<sup>24</sup> in loans, supplying crude oil, petroleum products, and using soft power tools. This has bolstered the Iranian lobby in Syrian government agencies and companies, as well as the private sector.</li> <li>Tehran has created clusters to further B2G/B2B cooperation in manufacturing (including automobile production), commerce (mass imports of Iranian consumer goods), and agribusiness. Iranians have purchased land plots in Western Syria.<sup>25</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alternative channels (correspondent relationships between Chinese and Lebanese banks) have been formed to use Lebanon—should it successfully overcome its own domestic crisis—as a facilitator/logistics “hub” for Chinese investment in Syria's peaceful recovery.</li> <li>Connections with technocrats cement China's long-term presence in Syria.</li> <li>Beijing's support for Damascus in the UN Security Council has boosted the pro-China sentiment among regular Syrians.</li> <li>Alternative channels (correspondent relationships between Chinese and Lebanese banks) have been formed to use Lebanon—should it successfully overcome its own domestic crisis—as a facilitator/logistics “hub” for Chinese investment in Syria's peaceful recovery.</li> </ul>

*Source: compiled by the author based open sources*

<sup>23</sup> For more detail, see: M. Belenkaya, "Iran Launches Investment War" // Kommersant. August 17, 2018.  
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3714912>

<sup>24</sup> S. Hatahet, "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria" // The Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House). March 2019. P. 6.  
URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> For more detail, see: M. Belenkaya, "Iran Launches Investment War" // Kommersant. August 17, 2018.  
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3714912>

**Table 8.** SWOT Analysis of the Positions of Russia, Iran, and China in Syria (Weaknesses)

Russia	Iran	China
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia’s investment potential is inferior to that of the GCC members and China, which means it must search for ways to coordinate Syria’s reconstruction efforts with other external actors.</li> <li>• The sanctions regime imposes objective constraints on foreign trade due to the shortage of financing mechanisms and technical difficulties with banking transactions. These are exacerbated in the context of the sanctions war against Russia due to the special operation in Ukraine.</li> <li>• Lack of credibility due to Russia’s less impressive B2B cooperation experience with Syria compared to Damascus’ contacts with Arab and Western countries is aggravated by GR challenges of the non-transparent local business environment.</li> <li>• Russia does not seem to have a unified strategy for building its long-term economic presence in Syria (the “narrow” approach of delegating foreign trade functions to a limited number of companies is mostly applied).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural, historical, confessional, and linguistic differences have always existed between Syria and Iran.</li> <li>• The clerical socio-political structure of Iran is different from that of secular Syria. Since the start of the conflict, Syria’s security agencies, official circles, and business communities have become divided into opponents and supporters of Iran.</li> <li>• Tehran’s international isolation limits its potential to participate in the Syrian peace process (with the exception of trilateral summits) and multilateral economic projects. The scope of Iran’s donor aid and official development assistance is highly dependent on the external environment – the socioeconomic situation inside Iran and around the country (sanctions).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China does not have insufficient authority among Syria’s security agencies, which weakens its impact on Syrian technocrats, making China’s influence dependent on non-economic factors.</li> <li>• The reluctance of Hong Kong banks to invest before the removal of sanctions is a significant limitation on the involvement of the Chinese state and business in the reconstruction of Syria.</li> <li>• Like the United States and the European Union, Beijing does not include Syria in its list of top foreign policy priorities; this accounts for China’s wait-and-see attitude in the Syrian peace process and its less extensive economic presence in Syria in comparison with Russia and Iran.</li> </ul>

Source: compiled by the author based on material available from open sources

**Table 9.** SWOT Analysis of the Positions of Russia, Iran, and China in Syria (Opportunities)

Russia	Iran	China
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term presence of the Russian Armed Forces has been ensured (bases in Latakia and Tartus).</li> <li>• A framework has been put in place to convert Russia’s military and political presence into the exclusive access for Russian companies to local raw materials and infrastructure (seaport of Tartus).</li> <li>• Syria PPP (5/2016) and investment (18/2021) laws pave the way for the creation of “broad” cooperation clusters.<sup>26</sup> These encompass industry, energy, agribusiness, transport, and IT.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For Iran, aid to Syria remains a driving force behind Damascus’ growing dependence on Tehran, keeping Syria in the “Axis of Resistance” and as a “bridge” between Iraq and Lebanon as part of the “Shia Crescent” project.</li> <li>• The long-term economic peg to Iran could be further strengthened should Iran and the United States reach separate agreements on sanctions relief in the context of the JCPOA.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The potential for linking Syria to China in terms of business and technology has been created, specifically in manufacturing and energy.</li> <li>• Bilateral trade has favoured China since the 2000s, as the Syrians have become accustomed to Chinese-made consumer goods.</li> <li>• In the long term, the prospective status</li> </ul>

<sup>26</sup> I. A. Matveev, “Contemporary Economic Legislation of Arab Countries: The Case of the Syrian Arab Republic” // Moscow: GAUNG-Press, 2021. P. 188–266.

