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The geopolitics of Syria's reconstruction: a case of matryoshka

The supply of, and demand for, the reconstruction of Syria is grossly mismatched in both focus and volume. This essay examines whether Russia, the United States, the European Union, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel are likely to close, maintain or increase this gap. Such an examination helps assess the prospects for Syria's future stability. In the final analysis, the combination of the misaligned global interests of the US (war on terror, anti-Iran) and Russia (re-establishing great power status, keeping Syria on its side) with the regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran makes the reconstruction of Syria hostage to irreconcilable agendas given the country's association with Iran. Potential intermediaries like Turkey and the EU will not engage in countrywide reconstruction at this point. Turkey suffers from domestic turmoil and radical shifts in its foreign policy that have made it partisan and limited in its scope, while the EU's foreign policy indecisiveness has relegated it to the sidelines. Israel was never going to engage directly in Syria's reconstruction but also finds itself without political influence other than the one-trick pony of its regular airstrikes. The result is that the reconstruction of Syria will be fragmented, incomplete and focused on the immediate interests of the regime, Russia and Iran, with attendant negative consequences for the livelihood prospects of many Syrians in the short to medium term. There is an urgent need for detailed scenario-planning that explores the long-term consequences of this state of play – for the Syrian regime, for the Syrian population, for Syria's neighbours and beyond.

Introduction

The war in Syria has easily been the most violent and ruinous internationalised civil war of the 21st century so far.¹ Its estimated

370,000–570,000 casualties, c. 5.6 million refugees and c. 6.6 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), along with its reconstruction bill of over US\$250 billion, underpin this claim,² as do credible narratives

1 This policy brief is a cross-posting of its original publication in a 2019 special issue of the journal 'Syria Studies' of the Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS) at the University of St. Andrews (United Kingdom). I am grateful for the review of this essay by Samar Batrawi (research fellow at Clingendael) and Hamidreza Azizi (assistant professor at Shahid Beheshti University in Iran). Its contents remain the author's own responsibility.

2 Data are taken from <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/>; <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> (accessed 18 March 2019); World Bank Group, *The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria*, Washington DC: WBG, 2017. Note that conflict casualty figures are notoriously unreliable as they are prone to both over- and underreporting.

describing the scale of abuse carried out by the Syrian regime against the country's civilian population.³ While the Assad regime tries to give the impression that normality has returned to large parts of Syria,⁴ it will actually be decades before the wounds created by this conflict have 'healed' in terms of trauma, frayed societal tissue and depleted social capital.

Beyond such appalling carnage and destruction, the Syrian civil war is also highly relevant from a geopolitical perspective. Not only is it a place where both the hope and repression of the Arab Uprisings continue to reverberate, it is also a (proxy) battleground for various regional and global power competitions that have superimposed themselves on the drivers of local conflict. As a result, the conflict's key drivers, as well as the possibilities for its resolution, lie largely outside of Syria. At the diplomatic level, there is the moribund, Syrian-focused Geneva peace process run by the UN and the faster-paced Astana and Sochi peace processes, which are Turkish/Iranian/Russian-operated.⁵ At the military level, there is the largely impotent Syrian Arab Army (SAA) on the one hand, and the Russian air force and

Iran-affiliated forces on the other.⁶ Finally, Syria's location as an intersection between Africa, Europe and Asia and between Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran makes it both a participant in, and victim of, proxy warfare, refugees, radicalism and crime. All of this ensures that any political settlement emerging from its ruins will project a long shadow, commanding ongoing interest from its neighbours.

It is from this perspective that the essay explores how the interests of key foreign state actors in the Syrian conflict will help or hinder the nature, comprehensiveness and speed of reconstruction in those parts of the country under the control of President Assad.⁷ Currently, the supply of and demand for reconstruction are grossly mismatched

3 De Silva, D. et al. (2014), *Report into the credibility of certain evidence with regard to torture and execution of persons incarcerated by the current Syrian regime* ('Caesar report'), London: [online](#) (accessed 30 September 2018).

4 For example, SANA (the Syrian Arab News Agency) reported the 2017 Damascus International Fair to 'have succeeded beyond expectations' to demonstrate that Syria 'is open for business'.

5 While none of these peace processes have so far been conclusive, the contrast between four Geneva conferences on the one hand and eight 'Astana talks' and one conference in Sochi on the other, suggest that the Astana-Sochi track is more active. It is not necessarily more inclusive. Some of its meetings are tripartite consultations between Russia, Iran and Turkey *about* Syria.

6 See for example: Keen, D., *Syria: Playing into their hands*, London: Saferworld, 2017; Vatanka, A., *Iran's use of Shi'i militant proxies*, Washington DC: Middle East Institute, Policy Paper 2018-5, 2018; Steinberg, G., *Die shiitische internationale*, Berlin: SWP, 2018. Also consider, more specifically, the interventions by Hezbollah (2012), Iran (2013), Russia (2015) and support from various Gulf countries (2011/12-2017), as well as interventions by Turkey (2016, 2017 and 2018), France (2016) and the US (2017).

