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Six scenarios for pro-regime militias in 'post-war' Syria

Pro-regime militias have played a key role in military offensives and local security enforcement during the Syrian civil war. They proved crucial tools in ensuring the survival of the regime of President Assad and shaped the course of the war. Today, the regime and its allies are seeking to bring their 'war on terrorism' against remaining rebel forces to a conclusion. In parallel, the future role of pro-regime militias in Syria's political order has become contested between the Syrian regime and its main international backers – Iran and Russia. This has left Western European policy makers uncertain about the true nature of the political and military forces that will run the Syrian state. Israel watches the situation closely as it takes an understandable interest in the future political order of its neighbour. This policy brief identifies the most important interests of Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime in respect of pro-regime militias. Their visions for the future of these militias are explored through six possible scenarios. The potential effects of each scenario carry important ramifications for the future of the Syrian state and its people, including possibilities for the safe and voluntary return of refugees.

Introduction¹

At the end of 2017, fighters in local and foreign pro-regime militias in Syria were estimated to number between 100,000 and

150,000.² At the same time, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had fallen from its pre-war size of 220,000 troops to around 25,000 active and deployable troops.³ Pro-regime militias played a key role in many military offensives and local security enforcement throughout the Syrian civil war. They essentially helped guarantee the regime's survival. Without pro-regime militias, Assad would probably have

1 The authors are grateful to Nanar Hawach (Uppsala University) for his contribution to this brief, as well as to Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) and Neda Bolourchi (Rutger University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies) for their peer review. The brief is part of Clingendael's Levant research programme, which examines the role of coercive organisations in relation to the political orders of Syria and Iraq. Its research results to date can be accessed here.

2 Lister, C. & Nelson, D. (2017), *All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria*. Online: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/all-president-s-militias-assad-s-militiafication-syria> (Accessed 15-08-2018); Alaaldin, R. et al., *A 10-degree shift in Syria strategy*, Washington DC: Brookings Policy Brief, 2018.

3 *Ibid.*

been unable to secure the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo axis, coastal regions, Hama and large parts of southern Syria; all key economic locations that together hold the majority of the Syrian population. These victories have, however, come at a cost to its central power and monopoly on violence.

During recent months, Syria's war has entered a new phase. As the guns have fallen largely silent, relative stability appears to be spreading across the country.⁴ The situation offers the Syrian regime an opportunity to portray itself as the only legitimate, sovereign and, crucially, capable centre of rule of what it refers to as 'post-war' Syria.⁵ And now that the Syrian regime and its allies are steering a political process to conclude 'Syria's war on terrorism', the future of pro-regime militias has become an important area of friction between the regime's key allies, Russia and Iran.⁶ This brief examines these frictions and maps pathways for their resolution in the form of six scenarios.

Loyalist militias and the Syrian civil war

During the first months of the Syrian civil war, prospects of a regime victory were slim. Border provinces fell rapidly to the Syrian opposition and, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, military casualties and defections had

reduced the SAA to half its size by mid-2013.⁷ Desperate for more manpower to battle the increasing myriad of armed opposition groups, the regime began to mobilise and enlist pro-regime militias. This was a survival strategy that eroded the regime's monopoly on violence and magnified the influence of foreign pro-regime sponsors such as Iran.

Unlike in many other countries, the use of militias is legally possible under Syria's Military Service law. According to Chatham House's Kheder Khaddour, the language of the law permits the use of 'auxiliary forces' and 'other forces that are necessitated by circumstances' to fight within the SAA's framework.⁸ Hence, this law provided the legal basis for the proliferation of local militias as the SAA lost troops at an astonishing rate and proved unsuccessful in recruiting fresh manpower. In contrast, local militias have been more successful in mobilising Syrians to fight since they often rely on communal networks and allow fighters to stay close to home. In addition to being stationed closer to home, joining a militia also offered better financial and social benefits, which grew as the conflict continued.

While the SAA was able to offer various financial and social benefits to its officers prior to 2011, these gradually diminished during the conflict.⁹ Such benefits were facilitated by the networks of new elites that emerged from Assad's neoliberal reforms

4 Polianskaya, A. (2018), *Syrian President Assad Flies to Russia to Meet for Talks with Putin*. Online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-assad-russia-putin-talks-latest-war-recovery-economy-a8357596.html> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

5 Leenders, R. & Mansour, K. (2018), 'Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War', in *Political Science Quarterly*, 133, 2, p. 225.