*End of the Table 9.*

- New opportunities for G2G cooperation with Syria are emerging in the context of restrictions that sanctions have imposed on the use of Russian capital, (financial assistance, state subsidies for project implementation).
- The use of the “security matrix” in the context of the implementation of economic projects in Syria by third countries in exchange for the financing of humanitarian food supplies from Russia to Syria.
- With alternative foreign trade options (the European Union, Japan, South Korea) being phased down, it may be possible to intensify B2G contacts with Syria involving Russia’s small and medium-sized business, which has so far been cautious due to the sanctions.
- A strategic agreement between Russia and Iran would open new horizons for the implementation of joint economic projects in Syria. In this case, Moscow is likely to take Iran’s interests in this area more seriously.
- of Syria’s brotherly country will offer China foreign trade advantages over their competitors in Japan and Germany.
- If the sanctions against Syria are eased, Iranian and Russian companies might rapidly lose their exclusive positions in the commodities sector and elsewhere.

*Source: compiled by the author based on material available from open sources*

**Table 10.** SWOT Analysis of the Positions of Russia, Iran, and China in Syria (Threats)

Russia	Iran	China
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia continues to support the Syrian president, whereas its contacts in the middle segment of the local elite (in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, among technocrats, etc.) are less extensive than those of China and Iran, and when it comes to business relationships, Arabs prevail as Syria’s partners. In this context, the future of Russia’s influence in the event of Bashar al-Assad’s departure from office—for example, as part of the political process—is unclear.</li> <li>• Damascus is forced to manoeuvre between Moscow and Tehran, sometimes disregarding Russia’s interests. There is latent dissatisfaction among part of the local elite with Russia’s “narrow” approach (the “insignificance” of its aid compared to Iranian loans).</li> <li>• Risks of accidental strikes by the Israeli and U.S. military on Russian targets remain due to their proximity to Hezbollah (the coast of Western Syria, Damascus and the Damascus region).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Iran’s attempts to strengthen its control over Syria have led to a split in the local elites. Specifically, we are talking about the strategy of the hard-line wing of the Iranian leadership, which aims to create a “horizontal security system” in Syria using its lobbies in the security agencies, and non-governmental actors (for the purpose of isolating the Abu Kamal area in Deir ez-Zor under IRGC control, etc.).</li> <li>• This split compromises the stability of the authorities by provoking tensions between the “progenies of those in power.”</li> <li>• The convergence with Tehran—to a large extent forced—leaves Syria as a target for Israeli strikes on local Iranian targets, while obstructing the launch of infitah by the GCC countries.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If sanctions are eased amid an external consensus on the economic reconstruction of Syria, China could still end up losing out. This is especially true when it comes to alternative collective investment projects offered by the GCC countries, the European Union, India, Japan, and the Asian Tigers.</li> <li>• China’s wait-and-see tactics appreciably reduce the possibility of recovery in conditions of the economic crisis in Syria and partial external isolation. Damascus is holding consultations with China to try and persuade Beijing to at least partially reconsider its “passive” stance.</li> </ul>

*Source: compiled by the author based on material available from open sources*



As the tables above show, each of Syria's three main allies has strengths, weaknesses, prospects, and opportunities. They will objectively encourage Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing to look for points of interaction instead of unconstrained rivalry and work out mutually acceptable rules of the game as they build up their own long-term economic presence in Syria.

## Points of Interaction for External Actors in the Syrian Conflict<sup>27</sup>

Despite the West's hostile moves against Russia (for example, Russia was not invited to the 6<sup>th</sup> Syria donor conference, which took place in Brussels under the aegis of the European Union on May 9–10, 2022<sup>28</sup>), opportunities for coordination in the context of the Syrian conflict nevertheless remain, although they are somewhat limited in scope (see Table 11).

It is highly unlikely that some external actors are genuinely interested in the revival of the military and terrorist threat from Islamic State\*, which could turn into a breeding ground for the global export of professional fighters and radical ideas, including to the collective West, and zones of regional conflict.

The military sphere remains another dimension for engagement in view of the deployment of Iranian, Russian, Turkish and U.S. forces in Syria and the permanent armed confrontation between Israel and the Syrian/Iranian authorities. The latter is associated with the air and missile attacks of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) on the SAA's positions and Iranian facilities deployed in Syria (on June 10, 2022, the Israelis attacked the international airport in Damascus, damaging the runway and the terminal<sup>29</sup>).