7 The essay considers 'states' in neo-realist fashion. It does not examine different decision-making centres within states but views them as unitary actors. This is an abstraction of reality permissible to the extent that it helps understand the main motivations of the key state protagonists in the Syrian civil war.

in both focus and volume.⁸ A better understanding of the probable role of foreign state actors – in particular the US, Russia, the EU, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel – in decreasing, maintaining or increasing this gap will help assess the prospects for Syria's stability. In terms of closing the gap between supply and demand for reconstruction efforts, foreign state actors can allocate funds directly to Syrian reconstruction in the form of aid and concessional lending, or indirectly by providing incentives for private businesses in their own jurisdictions to engage.

Syria as battlefield of global geopolitics

It is commonplace to view the Syrian conflict at least in part as yet another site of US-Russian contestation, but this risks

fundamental misrepresentation of the situation. After all, the US has not been an effective party to the original Syrian conflict (the uprising against President Assad), and neither does it view Russia as a global peer.⁹ Instead, US interests have largely centred on the defeat of Islamic State (IS) and countering Iran's growing influence in the Middle East.¹⁰ As a consequence, only part of the US vs. Russia framework has analytical usefulness, namely the observation that Russia views and uses the conflict in Syria as part of its strategy to reassert itself as a global power on a par with the US.¹¹

Understanding the 2015 Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict requires a brief examination of the gap that the previous 25 years created between the Kremlin's self-perception as a great power and its treatment as a second-rate power by most Western countries throughout the 1990s and 2000s.¹² NATO security expansion, EU economic expansion and Western political marginalisation of Russia during a period political-economic upheaval and weakness created a nationalist revanchism that was further aggravated by NATO's perceived abuse of UN Security Council Resolution No. 1973 to topple the Libyan regime of Colonel Kaddafi (2011) and the EU's efforts to draw Ukraine firmly into its economic orbit through the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (2014). Throughout the same period, the Kremlin gradually re-established its control over the Russian state apparatus, modernised its military and

8 Simply put, the sums needed for reconstruction are large (upwards of US\$250 billion), Syria's business elite is unable to mobilise this kind of money in the face of current Western sanctions, Syria's international allies (Russia, Iran) are also in all likelihood unable to contribute such resources while Western countries are unwilling to do so. The Gulf countries are an alternative source of funding and have been making tentative moves towards an accommodation with President Assad (e.g. Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates are at various stages of reopening their embassies in Damascus). Yet, the overarching Saudi-Iranian tensions make it unlikely that significant reconstruction finance will be forthcoming soon other than what is needed to normalise relations, or perhaps in economic sectors that are of strategic relevance to the Gulf. On the 'old' and 'new' guard of Syria's business elite see: Rabat, L., *Who will rebuild Syria: Extremely loud and incredibly close*, Modern Diplomacy, [online](#), 2019. On Western attitudes towards reconstruction see: <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/03/17/591288/Syria-reconstruction-US-UK-France-statement> (accessed 18 March 2019). Also consider the 'No Assistance to Assad Act' that is under review in the US Congress and Senate: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/4681> (accessed 18 March 2018). Finally: Batrawi, S. (2018), *Drivers of urban reconstruction in Syria: power, privilege and profit extraction*, The Hague: Clingendael.

9 See: Hamidi, I., 'Syria at a crossroads: 'A peace to end all peace?', *Turkish policy quarterly*, Fall 2017; Van Dam, N., *Destroying a nation: The civil war in Syria*, London: IB Taurus, 2017; Price, B., 'Syria: A wicked problem for all', *CTC Sentinel*, Special Issue, Vol. 6, Issue 8, August 2013; Lo, B., *Russia and the new world disorder*, London: Chatham House, 2015.

10 Alaaldin, R.; Fritz, J., S Heydemann et al, *A 10-degree shift in Syria strategy*, Washington DC: Brookings, 2018; Barnes-Dacey, J., E. Geranmayeh, H. Lovatt, *The Middle East's new battle lines*, London: ECFR, 2018.

11 Lo (2015), *op.cit.*; Rodkiewicz, 'Russia's Middle Eastern Policy: Regional ambitions, global objections', *OSW Studies* No. 71, 2017.

12 *Ibid.*

stabilised its economy through Kremlin-centred crony capitalist networks, heavy reliance on natural resources, and some economic diversification towards Asia.¹³ The result is a new Russian foreign policy assertiveness that pursues two core strategic interests. First, if Russia cares about an issue, it expects to be part of the group of states politically deciding it. Second, it calls the shots in the former Soviet space, albeit on the understanding that old-fashioned, total USSR dominance has been replaced by a more complex and variable web of economic, military and social ties.¹⁴

From this perspective, the Syrian conflict is at least in part a Russian gambit to re-establish its influence as a key player in the great power concert that manages today's multipolarity.¹⁵ It is not necessarily the case that Russia's intervention was proactively planned with such an objective in mind. In fact, it may well have been the immediate threat against its access to the Mediterranean port of Tartus, the imminent overthrow of the Syrian regime as a Russian ally, or even the Iranian request for help that triggered the involvement of Russia's armed forces in 2015. But all of this needs to be seen in the broader context of 'revanchism' and great power re-establishment outlined above. In short, the exact chain and sequence of motivations and actions arguably matters less than the underlying foreign policy outlook.