6 Polianskaya, A. (2018), *Syrian President Assad Flies to Russia to Meet for Talks with Putin*. Online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-assad-russia-putin-talks-latest-war-recovery-economy-a8357596.html> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

7 Lund, A. (2015), *Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?* Online: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215> (Accessed 15-08-2018); see also: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-are-pro-assad-militias-syria> (2015) (Accessed 14 March 2019).

8 Khaddour, K. (2016), *Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center. Online: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf (Accessed 22-08-2018).

9 Khaddour, K. (2016), *Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center. Online: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf (Accessed 22-08-2018).

in the early and mid-2000s.¹⁰ The rise of these elites also deepened patronage networks throughout the SAA and, as a result, nepotism and clientelism became crucial mechanisms for promotion into the army's upper ranks.¹¹ After 2011, these same networks facilitated the smooth incorporation of militias into the SAA's structure and chain of command. The model of command for President Assad's forces shifted from professional military leadership in charge of classic warfare to leadership by loyalist individuals with either a military or business background who fused traditional military and new paramilitary forces to fight more flexibly and locally, while investing significant 'personal' funds in the creation of new units. For example, the pro-regime militias Tiger Forces was initially funded by Bashar al-Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf and led by top Alawite general Suheil al-Hassan. Militias should therefore be seen as both a product and a beneficiary of the neo-patrimonial networks that gradually infiltrated the SAA from the early 2000s.

This means that the current status of pro-regime militias in Syria is one of hybridity rather than irregularity. In other words, pro-regime militias are not irregular units that operate outside the preexisting structures of the SAA. Rather, many loyalist regime militias were fostered by the regime and have 'operated within the same structures' as the SAA.¹² Moreover, as the conflict progressed, many militias have benefited from Russian, Iranian, regime or regime-affiliated support. Now that the SAA, together with Russian and Iranian forces, has regained control over substantial parts of Syrian territory, the future of Syria's pro-regime militias

has become a bone of contention between Russia and Iran. As many of these militias represent the interests of their sponsors, which have significant leverage through a widespread territorial footprint, their future place in Syria's military and political order matters.

Russian and Iranian visions for Syria

It is easy to oversimplify Russia's and Iran's interests in Syria. Both states are driven by numerous, sometimes overlapping, interests that go beyond mere ideological dogmatism. The key interests behind Russia's vision for Syria are:

- Projecting legitimacy in the Middle East as a direct challenge to the US. Russia wishes to promote its international image as a capable great power able to manage and solve the Syrian war; something the US has been unable or unwilling to do. Russia also portrays itself as being in a more legitimate position than the US, since the Syrian state 'invited' Russian assistance
- Undermining the UN-led political processes without destroying them completely by creating parallel tracks (e.g. Astana) that can ultimately present a *fait accompli* to the UN at a later date
- Fostering US and EU recognition of Russia as an important and credible actor in the fight against terrorism
- Upholding the principle of the supremacy of state sovereignty by supporting the Syrian state over the (liberal) notion that a state's sovereignty can be abrogated in the case of grave humanitarian crisis¹³

10 See for example: Hadidi, S., Z. Majed and F. Mardam-Bey, *Dans la tête de Bachar al-Assad*, Paris: Actes Sud, 2018.

11 Khaddour, K. (2016), *Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center. Online: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf (Accessed 22-08-2018).

12 Khaddour, K. (2018), *Syria's Troublesome Militias*, Carnegie Middle East Center. Online: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77635> (Accessed 22-12-2018).

13 Leenders, R. & Mansour, K. (2018), 'Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War', in *Political Science Quarterly*, 133, 2, p. 250.

- Profiting from reconstruction investments while offloading some of the cost of reconstruction to the US and EU. In parallel, Russia seeks to win reconstruction bids and other investment rights at the expense of Iran
- Profiting from war, e.g. testing new weaponry and testing the efficacy of private Russian mercenary forces (The Wagner Group)
- Protecting its long-term basing rights on the Syrian coast
- 'Neutralising' extremist foreign fighters from the Caucasus and Chechnya before they return home from Syria.

These translate into two priorities from the perspective of the reconstruction of Syria: (1) rebuilding the Syrian state's central authority and political and military capabilities and (2) integrating pro-regime militias under a central command structure of the SAA *or* demobilising militias entirely. In a recent interview, Russian President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed these priorities, saying that 'in connection to noticeable victories and success of the Syrian army in fighting terrorism and to the beginning of a more active political process, foreign armed forces will be withdrawn from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic.'¹⁴ Russia has already made concrete steps towards achieving this vision, for example through the creation of a Fourth Corps of the SAA that brings some militias more firmly under the army's wing, and by providing any financial investment or support directly to preexisting SAA structures.¹⁵

14 Polianskaya, A. (2018), *Syrian President Assad Flies to Russia to Meet for Talks with Putin*. Online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-assad-russia-putin-talks-latest-war-recovery-economy-a8357596.html> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

15 Khaddour, K. (2016), *Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center. Online: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf (Accessed 22-08-2018).