Moscow is determined to prevent a recurrence of incidents such as the Ilyushin Il-20 crash—the aircraft was mistakenly shot down by the SAA air defence on September 17, 2018 immediately after Israeli air strikes near Latakia (the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation blamed Tel Aviv, citing late notice of the attack by the Israelis as part of the deconfliction mechanism<sup>30</sup>). The Russia—U.S. military hotline, established in 2015 to prevent air incidents in Syria, remains in place. The Russian Defence Ministry used it on 15 June 2022 to notify the Pentagon of its upcoming strike on militants of the pro-U.S. Syrian Maghawair al-Thowra opposition group (Commandos of the Revolution) in the vicinity of al-Tanf.<sup>31</sup>

To recap, it appears that, regardless of the positions of the actors operating in Syria in the context of the Ukraine crisis, none of them is interested in creating a *casus belli* for a large-scale, let alone nuclear, war between Russia and NATO in Syria.

<sup>27</sup> Excluding sporadic contacts or intelligence links.

<sup>28</sup> D.S. Polyakov, "Politicizing Aid as the Basis for the Syria Donor Conference" // EADaily, May 16, 2022.  
URL: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2022/05/16/politizaciya-pomoshchi-kak-osnova-donorskoy-konferencii-po-sirii>

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

<sup>29</sup> "Syria suspends flights to Damascus airport after Israeli attack due to damaged runway" // Interfax, June 11, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/845899>

<sup>30</sup> Special Briefing of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation on the Crash of the Ilyushin Il-20 Aircraft of the Russian Air Force off the Coast of Syria" // Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, September 23, 2018.  
URL: [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12196560@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12196560@egNews)

<sup>31</sup> K.V. Semyonov, "Assault on Al-Tanf: Rumours about Russia Leaving Syria are Premature" // News.ru, June 21, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.ru/near-east/udar-po-at-tanfu-sluhi-ob-uhode-iz-sirii-prezhdevremenny/>

**Table 11.** Points of Interaction for External Actors in the Syrian Conflict

	EU (+UK)	Israel	Iran	China	UN	Russia	GCC	U.S.	Turkey
EU (+UK)					HUM (AS) ACC (AS)	T2 (PROS)	INF (PROS)	NGO, HUM (AANES) DIP MIL T2 (PROS)	NGO (SSG)
Israel						DIP MIL		DIP MIL	
Iran				IP (Govt Area)		EM (Govt Area) DIP MIL		DIP (PROS) (in case of JCPOA progress)	DIP
China			IP (Govt Area)		HUM (Govt Area) ACC (AS)	DIP			
UN	HUM (AS) ACC (AS)			HUM (Govt Area) ACC (AS)		HUM (Govt Area) DIP	HUM (AS)	HUM (AANES) NGO (AS)	HUM (SIG)
Russia	0 (temp due to Ukraine)	DIP MIL	EM (Govt Area) DIP MIL	DIP	T2 (PROS) RSM (AS) HUM (Govt Area) DIP		RSM (AS) INF (PROS) DIP	MIL (limited due to Ukraine)	RSM (SIG-Govt Area, SSG-Govt Area, SIG-AANES) DIP MIL
GCC	INF (PROS)				HUM (AS)	RSM-INF (AS) (PROS) HUM (PROS) DIP		DIP MIL	NGO (SSG) IP (PROS)
U.S.	NGO, HUM (AANES) DIP MIL T2 (PROS)	DIP MIL	DIP (PROS) (in case of JCPOA progress)		HUM (AANES) NGO (AS)	MIL (limited due to Ukraine)	DIP MIL		MIL
Turkey	NGO (SSG)		DIP		HUM (SIG)	RSM (SIG-Govt Area, SSG-Govt Area, SIG-AANES) DIP MIL	NGO (SSG) IP (PROS)	MIL	

Abbreviations:

ACC	Anti-COVID-19 campaign
MIL	Military coordination
AS	All of Syria
HUM	Humanitarian aid
DIP	Diplomatic coordination (including formats of negotiations on Syria)
EM	Extraction of minerals
INF	Infitah (open-door policy)
IP	Investment partnership
NGO	NGO engagement
RSM	Application of or interest in the “security matrix”
T2	Track-2 (informal expert talks over Syria’s future)
UK	United Kingdom
PROS	Prospective shared points of interest

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*Source: compiled by the author based on open sources*

# Future Development Scenarios for Syria

Given international developments at various levels, it is almost impossible to forecast how events in Syria will unfold with any degree of accuracy. However, we can outline the main trends based on the objective reality of the Syrian conflict (see Table 12).