If this assessment of Russia's Syrian gambit is correct, it makes ensuring the survival of President Assad himself and blocking a more US-oriented resolution of the conflict

mostly a means to an end.¹⁶ Russia's efforts since 2015 to detach Turkey as much as possible from its Western moorings should also be seen as an opportunistic move that both plays into its global agenda and serves to increase its regional room for manoeuvre.¹⁷ While the jury is still out on this last stratagem, it is clear that Ankara has substantially increased its foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis the US on issues such as the purchase of the S-400 air defence system, the Syrian Kurds, and its relations with Iran. The stated objective of Russia's intervention in Syria 'to defeat terrorism' must, on inspection of the evidence, be almost wholly considered an international smokescreen.¹⁸

In the pursuit of its 'real' objectives, Russia has consistently applied an adroit mix of classic foreign policy instruments, i.e. diplomatic pressure (initially via the UN Security Council and later via the Astana/ Sochi peace processes) and high-powered expeditionary military force.¹⁹ This allowed it to notch up two key political results: 1) veto power in determining the progress of the conflict as Syrian regime offensives are not possible without Russian (air) support,

13 Judah, B., *Fragile empire: How Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, New Haven: YUP, 2014; Lo (2015), *op.cit.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 For a broader assessment of Russia's foreign policy objectives in the Middle East, which prominently includes its quest for great power status in its confrontation with the West: Kozhanov, N., *Russian policy across the Middle East: Motivation and methods*, London: Chatham House, 2018.

16 Trenin, D., 'What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East?', in: Popescu, N. and Secieru S., 'Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?', *EU ISS Chaillot papers*, No. 146, July 2018.

17 Rodziejcz (2017), *op.cit.* Note that Turkey-EU relations were already troubled before the Syrian conflict.

18 See for instance: Gaub, F., 'Russia's non-war on Daesh', in: Popescu and Secieru (2018), *op.cit.*; Bellingcat [online](#) reporting on targets of Russian airstrikes (accessed 13 October 2018). While there is a connection in the form of Chechen fighters among Syria's opposition, the Kremlin's effective suppression of militant Islamism in the second Chechen war and Kadyrov's iron fisted rule since indicate that Russia has good domestic control over its 'terrorist challenges', despite the continuation of a low-level insurgency in the northern Caucasus.

19 Kaim, M. and O. Tamminga, 'Russia's military intervention in Syria', *SWP Comment*, No. 48, 2015; Delanoë, I., *What Russia gained from its military intervention in Syria*, *Orient XXI*, 2018, [Online](#) (accessed 13 October 2018). On its sustainability: Secieru, S., 'The real and hidden costs of Russia's foreign policy', *EU ISS Issue Briefs*, No. 2, 2018.

and 2) a new set of pragmatic relations with Turkey, Iran and even Israel that puts Russia at the centre of regional diplomacy and, in consequence, of any conflict resolution framework for the Syrian civil war.

While there is little evidence that Russia's intervention has re-established it in the premier league of great powers, this objective could still be satisfied by it being a key player in delivering an internationally accepted resolution to the Syrian conflict. While it is essential for the sustainability of such a resolution that the reconstruction of Syria is taken in hand, this does not necessarily require a significant contribution from Russia. It would be enough if others pick up the reconstruction bill, and this is an area of focus for Russia at the moment.²⁰ This is because ensuring minimal stability in post-conflict Syria and maintaining a meaningful state-centric model of Russian-Syrian cooperation requires the re-establishment of the Syrian state with at least core capabilities. This, in turn, demands some degree of state-led reconstruction for which external funds are required. Secondly, Western assistance for reconstruction would essentially prove Russia right and confer legitimacy on its intervention by recognising that President Assad was the only option to win the fight against 'terrorism'. It goes without saying that the Syrian-state-to-be-reconstituted would be centralised in nature and revert to its pre-2011 crony capitalist practices, in line with the regime's and Russia's preferences.²¹ Any financial contribution of Russia itself is likely to be limited to Syria's oil and gas industry which, as it happens, is also the only economic sector that can turn a profit in the short term

(regional pipeline politics, in particular, being important).²²

In sum, Russia has an appreciable interest in Syria's reconstruction, provided it is state-led and state-focused. It may be prepared to negotiate with the Syrian regime to extract political concessions that fall short of meaningful change in exchange for financial reconstruction contributions from other countries. It should be kept in mind, however, that Russia's ability to extract such concessions from the regime is limited and likely to decline once the guns fall silent and its use to the Syrian regime decreases.²³

From uninterested to weak: The US, the EU, and the Syrian conflict

The lack of US engagement with the original Syrian conflict, its half-hearted policies, and the complete absence of an effective EU approach to the conflict enabled Russian successes and reduced the West's options for dealing with Syria's reconstruction. Despite having a significant interest in a stable and democratic Syria, the EU is currently relegated to financing a significant part of the cost of hosting Syria's more than 5 million refugees in the region through its compacts while at the same time lacking political influence or even channels of diplomatic communication with

20 See for example Bloomberg [Online](#) on 12 October 2018 (accessed 13 October 2018).

21 Batrawi, S. and N. Grinstead, *Six scenarios for pro-regime militias in 'post-war' Syria*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019; see also: Khatib, L. and L. Sinjab, *Syria's transactional state: How the conflict changed the Syrian state's exercise of power*, London: Chatham House, 2018.