Russia appears to be amenable to Israeli demands for a decreased Iranian military presence in Syria insofar as this does not jeopardise its own priorities. Russia has nowhere near the on-the-ground proxy military power in Syria that Iran has, but it essentially controls the skies and has fostered a great deal of leverage with the SAA.

The key interests behind Iran's vision for Syria are:

- Projecting influence in Syria and the broader region in both soft-power terms (as the leader of the resistance against the US and Israel) and in terms of real on-the-ground influence¹⁶
- Maintaining Syria as a strategic partner for deterring Israel and increasing its own forward defensive posture against Israel in Syria
- Expelling or at least significantly reducing US influence in the Levant
- Protecting and expanding its access to proxies, most importantly Hezbollah in Lebanon, by securing and expanding friendly land and air territory through which it can supply these proxies
- Building bottom-up legitimacy through the infiltration of state institutions and Shi'a religious shrines
- Refining Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) capacities in hybrid warfare
- Profiting through reconstruction of the likes of electrical grids, power plants and factories.

These interests translate into two priorities from the perspective of the reconstruction of Syria: (1) maintaining Assad in power for

16 For example, as it has with taking control the strategic border town of Al-Mayad in Deir al-Zour province. See: Radio Alkul (2018), جرحى بين عناصر ميليشيا الدفاع الوطني والحشد الشعبي إثر اشتباكات بين الطرفين في البوكمال. Online: <https://www.radioalkul.com/p200877/> (Accessed 21-11-2018).

as long as possible while (2) creating the conditions to retain access to Syria in case the Assad regime does fall by developing proxy forces that will outlive Assad. Assad is useful and preferred, but he is not essential to Iran's designs as long as it can avoid the establishment of a Sunni majority government with full control over Syria.

For some observers this approach is entirely congruent with Iran's efforts in Lebanon and Iraq, where paramilitary groups, which in part also act as proxies, exercise significant influence on the formal government in which they are also represented.¹⁷ However, there are key differences in context and local dynamics that mean it is too simplistic to conclude that Iran is pursuing realisation of a Lebanon- or Iraq-inspired paramilitary model in Syria. For example, there are far fewer Shi'a – a key support base for Iran – in Syria than in Iraq or Lebanon. Iran has demonstrated flexibility with its long-term strategies of aiding and abetting proxy forces in the region, but with the underlying objective of maintaining as much independence for those forces from the state they operate in as possible.

What about Assad?

It is unclear at present how much influence the Assad regime will have over future grand bargains between itself, Russia and Iran in Syria. Assad has allowed the Syrian state's sovereignty to erode as a wartime necessity for regime survival. Now, however, he is likely to seek to prevent the imposition of too many additional constraints or built-in dependencies. The key interests behind Assad's vision for Syria are:

- Reestablishing the sovereignty and external legitimacy of its rule in Syria¹⁸
- Centralising political and military power while sustaining patrimonial networks
- Regulating militias under a central command congruent with a reestablished Syrian sovereignty
- Reversing the state's relationship with the army to its pre-war pattern, when the military was dependent on the state and not vice versa
- Promoting and maintaining regional interests, including pressure on Israel¹⁹
- Minimalising or strategically isolating (potential) dissent among Syrians at home and abroad.