**Table 12.** Future Development Scenarios for Syria

SHORT-TERM DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS		
Criterion	Scenario	Short term (1–2 years)
Restoration of economic unity	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited development of links between the government area and the AANES-controlled area (trade, including wheat purchases from Kurds, vaccine supplies from the government area under the COVAX programme, joint operation of water power plants);</li> <li>Maintained status quo in informal trade with the SIG- and SSG-controlled areas (shadow commodity turnover, transit of humanitarian aid).</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intensified links between the government area and AANES area (joint recovery of the oil and gas and transport infrastructure, anti-COVID-19 arrangements);</li> <li>Integration of local elites (areas controlled by the AANES, SIG and SSG, south of the government area) into a unified economic life in Syria in a decentralized format.</li> </ul>
Consolidation of state sovereignty	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservation of the SSG area as an equivalent of the Gaza Strip or its annexation to the SIG area;</li> <li>Transfer of Jarabulus District from the AANES-controlled area to the SIG-controlled area following Turkey’s actions;</li> <li>Persistent hotbed of instability in southern Syria;</li> <li>Continued operation of the cross-border mechanism;</li> <li>Maintained status quo where the main sections of the border with Turkey and partly with Iraq are beyond the control of the SAR authorities.</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transition of the SSG area to Damascus’ control as a result of military efforts (peaceful scenario is unlikely due to HTS*)</li> <li>Achievement of long-term reconciliation in the south of the country;</li> <li>Intensified operation of the SCC with a focus on decentralization of government and business interests of local elites; preparation of an updated draft constitution;</li> <li>Sovereignization of humanitarian aid.</li> </ul>
Ensuring an enabling international environment	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued sanctions with no significant changes on a <i>steps-for-steps</i> basis;</li> <li>Protracted “opening up” of Syria by the GCC countries, with the repatriation of unfrozen Syrian capital through the <i>Syrian Gulf Infitah</i> formula (<i>Infitah Surii Khaliji</i>).</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A shift from secondary to smart sanctions on a <i>step-by-step</i> basis;</li> <li>Achievement of international consensus on early recovery;</li> </ul>

\* An organization prohibited in Russia.

Continuation of the Table 12.

SHORT-TERM DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS		
Criterion	Scenario	Short term (1–2 years)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active “opening up” of Syria by the GCC countries with their investments according to the <i>Gulf Infatih</i> formula (<i>Infatih Khaliji</i>); involvement of EU and OIC countries, as well as Russia (with regard to security guarantees), in investment projects;</li> <li>Overcoming of Syria’s partial isolation in the Arab world (involvement in inter-Arab projects, expansion of trade via <i>GAFTA</i><sup>32</sup>).</li> </ul>
MEDIUM-TERM DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS		
Criterion	Scenario	Medium term (3–5 years)
Restoration of economic unity	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued economic isolation from the government area and economic focus of the AANES and SIG area on the external environment—Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey, respectively (including the use of the Turkish lira as the main means of payment in the SIG-controlled area);</li> <li>Fragmented efforts to ensure early recovery amid the complicated humanitarian situation.<sup>33</sup></li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduction in the number of parallel (local) economies from three to two (AANES and SIG);</li> <li>Increase in incomes and export potential across Syria as economic relationships are restored: preconditions are set for overcoming the socioeconomic crisis;</li> <li>Partial withdrawal of cross-area business activities from the shadow economy.</li> </ul>
Consolidation of state sovereignty	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persistent territorial fragmentation and illegal military presence of Turkey and the United States in Syria, limited access of the Syrian authorities to the state border;</li> <li>The manoeuvring of the Syrian leadership between Moscow and Tehran; possible conflict of Russia and Iran’s economic interests in the event that Iran attempts to strengthen its positions in the local raw materials sector and the country’s neutral position on the Ukrainian crisis.</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adoption of decentralization amendments to the Constitution (regarding clauses 1 and 4 of Article 150 of the current Constitution of 2012);<sup>34</sup></li> <li>Upgrading regulations to comply with constitutional amendments;</li> <li>Successful negotiations with Russia’s involvement to eliminate or limit Turkey’s presence in north-western Syria and the RAATA sector (alternatively, TAF bases may remain);</li> <li>Restoration of Damascus’ control of the state border, possibly with the exception of areas in the northern Aleppo Governorate in the SIG-controlled area.</li> </ul>

<sup>32</sup> Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA). Beirut: Ministry of Economy and Trade of Lebanese Republic, n. d.  
URL: <http://www.economy.gov.lb/en/what-we-provide/trade/foreign-trade-department/international-agreements/gafta/>