22 In January 2018, President Assad gave Russia the sole rights to oil and gas production in Syria. See: <http://theconversation.com/armed-by-the-kremlin-gazprom-could-be-the-new-force-in-syria-when-the-troops-leave-101492> (accessed 18 March 2019). A sustained presence of Russian energy companies implies, incidentally, a permanent Russian military presence in the form of 'company forces' to protect key facilities. The trouble today is that a number of key oil and gas fields are located in areas occupied by the non-regime-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

23 The extent to which the many pro-regime militias will, or will not, be effectively integrated into the SAA is an important indicator of Russian leverage as such integration is a precondition for re-establishing an effective state and runs counter to Iran's preferences for a more pluriform security sector akin to Lebanon or Iraq. Batrawi and Grinstead (2019), *op.cit.*

the Syrian regime.²⁴ Its sanctions, support for accountability-for-war-crimes initiatives and feeble military actions – such as British and Dutch support for armed opposition groups and French forces active in northern Syria – have meanwhile put it on the regime’s blacklist. That it is not completely without influence is only because of the reconstruction finance it could potentially contribute. Yet, given the Assad regime’s re-entrenchment, which is already underway, and its crony capitalist economic policies from before 2011, it is highly doubtful that a sufficiently fine-grained implementation modality can be found that prevents regime capture of European reconstruction support.²⁵

Successive US-administrations viewed the Syrian conflict predominantly through the prism of the war-on-terror (after 2014) and, later, as a regional conflict involving Iran (especially after January 2017 when President Trump was inaugurated). The war-on-terror frame shifted the US focus from its limited efforts to oppose dictatorship to a military campaign aimed at eliminating IS. While it is not exactly clear what core US security interest IS threatened given its focus on the ‘near enemy’, its presence in Iraq, combined with the entrenched nature of the 9/11 anti-terror paradigm in US political circles, proved sufficient. The US-led coalition has been effective in rolling back IS territorial control, but it has made little progress in addressing its root causes such as Sunni marginalisation in Iraq and dictatorship in Syria.

Paradoxically, the military focus on defeating IS caused the US to provide significant support for the Syrian Kurds,²⁶ with the side effect of facilitating Russia’s efforts to broaden the gap between Turkey and its Western allies (Turkey views the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) as part of the Turkish PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), and considers both terrorist organisations). Despite President Trump’s recent announcement of the complete withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria, the subsequent pushback from the US foreign policy establishment might ensure a continuous US presence in the area after all.²⁷ Yet, as it has become clear that Turkey prioritises perceived regional security threats over its relations with the US and its position in NATO, maintaining even a diminished US-military footprint in northeastern Syria will keep Turkey on edge and nourish its new relationship with Russia. In this sense, US policy towards northeastern Syria was, and remains, stuck between a rock and a hard place. Given the poor state of American-Turkish relations and the current obsession of the US administration with Iran, it is conceivable that the US will continue to engage in reconstruction-like efforts in Syria’s northeast under the guise of ‘stabilisation’. This might even happen in the framework of a deal between Damascus and Syria’s Kurds.²⁸

Meanwhile, US confrontation with Iran intensifies by the day and shows little sign of abating. The scope and intrusiveness of US conditions for re-engagement²⁹ are such that Iran is bound to feel vindicated about its

24 See for example the co-chair’s declaration of the Brussels III Conference on ‘Supporting the future of Syria and the region’, [online](#), 14 March 2019; Uzelac, A., O. Macharis and E. van Veen, *It’s there to stay: A big idea for a better response to Syrian displacement*, The Hague: Clingendael, [online](#), 2019.

25 On the political-economic structure of the Assad regime: Hadidi, S., Z. Majed and F. Mardam-Bey, *Dans la tête de Bachar al-Assad*, Paris: Actes Sud, 2018; for thoughts on how European reconstruction support could be organized: Decina, A., *How should the West play a weak hand in Syria reconstruction?*, War on the Rocks, [online](#), 2019; on continuities and ruptures in regime methods of rule: Khatib and Sinjab (2018), *op.cit.*

26 This mostly concerns the PYD and its associated militias (YPG and YPJ). See also: Van Veen, E., ‘Uit de as herrijzend: Syrië en de Koerdische kwestie [Rising from the ashes: Syria and the Kurdish question]’, *Clingendael Spectator*, Vol. 72, Issue 5, 2018.

27 Commentary abounds on President Trump’s decision. For instance: Pierini, M., *The politics of pandemonium*, Carnegie Diwan, [online](#), 2019.