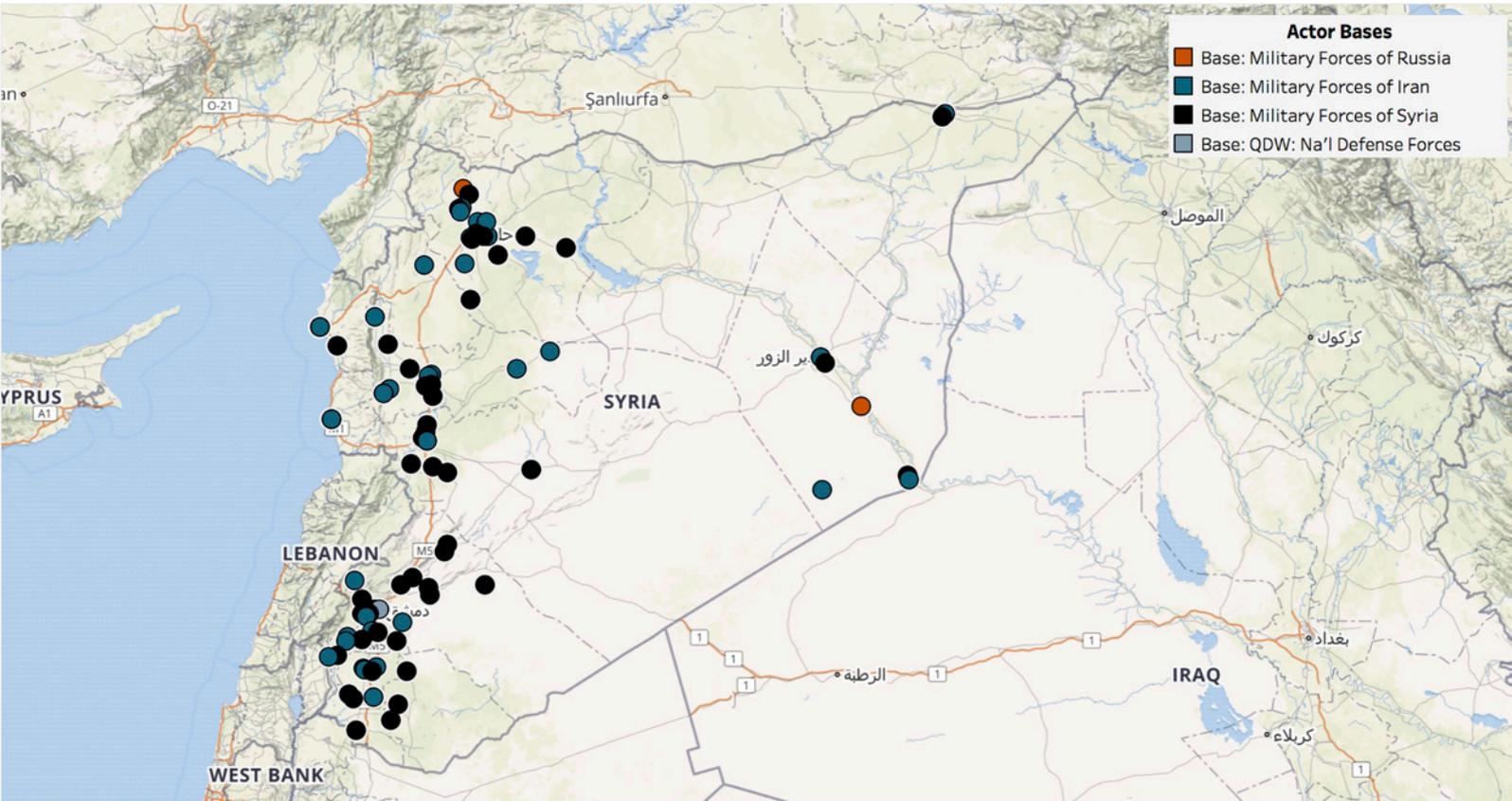
In order to secure these interests, the regime prefers to retain militias within the security and intelligence sector under a compromise that enables Assad to centralise power yet sustain patrimonial networks. The likelihood is that Assad seeks a pre-war political and military order with a degree of so-called demographic engineering in order to remove or force out 'undesirable' (meaning mainly disloyal) populations through selectively deterring return or strategically relocating

17 Fulton, W. Holliday, J. & Wyer, S. (2013), *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War.

18 The Syrian regime's focus on sovereignty and legitimacy permeates many of its policies. For example, Leenders and Mansour discuss the regime's use of the humanitarian space to bolster its sovereignty: Leenders, R. & Mansour, K. (2018), 'Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War', in *Political Science Quarterly*, 133, 2, pp. 225-257.

19 Szekely, O. (2012), 'A Friend in Need: The Impact of the Syrian Civil War on Syria's Clients (A Principal-Agent Approach)', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12, pp. 450-468.

Figure 1: Overview of key bases of Syrian regime, Iranian and Russian forces



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for Clingendael; base locations estimated on data until 31 July 2018. Access ACLED's dataset [here](#).

(potential) dissidents to areas away from the main cities and the coastal enclave.²⁰

Even with limited influence on the grand bargain, the regime is likely to play out Russian and Iranian interests in order to maximise its profits and, at least partially, achieve its preferred outcome. This outcome will rely heavily on reestablishing patronage and nepotism networks, a practice that

predates the conflict.²¹ Furthermore, the now predominantly Alawite composition of the SAA (the result of a mix of practical obstacles to non-Alawi enlistment and strategic considerations by the regime) is an indicator of the now increasingly sectarianised nature of loyalty.²² Therefore, Assad is likely to try to maintain a structure of central authority sustained by patrimonial networks.