<sup>33</sup> “UNDP Policy on Early Recovery” // UNDP. August 22, 2008. URL: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A638DC99C778DD18C12575F3003F55B0undp\\_aug2008.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A638DC99C778DD18C12575F3003F55B0undp_aug2008.pdf); “Post-Conflict Economic Recovery: Enabling Local Ingenuity” // UNDP Crisis Prevention and Recovery Report. 2008, xxiii.  
URL: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A73161A001F3AB6CC12574EA004625C6-undp\\_oct2008.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A73161A001F3AB6CC12574EA004625C6-undp_oct2008.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic. Adopted at the referendum of February 26, 2012. Ministry of Defence of the Syrian Arabic Republic, n. d.  
URL: <http://www.mod.gov.sy/index.php?node=551&cat=3858>

*End of the Table 12.*

<b>MEDIUM-TERM DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS</b>		
<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Medium term (3–5 years)</b>
Ensuring an enabling international environment	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistence of the sanctions regime, with one-off waivers instead of smart sanctions;</li> <li>• Russia’s continued involvement in the “narrow” format reconstruction of Syria (jobs are delegated to selected private companies from Russia);</li> <li>• China’s withdrawal from post-conflict reconstruction.</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifting of sanctions; promotion of the Peaceful Syria image;</li> <li>• Achievement of international consensus on the peaceful reconstruction of Syria; transition from early to post-conflict reconstruction;</li> <li>• Implementation of collective plans by external stakeholders for the reconstruction of the regions of a united Syria (focus: Russia/Iran/China/GCC—government area; EU/U.S./GCC —AANES; Turkey/Qatar – SIG area); increased contribution of Iran, should anti-Tehran sanctions be mitigated;</li> <li>• Russia’s transition to a “broad” approach, implying the establishment of cooperation clusters in industry, agribusiness, and infrastructure, under the auspices of the Russia—Syria Intergovernmental Commission for Cooperation;</li> <li>• China’s adequate involvement in post-conflict reconstruction.</li> </ul>
<b>LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS</b>		
<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Long term (5–10 years)</b>
Restoration of economic unity	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintained status quo with one formal and two parallel economies (AANES and SIG);</li> <li>• Persistent socioeconomic crisis: slow recovery.</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enablement of transition towards sustainable growth in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the National Development Program for Post-War Syria.<sup>35</sup></li> </ul>
Consolidation of state sovereignty	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistence of territorial fragmentation as a threat to the peace process and ultimate resolution of the Syrian conflict.</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Election of the head of state based on the will of Syrian citizens in the 2028 presidential election (Bashar al-Assad’s political future);<sup>36</sup></li> <li>• Resolution of the challenge of Syrian Kurds as part of the decentralization endeavour.</li> </ul>
Ensuring an enabling international environment	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No progress in the international consensus-building process on Syria as a challenge to recovery and large-scale return of refugees.</li> </ul>
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement of international consensus on Syria as a driver encouraging the implementation of a political economy model that implies the role of the economy and decentralization as catalysts for the reintegration of the country and, consequently, for the resolution of the conflict.</li> </ul>

*Source: compiled by the author based on material available from open sources*

<sup>35</sup> National Development Program for Post-War Syria, Syria Strategic Plan 2030. Damascus: Planning and International Cooperation Commission at the SAR Council of Ministers, May 2020. URL: [http://picc.gov.sy/EG8/report/%20Syria\\_2020.pdf](http://picc.gov.sy/EG8/report/%20Syria_2020.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> R.S. Mamedov, “Syria and the ‘Old New World’ // Valdai International Discussion Club. June 7, 2021. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/siriya-i-staryi-novy-mir/>

To summarise: trends and scenarios for the evolution of the Syrian conflict are highly volatile. That is to say, over the longer term, Syria will not be the one to make all the calls. However, complex the vicissitudes of the international situation might appear, there is an obvious trend towards the continuing, and even growing, interdependence of the Syrian conflict with other aspects of global politics (the current developments in Ukraine, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, domestic armed conflicts in Libya). In this context, it is important to identify the modalities of the impact of the Ukraine crisis on the main configurations of the external stakeholders of the Syrian conflict (see Table 13).

**Table 13.** Modalities of the Impact of the Ukraine Crisis on the Configuration of External Stakeholders in the Syrian Conflict