28 Burcher, E., *Has the US given up on stabilization efforts in Syria?*, Atlantic Council, [online](#), 2018.

29 For instance: Pompeo, M., *After the deal: A new Iran strategy*, Remarks at the Heritage Foundation, 21 May 2018.

intervention in Syria as part of its so-called ‘forward defence’ strategy.³⁰ It is evident that Iran seeks to maintain appreciable strategic influence in Syria via expansion of its economic interests (e.g. transportation, railroads, housing) and by loosely integrating some of the forces it sponsors into Syria’s reconfigured security sector.³¹ These elements would both embody and enable a regional approach that consolidates Iranian influence beyond purely military elements.³²

The US appears to be banking on Syria’s weakness and reconstruction needs further draining Iranian resources. Should this increase the level of protest in Iran about the cost of its foreign policy actions while sanctions start to bite, the US would have achieved one of the aims of its sanctions policy. However, on balance this is unlikely as the growing anti-US stance of the Iranian population is likely to outweigh its dissatisfaction with its leadership’s economic policies. It should also be taken into account that the Iranian security services maintain a firm grip on both society and the economy.³³ It is more likely that Iran will stimulate its

businesses to engage in the reconstruction of Syria on commercial terms rather than providing greater state resources for reconstruction efforts, thus expanding its influence and potentially recouping some of its investments.³⁴ To make this possible, the Iranian government could seek to entice greater Chinese investment in Iran, Iraq and Syria by offering to strengthen the Middle Eastern corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative towards Europe.³⁵ In the medium term, such an approach could help Iran cope with the negative effects of US sanctions although BRI benefits present a double-edged sword to Iran as they would further increase its already significant economic dependence on China.³⁶ Moreover, the growing caution about Chinese investment in Europe might yet throw a spanner in the works by closing parts of the EU market to Chinese business activity.³⁷

Syria as a pawn on the regional political chessboard

It is the combination of the global and regional dimensions of the Syrian conflict that makes it difficult to resolve via international diplomacy. The conflict’s regional dimension centres on Iranian-Saudi competition across the Middle East, including Syria, with Turkey and Israel acting

30 For an excellent analysis of the evolution of Iran’s Syria strategy and its underlying foreign policy interests: Ahmadian, H. and P. Mohseni, ‘Iran’s Syria strategy: The evolution of deterrence’, *International Affairs*, 95:2, 2019; also: International Crisis Group, *Iran’s priorities in a turbulent Middle East*, Brussels: ICG, 2018a.

31 Azizi, H., *Iran eyes major role in Syria via reconstruction*, Al-Monitor, [online](#), 2018; Batrawi and Grinstead (2019), *op.cit.*

32 Azizi, H., *What Rouhani’s visit to Iraq tells us about Iran’s Syria policy*, Al-Monitor, [online](#), 2019.

33 See for instance: Wright, R., *Iran celebrates the revolution’s fortieth anniversary: Twelve blocks from the White House*, The New Yorker, [online](#), 2019. This is not to say there are no risks to stability in Iran, such as the new sense of political agency of Iran’s lower classes acquired through the protests of December 2017/January 2018. On this topic: Khian, A., *La révolte des pauvres ébranle le régime en Iran*, Orient XXI, [online](#), 2018. Yet, several interviews by the author in Tehran in January 2019 suggested that the Iranian government is capable of handling such protests without too much repression and that the middle classes fear the instability that would come with protracted protests.

34 Note that Iran’s leaders were concerned about mission creep from the onset of their involvement in the Syrian conflict, which also makes it less likely for state-funding for Syria’s reconstruction to be forthcoming. ICG (2018a), *op.cit.* Furthermore, many Iranian enterprises have links with its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

35 Azizi (2018), *op.cit.*

36 Shariatinia, M. and H. Azizi, ‘Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, online, 2019.

37 Moreover, in a recent twitter exchange, Hamidreza Azizi (@HamidRezaAz) cogently pointed out that the Chinese government may progress BRI initiatives only in parallel with progress in operationalizing the EU’s Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), presumably to improve international coverage against a predictably hostile US response. In other words, more may ride on the EU’s SPV than is commonly assumed.

as bit players specific to the Syrian theatre. For a brief moment, the regional powers perceived the Syrian conflict through the lens of the Arab Uprisings. It is worth recalling that significant parts of the Iranian foreign policy elite as well as its population initially sympathized with the Syrian opposition in their rebellion against President Assad's autocracy in a situation not dissimilar from their own revolt against the Shah in 1979.³⁸

In contrast, the Saudis' initially supported President Assad as fellow autocrat and out of fear for further revolutionary change in the region. In parallel, the Saudi monarchy had been concerned about growing Iranian dominance in Iraq since 2003. In 2011, these fears were deepened by US 'betrayal' – as perceived by the House of Saud – of common allies such as Egypt's Mubarak and Yemen's Saleh. Once it became clear that the US let events run their course and prioritised its nuclear negotiations with Iran over maintaining the Saudi-led status quo in the Middle East, the initial Saudi framework quickly gave way to one of conservative realpolitik – disguised as sectarian strife.³⁹ The remedy that the Saudi's deployed in response was a much more assertive middle eastern foreign policy.⁴⁰ In Syria, this took the form of supporting a range of moderate and not-so-moderate proxies to overthrow President Assad, who was recast from fellow autocrat into Iranian ally. The evolution of the Syrian battlefield has by now demonstrated the shortcomings of this strategy in the face of direct and large-scale Iranian and Russian support for the Syrian regime.