Figure 1 above provides an indicative overview of both the internationalisation and

20 Batrawi, S. (2018), *Drivers of urban reconstruction in Syria: power, privilege, and profit extraction*. The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 'Clingendael'; Batrawi, S. (2018), *Four ways in which the Syrian regime controls refugee returns*, The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 'Clingendael'

21 Khaddour, K. (2016), *Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf (Accessed 22-08-2018); Hadidi (2018), *op.cit.*

22 Khaddour (2016), *op.cit.*

Table 1: Overview of actor preferences per scenario

Scenario	Russia	Iran	Assad
1: Full dismantlement and return home	Yes	Worst case	Worst case
2: Full integration into the SAA	Best case	No	Yes
3: Integration into Syrian intelligence and security services	Maybe	No	Best case
4: DDR followed by civilian employment	No	No	No
5: Legal status as paramilitary forces	No	Best case	Yes
6: Untouched	Worst case	Yes	No

the hybridity of Syria’s civil war. Bear in mind that many pro-Assad militias are co-located with the SAA, as is the case for some Russian forces.

Six scenarios

Considering the interests of Iran, Russia and the Syrian regime, there are at least six conceivable scenarios for the future of Syria’s loyalist militias. These are: (1) the full dismantlement of militias and repatriation of foreign fighters, (2) the full integration of pro-regime militias into the SAA, (3) the integration of militias into newly-created intelligence and security services, (4) subjecting militias to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) followed by civilian employment, (5) militias attaining legal status as paramilitary forces or (6) militias being left untouched. Table 1 provides an overview of the preferences of actors per scenario.

A Russian ‘win’ would entail full integration into the SAA or full dismantlement, with foreign militias returning home. To Russia, this does not include Russian contractors or forces, since these are not seen as interventionist foreign forces but as groups that are assisting Syria at the regime’s invitation. This would achieve Russia’s priority of achieving far-reaching centralisation of militias under the SAA while disbanding others, strengthening the central command of the Assad regime.

An Iranian ‘win’ would entail militias attaining legal status as paramilitary forces or remaining untouched altogether. This would achieve Iran’s priority of maintaining

a decentralised Assad regime in power for as long as possible, while still developing autonomous militias outside of the command structure of the SAA as an insurance policy should Assad fall. Moreover, it is likely that Iran also sees militias as a useful political asset should there be a need to put pressure on the Assad regime in the future.

An Assad ‘win’ would entail integration of militias into the Syrian intelligence and security services or their full integration into the SAA. This compromise enables Assad to centralise his power, yet sustain patrimonial networks on which he depends for manpower and influence.

There is no single scenario that appeases the interests of all three actors and, hence, no easy compromise. However, both Russia’s and Iran’s best-case scenarios (full integration into the SAA and attaining legal status as paramilitary forces respectively) are acceptable to Assad, even though neither is the regime’s best-case scenario. The Syrian regime’s best-case scenario (integration into Syrian intelligence and security services) is a no-go for Iran, although Russia may be amenable to it. The Syrian regime has as many options in common with Russia (full integration into the SAA or remaining untouched) as it does with Iran (full dismantlement and return home or attaining legal status as paramilitary forces). For all three actors, DDR followed by civilian employment of former militiamen is not an option. In consequence, these scenarios outline the force field within which negotiations between Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime will take place. They also provide a framework for interpreting developments pertaining to loyalist militias

from the perspective of whose interests are being served by such developments and to what extent, and what they mean for the future political order and stability of Syria.

While Russia and Iran are the primary drivers of the future of loyalist militias in Syria, they are not the only relevant actors. Both Hezbollah and Israel are engaged in the Syria conflict with clear objectives. And although they will not drive the scenarios for loyalist militias in Syria, their interests in the future of loyalist militias in Syria should be factored into any analysis.