Configurations	Stakeholders' actions (options)	Consequences
Russia—Iran	Tightening of the Western sanctions against Russia if Russia's special military operation in Ukraine continues.	Increased economic importance of Iran for Russia's "Look East" strategy. Russia giving greater consideration to Iran's economic interests in Syria.
	De-escalation of the West's confrontation with Russia if the latter concludes its special military operation based on an agreement between Russia and Ukraine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued importance of Iran for Russia in the context of foreign trade;</li> <li>Maintained status quo (division of roles) on Russia and Iran's economic presence in Syria.</li> </ul>
	Strengthening of the Russia–Iran strategic partnership, expansion of bilateral trade, Iran's support for Russia on the Ukraine issue.	Russia's commitment to promoting economic coordination and launching joint projects with Iran in Syria.
	Iran's neutral position in the context of the Ukraine crisis.	Stronger economic rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria; Russia's hardline policy to assert its interests.
U.S.—Iran—Israel	Limited trade development.	
	The return of the United States to the JCPOA, alleviation/lifting of some sanctions against Iran.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delay in Iran's Shiite Crescent project and a cooling in its confrontation with Israel;</li> <li>Iran's growing donor capacity and aggressive plans to increase its economic presence in Syria while disregarding Russia's interests;</li> <li>No objections from the United States and Israel to the resumption of regular supplies of crude oil and oil products from Iran to Syria.</li> <li>Confrontation with Israel provoked by Iran, which makes use of Syria and Hezbollah; its growing military presence (IRGC) in Syria;</li> <li>Iran's limited ability to provide aid to Syria; its choice to implement joint economic projects in Syria with Russia.</li> </ul>
	Collapse of the Iran nuclear deal between Washington and Tehran / preservation or expansion of sanctions.	



*End of the Table 13.*

<b>Configurations</b>	<b>Stakeholders' actions (options)</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Russia—Turkey	Neutral stance / limiting of Turkish aid to Ukraine; expansion of Russia–Turkey trade and economic ties.	Continuation of the Russia—Turkey dialogue on Syria, including the peace process; suspension of strikes delivered by the SAA and Russian Aerospace Forces on Turkey’s Syrian allies in the SSG- and SIG-controlled areas;
	Turkey’s drift towards solidarity with the West / expansion of aid to Ukraine / withdrawal of objections to the membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO.	Suspension of coordination between Russia and Turkey on Syria; growing tensions in Idlib: from new strikes by the SAA and Russian Aerospace Forces on Turkey’s Syrian allies to a new SAA operation to liberate Lesser Idlib (Dawn of Idlib— 3).
Russia—Israel	Curtailment of Israel’s aid to Ukraine / facilitation of Kyiv’s agreement to Moscow’s conditions for ending the special military operation (mediation);  Development of Israel’s economic relations with Russia.	Continuation of the Russia–Israel dialogue / greater attention to Israel’s concerns over Iran’s activity in Syria (non-involvement of the Russian military in repelling Israeli attacks in the Syrian territory);  Russia’s initiatives to further trade and economic cooperation with Israel.
	Expansion of Israel’s support to Ukraine (supply of military products, sending of volunteers).	Involvement of the Russian Armed Forces (Air Defence) in repelling Israeli attacks on Syria;  Transfer of Russian military infrastructure facilities in Syria to Iranian forces in the event of the possible redeployment of Russian contingents.
Russia—GCC	Continued neutrality of the Arab monarchies on the Ukraine issue; lifting of sanctions and promotion of trade and economic relations with Russia.	The likely use by Russia of its “security matrix” in the event that the Infitah policy to “open up” Syria to the GCC countries is intensified, the application of Russia’s “security matrix,” along with the financing of humanitarian supplies from Russia to Syria by the Arabs.
	The Arab monarchies’ drift towards supporting Ukraine as a consequence of increased Western pressure and acceptance of the dividends offered by the United States. and its NATO allies (supply of military products and technology).	The refusal of Arab countries to apply the Russian “security matrix” in the context of their economic projects in Syria.

*Source: compiled by the author based on material available from open sources*

## Conclusion

Based on this situational analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, the acute shortage of domestic resources remains a nationwide challenge for Syria that eliminates possibilities for the country to recover from a deep economic crisis and transit to post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable development. It is symptomatic that experts, both inside and outside Syria, admit that the current phase of the crisis, against the backdrop of the fuel crunch and dramatic depreciation of the national currency, is worse than the hot phase of the conflict, when support was channelled from Iran on a regular basis.

The economic dependence on foreign aid, especially characteristic of the SSG- and SIG-controlled areas, suits comprador elite groups rather than manufacturers and farmers. National producers are interested in economic reintegration: providing state support to the centre; restoring a unified infrastructure; and, in the case of the AANES, promoting the shared use of energy and oil facilities and the sale of grain and other products in the government-controlled area, which remains the country's largest market. Therefore, prerequisites are in place for the economy to become the main driving force in restoring Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Second, because federalization remains a "red line" for the Syrian authorities, decentralization is viewed as a way to break the deadlock in the peace process. It implies agreements between Damascus and the local elites, especially in the south and in areas that will eventually return to government control. Syria may be ultimately transformed into a decentralized unitary state, whereas the governorates with annexed areas previously controlled by the AANES (Al-Hasakah Governorate, parts of Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates), the SIG (parts of Aleppo and Raqqqa provinces) and the SSG (Idlib) will be granted "special" status. Transformation into a complex unitary state (autonomy-wise) with Kurdish national territorial self-government is another possibility for Syria. As a result, the Syrian government will extend its military and customs control over almost the entire territory of the country and the state border—naturally, in exchange for its genuine, rather than declarative, commitment to accommodate interests of local influence groups when it comes to sharing revenues and disbursing central budget allocations.