As far as its involvement in Syria goes, the Saudi monarchy arguably scored a victory at the level of discourse rather than on the battlefield. Caught between accusations that IS derived much of its theological basis from Wahabi religious thought and

global astonishment at the meteoric rise of radical Sunni militancy, the sectarian Sunni vs. Shi'a frame offered the Saudi monarchy a 'get-out-of-jail-free-card' of sorts. By shifting the focus of the conflict towards Iranian hegemonial ambitions, Saudi Arabia superseded discussions about how Sunni militant extremism could have grown so rapidly, relegating the longstanding observation to the background that Shi'a religious tenets and doctrine have seldom been a core driver of either Iranian strategy or extremist violence.⁴¹ As it failed on the battlefield, Saudi strategy shifted from fighting Iran in Syria to bandwagoning with the Trump administration against Iran. Consequentially, it stands to reason that the Saudis have little interest in supporting the reconstruction of Syria.⁴²

While Syria represents one of a number of sites of confrontation with Iran to the Saudis (others include Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain and Qatar), to Iran it is more existential. Its core interests in the Syrian conflict were clear early on, namely retaining a friendly, non-Sunni majority regime in Damascus to keep Syria in the 'resistance' camp and maintaining a direct link with Hezbollah. Preventing the spread of Sunni militant extremism (after 2014) and connecting its different platforms⁴³ of regional influence in Lebanon and Iraq (after 2015) became additional interests in due time. The Iranian government has pursued these interests rigorously and with ample resources – including financial infusions from Iran's Central Bank, the deployment of thousands

38 Ahmadian and Mohseni (2019), *op.cit.*

39 Lynch offers an accessible overview of some key geopolitical and social developments in the Middle East after 2011: Lynch, M., *The new Arab wars: Uprisings and anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

40 Van den Berg, W., *Saudi Arabia's strategic stalemate: What is next?*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2017.

41 Scholars already observed in the 1990s that the 1979 Iranian revolution was influential because of its ideas and ideology rather than the actual export of a Shi'a theology-based governance model via Shi'a populations throughout the region. Esposito, J. (ed.), *The Iranian revolution: Its global impact*, Miami: Florida University Press, 1990.

42 For the purpose of this essay, I assume that the other Gulf States (minus Qatar and Oman) will follow a Saudi lead in terms of their support – or lack thereof – for reconstruction efforts of the Syrian regime.

43 Such as Shi'a political parties and militias in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as Iran's relationship with the Kurdish PUK.

of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel, and the mobilisation and deployment of Shi'a militias from Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴⁴ Iran's interests in Syria have a high intensity preference, which results from at least three sources:

- The 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war still influences the collective views of much of the Iranian leadership since many current members lived through that war. While the war may have been instrumental in cementing conservative clerical power at home, it also brought about vast destruction and, ultimately, humiliation. Iran had to accept the pre-existing status quo after a costly war initiated by an Iraq supported by much of the West and the Gulf.⁴⁵ Preventing its recurrence puts a premium on securing the neighbourhood as best as possible, including Syria.
- The US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) provided windows of opportunity for Iran to expand its influence in both countries as much as they produced clear warning signs that US invasion in the context of the 'axis of evil' or the 'war on terror' was not just a hypothetical possibility. Iraq's descent into chaos after 2003 and 2014 offered Iran the chance to establish a more contiguous area of influence stretching from Lebanon to Iran.⁴⁶

44 Steinberg guesstimates a presence of 1,000–4,000 ICRG advisers, special forces and commanders in the Syrian conflict theatre. Alaaldin *et al.* estimate there are 10,000–35,000 fighters in transnational, Iran-sponsored armed groups with Hezbollah contributing another 7,000–10,000 fighters. See: Alaaldin, R. *et al.*, *A 10-degree shift in Syria strategy*, Washington DC: Brookings Policy Brief, 2018; Steinberg (2018), *op.cit.*

45 Razoux, P., *The Iran–Iraq war*, Belknap Press: Cambridge, 2015. Incidentally, the IRGC's Quds force was founded in the Iran–Iraq war to support the Kurdish Peshmerga in their fight against Hussein's regime.

46 Ironically, in terms of Iranian political influence in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, it makes more sense to speak of a Shi'a crescent today than it did in 2004 when the notion was coined and made sense only in relation to demographic realities.

- The recent hostile US, Israeli and Saudi rhetoric against Tehran will have encouraged Iranian steadfastness in Syria as it re-imprints the 'war on terror's' regime change logic on the minds of Iran's leadership.⁴⁷ The US's recent cancellation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will have further bolstered Iranian resolve to keep any fight as far away from its frontiers as possible, despite any possible misgivings in Iranian foreign policy circles about its own role in Syria.⁴⁸

Although the Syrian regime faltered towards the end of 2014, despite Iranian support, Russia's intervention soon tilted the balance back in Tehran's favour and it has since steadily increased its influence in Syria. Yet, while Russia appears keen to re-establish at least the core capabilities of the Syrian state, it is widely inferred that Iran – building on its practices in Lebanon and Iraq – prefers to create a more hybrid arrangement that includes parastatal organisations, militias, population centres and even governance institutions that