The Hezbollah factor

Hezbollah's vision for Syria is aligned with Iran's. However, Hezbollah is not led by Iran. A hypothetical concession on Iran's part in a grand bargain cannot be assumed to be readily acceptable to Hezbollah, whose covert involvement in Syria dates back to 2011.²³

Hezbollah joined pro-regime militias in Syria largely to protect its access to weaponry from Iran and its manoeuvring capability against Israel, using the pretext of protecting Shi'a-majority areas along the Syrian-Lebanese border and Syria's main Shi'a shrines in Damascus. In the event of a Syrian opposition victory (which would probably instate a hostile Sunni majority government) Hezbollah would have been one of the biggest regional losers. Hezbollah thus became instrumental in preventing the fall of Assad's regime in the early phases of the Syrian civil war by participating in military operations and by training and commanding various local and foreign pro-regime militias across Syria. Hezbollah transformed the Syrian regime's approach to military operations by introducing guerrilla tactics to various pro-regime militias and the SAA. In particular, it focused on new tactics and strategies in urban battlefields that employ light infantry, reconnaissance operations,

and the deployment of snipers to limit enemy movements.²⁴

Militarily speaking, Hezbollah is the most effective weapon against Israel for both Iran and Syria. Moreover, it has been one of the Syrian regime's most efficient battlefield forces throughout the conflict. For Iran, Hezbollah is critical to boosting its regional influence. It is therefore highly unlikely that Iran or the Syrian regime will agree to a scenario that makes concessions to Russia at Hezbollah's expense. For its part, Hezbollah is also unlikely to acquiesce to a deal that reduces its role and long-term influence in Syria. The only likely concession is one that sees other Iranian-led militias such as the Fatemiyoun and Zainabyoun Brigades removed from Syria while leaving Hezbollah untouched.

The Israel factor

Contrary to the 'general indifference' exhibited by Israel in the first phases of the Syrian civil war, Tel Aviv views the new phase of the war with great concern.²⁵ With a regime 'win' supported by Iran and Hezbollah, Israel fears the influence both actors would gain in the future architecture of the Syrian state. Concretely, what that means for Israel is that Syria would transform from the 'devil they know' to an actor influenced by Israel's perceived primary regional threat: Iran. According to Gil Murciano, Israel's 'devil they know' calculation was based on two presumptions about pre-war Assad: that Israel was able to deter (through memories of historical defeat and reminders of military superiority) Assad from direct military confrontation in the Golan, and that Assad was a stable ruler with full control over his armed forces

23 Levitt, M. & Zelin, A. (2013), 'Hizb Allah's Gambit in Syria', *CTC Sentinel*, 6, 8, pp. 14-17.

24 Hawach, N. (2017), *Identifying the Technology of Rebellion: An Assessment of External Intervention in the Syrian Civil War*, University of Kent.

25 Murciano, G. (2017), *Israel vis-a-vis Iran in Syria: The Perils of Active Containment*. Online: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/israel-and-irans-growing-influence-in-syria/> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

Table 2: Hezbollah's and Israel's preferences per scenario

Scenario	Hezbollah	Israel
1: Full dismantlement and return home	Worst case	Best case
2: Full integration into the SAA	No	Yes
3: Integration into Syrian intelligence and security sectors	No	No
4: DDR followed by civilian employment	No	No
5: Legal status as paramilitary forces	Best case	Worst case
6: Untouched	Yes	No

able to contain any undeterred elements.²⁶ The latter has completely unravelled with the growing presence and importance of pro-regime militias. The Syrian regime is now highly dependent on Iran and Hezbollah, and is unlikely to limit their manoeuvring space in Syria unless there is significant counter-pressure from Russia, Israel itself or, improbably, the international community.

Indeed, contrary to the threat of ISIS, which was met by more widespread international involvement, Israel perceives itself as isolated and left to its own devices when it comes to countering the spread of Iranian power into Syria. 'The problem is that where ISIS exits, Iran enters,' according to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.²⁷ The establishment of a permanent Iranian-Hezbollah presence in the Golan would be the most obvious short-term territorial threat to Israel. A longer-term threat for Israel would be a sustained Iranian access route via Iraq and Syria – the infamous 'land bridge' to Hezbollah.

Considering the above priorities, the only scenarios that would be acceptable to Israel are those that remove Iran and Hezbollah's

autonomous military presence from Syria.²⁸ Concretely, this means the full dismantlement of militias and the return home of foreign recruits, or, very much a second-best, their full integration into a centralised SAA sovereignly controlled by Assad.