Third, within the framework of its "security matrix" (see Annex 1), Russia is in a position to guarantee compliance with the said arrangements in the future. This also applies to projects of early and post-conflict reconstruction implemented by external stakeholders, such as those following the Gulf Infitah formula. Importantly, despite the special military operation in Ukraine, Russia is not going to phase down its military presence in Syria, which was confirmed by Alexander Lavrentyev.<sup>37</sup> More active coordination between Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara

<sup>37</sup> Belenkaya M. B. "There is Absolutely No Talk of Reducing Russian Forces in Syria" // Kommersant. June 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5420967>

concerning a broad agenda is also possible. This agenda would include the search for a political solution to the Syrian conflict (specifically, work is currently under way to organize another tripartite Iran—Russia—Turkey summit on Syria in Tehran<sup>38</sup>), post-conflict reconstruction, and resolution of the refugee issue. Russia and China are likely to progress towards the implementation of joint projects in Syria, although, given the sanctions war against Russia, not all of them will be disclosed to the broad public.

Although sanctions against Russia and Syria, combined with the West's increasing pressure on the Arab world in the context of the Ukraine crisis, will probably discourage such stakeholders from making use of the "security matrix," a number of GCC countries (the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait) will hardly give up on their intentions to return to Syria economically.

Fourth, the limited negative impact of the Ukraine crisis on the situation in Syria is due to the weak dependence of its economy and food security on produce supplies from Ukraine, primarily milling wheat, which is an obvious advantage for Syria compared to a number of Arab economies, including Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia.

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<sup>38</sup> "Iran Hopes to Hold a Tripartite Summit on Syria with Russia" // RIA Novosti. June 23, 2022.  
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# Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
EU	European Union
GAFTA	Greater Arab Free Trade Area
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*
ITC	Iranian Telecommunications Company
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MTN	Mobile Telephone Network
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PPP	Public Private Partnership
RAATA	Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad
RIAC	Russian International Affairs Council
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SAR	Syrian Arab Republic
SCC	Syrian Constitutional Committee
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SMO	Special Military Operation
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government
TAF	Turkish Armed Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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\* An organization prohibited in Russia.



# Terms

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Kurdish: Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê)	Self-proclaimed (in January 2014) self-governing federal (predominantly Kurdish) state entity in north-eastern and partly eastern Syria.
Adrar (ارارضا)	Direct damage, injury, harm (Arabic). <sup>39</sup>
External stakeholders in the Syrian conflict	Foreign states and organizations involved in Syria's internal armed conflict.
Syrian Interim Government (تتقووملا قموكح قيروس)	Administration alternative to Syrian authorities formed by the Syrian opposition in the Turkish city of Gaziantep in March 2013.
Deeply Divided Society	A society with clear internal antagonisms (confrontation lines) that have existed for a long period of time ( <i>the GRO theory is attributed to British researcher Adrian Guelke. Its provisions were adapted to the situation in the Middle East by V. V. Naumkin, a full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences</i> ).
Horizontal (parallel) security system	A system of control of territories and/or resources of non-state actors ( <i>concept: developed by experts by the example of Iran in Syria</i> ).
Progenies of those in power (awlad al-sulta (دلواو تطلسلا)	Entrepreneurs integrated with the authorities (Syrian term).
Decentralisation (al-la markaziyya (تيزكمرمالا)	Reorganization of intra-system processes where a portion of these processes (economic and social administration, budgeting, distribution of revenues) is transferred from the centre to provinces (in Syria, decentralization is currently understood as the empowerment of ministries, agencies and local governments, but not regions or governorates).
Economic cooperation cluster	A functionally localized area (branch) of economic engagement.

<sup>39</sup> In Arabic, there is no clear distinction between the concepts of damage and loss (both are translated as "losses"). There are various shades of meaning, though. The word *khasair* refers rather to losses, while the word *adrrar* means damages. In the former case, Syrians imply lost profits and undermined sustainable development potential, i. e. indirect damage caused by the conflict and sanctions, sometimes adding the need for reconstruction and modernisation; the latter word refers to direct devastating effects of armed clashes. See: K.K. Baranov, *Comprehensive Arab–Russian Dictionary*. In 2 vol. 11<sup>th</sup> edition (Moscow: Zhivoi yazyk, 2006); *Ibid*: Vol. 2. P. 456.