47 The common argument that Iran deploys a resource-light, forward-defence concept because of its comparatively poor conventional warfare capabilities must be caveated. While Iranian MILEX pales compared with the Gulf, the latter's armies have traditionally been 'procurement armies' that exist to seal international alliances, not to be deployed on the battlefield. Moreover, while formidable, the Israeli Defense Force is too small and alien to the region to engage Iran in a sustained conventional war beyond Israel's immediate border areas. In short, US military capabilities in the region are the key that makes or unmakes the argument. See: Roberts, D., *The Gulf monarchies' armed forces at the crossroads*, Paris: IFRI, 2018. For a more in-depth assessment of Iran's deterrence strategy: Ahmadian and Mohseni (2019), *op.cit.*

48 ICG (2018a), *op.cit.*; several interviews by the author with Iranian policy makers in Tehran in January 2019 showed good awareness of the reputational cost Iran has incurred in the Arab world by supporting the brutality and violence of President Assad's regime. This was generally seen as the regrettable price for keeping Syria in the 'resistance camp'.

are loosely associated with the state.⁴⁹ This would create a lever of influence additional to its formal and cordial relations with the Syrian regime.⁵⁰

Such an approach to ‘reconstruction’ must, however, balance two trade-offs. First, it will not match the preferences of the Syrian regime (or those of Russia, for that matter). The Syrian regime may have to tolerate it in the short term due to its own weakness but, given its memories and practices of pre-2011 control, it will not necessarily accept it in the long term. Despite its vastly reduced military and economic capabilities, the regime is not without agency. Seen from this perspective, cleverly designed external support for reconstruction via the Syrian state could actually increase its longer-term independence from Iran. Second, however much Iran might wish, it will struggle to maintain a sizeable non-military parallel sphere in a Sunni-dominated country.

In brief, the Iranian view on the reconstruction of Syria deviates significantly from the standard, state-centred approach of the international community or, for that matter, the preferences of the Syrian regime. While Iran’s approach has its limitations, establishing selected centres of social control/influence in towns like Qusair or around the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine, as well as maintaining a security sector-based insurance policy by retaining direct lines of command to a number of militia forces, are within its reach.

The bit-players of the Syrian conflict: Turkey and Israel

Turkish interests in the Syrian civil war narrowed considerably between 2012 and 2018 – from the overthrow of President Assad to reducing the territorial gains and

self-rule of Syria’s Kurds.⁵¹ The concern of the Turkish elite about the rise of Syria’s Kurds must primarily be considered in the context of its own unresolved Kurdish question, which Turkey has traditionally viewed through an unvarnished lens of narrowly-defined nationalism and assimilation.⁵² But Turkey’s anti-Kurdish focus across Turkey, Syria and Iraq (excepting the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) will also persist because it serves as a useful deflector away from its domestic economic turmoil and poor relations with the US and EU.

For the purpose of this essay, three observations on Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian civil war matter. First, the Turkish occupation of Afrin, Jarablus, Al-Bab and adjacent areas – which was initially seen as a temporary measure to prevent and undo the creation of a Kurdish-dominated Turkish-Syrian border area – is starting to show signs of permanence in terms of reconstruction, military presence and a cross-border link being established.⁵³ Second, the failure of Turkey’s anti-Assad strategy, coupled with its occupation of Syrian territory, has put it on a future collision course with the Syrian regime. Interestingly, Russia greenlighted Turkish military moves against the wishes of both the Syrian regime and Iran, presumably with the intention of enhancing its own leverage vis-à-vis both actors. Third, Turkish companies are well placed to benefit commercially from engaging in Syria’s reconstruction – especially in the Aleppo area – due to the large Syrian diaspora on Turkish territory and its geographic proximity.⁵⁴

On balance, this suggests that Turkey might engage more deeply in reconstruction of

49 Batrawi and Grinstead (2019), *op.cit.*; ICG (2018a), *op.cit.*

50 For example: Mohseni, P. and H. Ahmadian, *What Iran really wants in Syria*, Foreign Policy, 10 May 2018, Online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/10/what-iran-really-wants-in-syria/> (accessed 14 October 2018).

51 Van Veen, E. and E. Yüksel, *Too big for its boots, Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East 2002-2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

52 Gunes, C. and R. Lowe, *The impact of the Syrian war on Kurdish politics across the Middle East*, London: Chatham House, 2015.

53 See for example: Tastekin, F., *Turkey wants its share of Syria’s reconstruction*, *Al-Monitor*, 15 August 2018 (accessed 15 October 2018).

54 Turkey was also the main economic beneficiary of the Iran-Iraq war. See: Razoux (2015), *op.cit.*

the parts of Syria it currently occupies as a hedge against the Syrian Kurds, as long as it can maintain these areas as part of its own sphere of influence. For example, it is imaginable that its Syrian proxies will loosely integrate with the SAA to police the area but retain substantial Turkish links. To this effect, it could come to a practical arrangement with the Syrian regime that also includes support for reconstruction in regime-held areas as long as this involves Turkish companies. Given the antipathy between Assad and Erdogan, this may require a Russian-mediated deal that also resolves the Idlib question and engages Turkey in efforts to remove the US military presence from northeastern Syria altogether.