To achieve this, Israel has limited political options. It ceased to rely on the US in 2016 after fruitless efforts to engage the Obama administration in countering Iran's presence in Syria. After the Helsinki summit in June 2018, the US and Russia appeared to agree on the importance of securing the Golan, with Trump stating that 'creating safety for Israel is something that both President Putin and myself' desire.²⁹ Israel shares an interest with Russia in dismantling autonomous militias in order to centralise Assad's political and military power. Indeed, Israel and Russia's relationship has improved since Russia's first engagement in the conflict as the countries have increasingly come to rely on one another. For Russia, the most important thing is not to alienate Israel since this would endanger its desire to increase its sphere of influence in the Middle East. For Israel, Russia is the only actor able to

26 Murciano, G. (2017), *Israel vis-a-vis Iran in Syria: The Perils of Active Containment*. Online: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/israel-and-irans-growing-influence-in-syria/> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

27 Quoted in Murciano, G. (2017), *Israel vis-a-vis Iran in Syria: The Perils of Active Containment*. Online: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/israel-and-irans-growing-influence-in-syria/> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

28 Murciano, G. (2018), *Preventing a Spillover of the Iran-Israel Conflict in Syria*. Online: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/preventing-a-spillover-of-the-iran-israel-conflict-in-syria/> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

29 Meyer, H. (2018), *Putin Says He Agreed with Trump to Secure Syria Border with Israel*. Online: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-16/putin-says-agreed-with-trump-to-secure-syria-border-with-israel> (Accessed 15-08-2018).

Table 3: Options for actor engagement per scenario and relatively likelihood

Scenario	Satisfies	Dissatisfies	Likelihood	Likelihood for push-back by militias
1: Full dismantlement and return home	Russia and Israel (best case scenario for Israel)	Iran, Hezbollah, Assad (worst case scenario for all three)	Unlikely (considering aversion of key actors)	High
2: Full integration into the SAA	Russia, Assad, Israel (best case scenario for Russia, second-best for Israel)	Iran and Hezbollah	Somewhat likely (depending on ability to leverage Iran/Hezbollah)	High
3: Integration into Syrian intelligence and security services	Assad (best case scenario)	Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Israel	Unlikely (considering aversion of key actors)	Moderate
4: DDR followed by civilian employment	None	Russia, Iran, Assad, Hezbollah, Israel	Very unlikely (considering aversion of all actors)	Moderate
5: Legal status as paramilitary forces	Iran, Assad and Hezbollah (best case scenario for Iran/Hezbollah)	Russia and Israel (worst case scenario for Israel)	Likely (considering power balance between Russia/Iran)	Low
6: Untouched	Iran and Hezbollah	Russia, Assad and Israel (worst case scenario for Russia)	Unlikely (considering aversion of Russia/Assad)	Low

mitigate Iran's growing influence in Syria.³⁰ Table 2 gives an overview of Hezbollah's and Israel's preferences per scenario.

Likelihood for push-back by militias and options for engagement

Academic literature generally views non-state militias as opportunistic and as potential spoilers to ceasefires and peace agreements.³¹ One study predicted that pro-regime militias in particular increase

the risk of conflict relapse by 20 per cent.³² The influence of low-level violence and chaos resulting from militia involvement in arms trades, narcotics and other forms of criminality in post-conflict contexts (illegal activities that brought them both power and money during the war) can bring further devastation to civilian populations already ravaged by years of war.³³ The long-term stability of Syria remains volatile because of unresolved business of Idlib, Afrin and Kurdish Syria, as well as the destabilising effects that structural violence by loyalist militias will have. These effects are likely to increase in any scenario where militias are left relatively untouched. Considering the interests of all the actors discussed above, Table 3 provides an overview of which actors

30 However, the complex nature of the conflict in Syria makes the durability of the Russian-Israeli alignment of interests in Syria vulnerable, as the downing of a Russian transport plane in September 2018 by Syrian air defences during an Israeli air strike demonstrates.

31 MacGinty, R. (2008), *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.113.

32 Steinert, C. (2018), *Why Pro-government Militias Spoil Peace Agreements*, Oxppl: The Oxford University Politics Blog. Online: <https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/why-pro-government-militias-spoil-peace-agreements/> (Accessed 21-11-2018).

33 Alden, C. et al. (2012), *Militias and the Challenges of Post-conflict Peace*. (London: Zed Books), p. 2.

are satisfied by each scenario. In addition, the box evaluates the likelihood and the potential for push-back by local, loyalist militias.

How pro-regime militias might react to each scenario is intrinsically linked to the question of how pro-regime militias themselves envision Syria's future. The Syrian civil war afforded a great deal of power and money to militias. This level of status and resources can be maintained in more than one scenario, since the Syrian regime's preference for ruling through neo-patrimonial networks allows for it to channel benefits through its security and intelligence services as well. Under certain scenarios, these services could include former militia units and fighters.