Lesser Idlib	The territory of Idlib Governorate remaining under the control of the Syrian armed opposition.
Parallel (local) economy	A system of economic relations that has evolved separately within a particular country (region, governorate, or part thereof) which co-exists with the national (official) economy of a UN-recognized state.
Open-door policy (Infithah حاتفنا)	The policy of Arab (Arabian) countries to restore trade and economic ties with Syria, despite the fact that sanctions are formally in place (historically, economic liberalization in Egypt under President Anwar Sadat).
Post-conflict reconstruction	The second phase of recovery according to the UN classification to help a crisis-affected country eliminate the causes of and recover from the crisis, and create a framework for sustainable development.
RAATA	A sector in Syria under Turkey's territorial control (part of the northern "security belt" in the SIG-controlled area between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in Raqqa and Al-Hasakah governorates, respectively) (the term used in UN documents).
Early recovery	The first phase of recovery according to the UN classification, envisaging external aid to resolve a humanitarian crisis.
Russia's security matrix in Syria (see Annex 1)	An applied behavioural pattern, where the direct role of the Russian military police in Syria contributes to the resolution of security issues, the commencement of a nationwide dialogue, and the recovery of business operations. <sup>40</sup>
Syria 2030	A national development programme in the post-war period:  The Syria 2030 strategic plan.
Syrian Salvation Government (حكومة الإنقاذ السورية)	Self-proclaimed (in November 2017) administration of the Syrian opposition in Idlib, an alternative to the Syrian Interim Government.
Cross-border aid mechanism	A procedure for rendering humanitarian assistance to Syria via the Syrian border crossing of Bab al-Hawa (in the SSG area; extended on July 9, 2021 under UNSCR 2585)

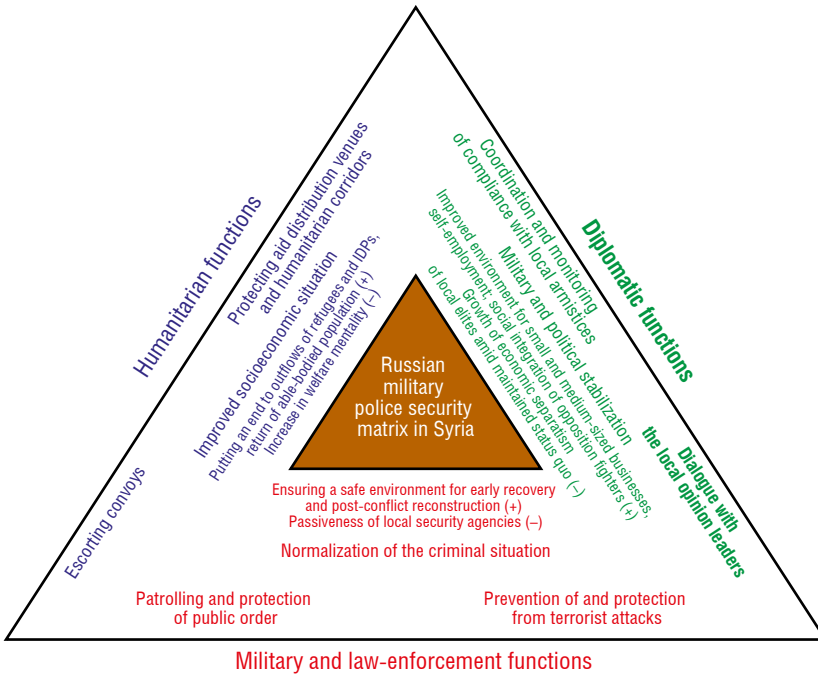
<sup>40</sup> Matveev I. A. "The Hard Way to Recovery," in I. A. Matveev, Political economy of Syria in conflict, Vol 2. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2022. P. 246.

Narrow approach to the reconstruction of Syria	A strategy to ensure the economic presence of foreign stakeholders in Syria through the delegation of business authority to selected companies in certain industries (sectors).
Sustainable development	A package of measures to meet current human requirements while preserving the environment and resources, i. e. without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their requirements ( <i>a UN term</i> ).
Khasair (رئاسخ)	Loss (including indirect loss), defeat (Arabic).
Steps-for-steps	Tactical formulas for the Syrian political process (proposed by UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen).
Step-by-step	
Shia Crescent	A project put forward by the Iranian leadership to establish an area of influence in the form of a belt stretching from Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria and reaching as far as Israel ( <i>the term was coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan in December 2004</i> ).
Broad approach to the reconstruction of Syria	A strategy to ensure the economic presence of foreign stakeholders in Syria through the creation of diversified cooperation clusters

# Annex

## Annex 1

Diagram 1. Russia's security matrix in Syria



Source: compiled by the author

## About the Author

Igor Matveev holds a Ph.D. in History. He graduated cum laude from MGIMO University under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia in 1995 and completed his postgraduate studies at MGIMO in 2003.

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## Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)

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 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.

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## **Notes**

## Notes



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