Militias will logically push back against any scenario that reduces their status in post-conflict Syria. Local militias – as opposed to foreign-sponsored militias – are likely to push back overtly by creating security incidents. Since most local militia leaders are loyal to Assad through personal connections or long-standing allegiance, such incidents are likely to be sporadic rather than systemic. In addition, those loyalist militias with substantial grievances are unlikely to coalesce around any opposition figure or other internal challenger to the Assad regime given that these do not exist at present.³⁴ In short, the likelihood of loyalist militias backing a coup against Syria's new political order in the near to medium term is low. After all, the same neo-patrimonial networks that greased support for the SAA prior to 2011 have expanded and morphed to include loyalist militias. This makes it likely that power, money and other rents can be attained by (former) militias through these networks, which decreases the likelihood for push-back.

34 Even the Syrian Social Nationalist Party remains limited in its political freedom of manoeuvre, despite its staunchly pro-Assad stance during the civil war. See: Solomon, C., J. McDonald and N. Grinstead, *Eagles riding the storm of war: The role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.

Conclusion

Looking forward, the most likely scenarios are that either pro-regime militias will attain legal status as paramilitary forces or that they will be integrated into the SAA. In the medium term, both would have far-reaching domestic and regional effects. Neither scenario addresses questions of accountability, justice and protection from persecution, which are arguably essential to establishing a durable peace rather than simply achieving a military victory, with the consequence that the seeds of future conflict are likely to be ingrained in Syria's post-conflict political order.

Justice and protection are also at the heart of providing Syrian refugees with the option of safe and voluntary return to Syria. The lack of militia accountability and justice for their victims also exacerbates the severe problems around political freedom in Syria, where opposition to the regime is being labelled and persecuted as disloyalty at best, and terrorism at worst. This is aggravated by the increasingly sectarianised nature of the SAA. Therefore, unless the Syrian regime implements bureaucratic, legal and political changes (for which there is no real incentive), it is unlikely that refugees will have the option for safe and voluntary return in either scenario.

Regionally, the two most likely scenarios will increase Iran and Hezbollah's military influence in Syria, including their offensive capacities. This will lead to Israel's maintenance and potential escalation of its deterrence strategy, which is likely to include renewed Israeli air strikes on SAA facilities.

As a result of their limited influence on the Syrian conflict since 2011, European policy makers have little say in what happens to Syria's pro-regime militias. But that does not mean that there are no lessons to be learned or policies to be adjusted, especially since humanitarian aid will continue and some reconstruction assistance may begin in the near future. The Syrian regime has depleted its resources and international legitimacy while facing a reconstruction bill of at least €250 billion. Syria's international allies may be able to cover some of the costs, but the

regime will probably look to local elites to cover part of the bill. These elites will, in turn, expect financial and political returns from their investments. Many of these elites are patrons of local loyalist militias and are likely to channel or be ordered to direct a portion of their profits to these militias. Therefore, the future of Syria's pro-regime militias is inextricably linked with broader questions of reconstruction. Based on the above, there are a number of lessons to be drawn for Western European policy makers.

- *Continue to commit resources to monitoring the development trajectory of loyalist militias in Syria.* In the most likely scenarios, reconstruction actors will encounter loyalist militias in one form or another and therefore should understand their relationship with the Assad regime and calibrate what type of involvement will minimise further straining state-societal relations in Syria.
- *Insist that humanitarian agencies and projects they fund resist any attempt by loyalist militias to profit from reconstruction.* Financial assistance falling into the hands of these militias would provide further grease for the wheels of a corrupt and decrepit political economy. This requires tight local monitoring, a willingness to walk away and an understanding of whether NGOs approved for international cooperation by the Syrian state have ties to pro-regime militias.
- *Uphold clear and morally upstanding criteria for what is considered 'safe and voluntary return'.* This should be done bearing in mind that under the two most likely scenarios the conditions for such return will be structurally violated unless new avenues for transitional justice and accountability open up, which is unlikely.
- *Consider the idea of a traditional disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme in post-conflict Syria a non-starter.* Although it is a widely known peacebuilding practice, it is one that would be impossible to implement in Syria given the differing visions for loyalist militias by the relevant parties in Syria. Moreover, DDR programmes are often under the purview of a UN or international peacekeeping mission, which is unlikely to see the light of day in Syria.
- *Come to terms with Russian and Iranian influence in Syria.* European policymakers ought to acknowledge, in public or in private, Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, including its militia dimension, so that this can be better reflected in their diplomatic relationship management with either country. Entering into a conversation with both countries is essential to limit any negative spillovers of Syria's emergent political order, such as the instability and insecurity that Syria's fragmented militia landscape might create, especially if contributing to the reconstruction of Syria remain a non-starter.

About the Clingendael Institute

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