As to Israel, its initial stance of benign neglect towards the Syrian civil war under the motto ‘where two dogs fight over a bone...’ has boomeranged now that it is faced with the specter of increasing Iranian influence and permanent, Iran-linked military installations on Syrian soil. While this has significantly raised the stakes for Israel, the country has little leverage over the politics of the Syrian civil war other than the airstrikes it regularly executes against SAA, Hezbollah and Iran-affiliated forces. Although it used to conduct these with impunity, the IL-20M incident on 18 September 2018, subsequent Russian rhetoric and Russia’s deployment of several S-300 missile batteries to the benefit of the SAA have made their continuation somewhat more delicate.⁵⁵ Despite Russian cooperation with Israel to remove Iran-affiliated forces from the direct vicinity of the Syrian-Israeli border area, the ongoing process of integration of foreign and domestic pro-regime militias into the SAA could easily muddle the waters for Israeli strike planners in the near future.

Should Iran try to restart its earlier efforts to establish a military presence in southwestern Syria, it would put itself on a dangerous collision course with Israel, and perhaps even Russia. Yet, because this scenario does not serve the Iranian short-term interest of consolidating its influence in Syria, it is more likely that the informal buffer zone already in place in the southwest will be maintained to defuse the situation – for now.⁵⁶ Alternatively, should Israel decide to launch an all-out air campaign against Iranian military assets across Syria, the risks of confrontation with Iran, as well as with Russia, would increase. Its recent strike patterns do not, however, support this scenario as they are concentrated on the Damascus area and military research facilities in western Syria.⁵⁷ A mutually tolerated stalemate with a respectful distance between them is the more likely future for SAA-embedded Iranian militia forces and their Israeli Defense Forces counterparts.

Overall, it is plausible to assume that Israel will diplomatically and discretely support Russia’s efforts to enable the re-establishment of the Syrian central state through state-led reconstruction efforts to counter Iranian influence while maintaining its airstrike policy as long as it can.

Implications for reconstruction

This essay has addressed the question of how the interests of key foreign state actors in the Syrian conflict will help or hinder reconstruction of those parts of the country under the control of President Assad. Its key findings and insights are summarised below.

55 Suchov, M., *Is Russia’s S-300 delivery to Syria a gamechanger?*, [Al-Monitor](#), 10 October 2018 (accessed 15 October 2018). Israel carried out roughly half as many air strikes in Syria in the six months after the IL-20M incident as in the six before (~20 vs 40). There was a two month absence of attacks after the IL-20M incident, but strikes picked up in recent months. The targets have been pretty much the same: SAA, Iran-affiliated and Hezbollah forces. Source: Email exchange with an ACLED researcher on 20 March 2019.

56 International Crisis Group, *Israel, Hezbollah and Iran: Preventing another war in Syria*, Brussels: ICG, 2018b; Ahmadian and Mohseni (2019), *op.cit.*

57 Murciano, G., Preventing a spillover of the Iran-Israel conflict in Syria, *SWP Comment*, No. 27, 2018; Anderson, S. and Muaz, A., *Israeli strikes in Syria: Calculated messages to the regime and its allies*, ACLED, [Online](#) (accessed 15 October 2018).

Table 1: Overview of key interests of selected foreign state actors in the Syrian conflict and their implications for reconstruction efforts in Assad-held areas

State actor	Key current interests in the Syrian conflict	Preference intensity in Syria	Assets deployed in Syria*	Leverage on course of conflict	Likely implications for reconstruction support
US	Eliminating IS	Moderate	Low	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – May support reconstruction framed as ‘stabilisation’ in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria – Refrains from all other reconstruction
	Weakening Iran	Moderate			
Russia	Reasserting itself as a global power	High	High	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strives for internationally accepted conflict resolution – Lobbies others to support ‘minimum reconstruction’ of Syrian state – Seeks commercial benefit
	Re-establishing a friendly Syrian state	High			
	Unmooring Turkey from the West	Low			
EU	Bringing a political transition about	Moderate	Nil	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No reconstruction support unless the elusive political transition occurs – Focus by necessity on regional refugee situation – Weakening Iran is not a consideration
Saudi Arabia	Overthrow of Assad as ally of Iran	High	Low	Low	None likely to be forthcoming beyond bare minimum required for normalisation of relations
Iran	Retaining a friendly regime	High	High	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Support for ‘minimum reconstruction’ of Syrian regime – Reconstruction of a quasi-autonomous sphere of influence
	Establishing a parallel sphere of influence	High			
	Connecting its areas of influence in the Middle East	Moderate			
Turkey	Undoing Kurdish autonomy gains	High	Moderate	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reconstruction of occupied bits of northern Syria to establish a zone of influence – May seek commercial benefit
Israel	Rollback of Iran-linked military presence	High	Moderate	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No direct reconstruction support – May discretely support Russian fundraising efforts as part of its anti-Iran strategy

* Excluding humanitarian aid and related efforts.

Based on Table 1, a few initial answers to the main question of the essay can be outlined:

First, if the current military balance and presence of forces persist without a negotiated diplomatic breakthrough, Syria’s reconstruction is likely to be territorially fragmented, limited in nature and driven by Iran-Russia-Assad, Turkey and the US in their respective areas of influence. Iran will work closely with the Syrian regime and Russia although significant tensions will continue to exist between these three

actors.⁵⁸ Turkey may also work with Russia to some extent.

58 Such tensions are for example analyzed and explored in: Hatahet, S., *Russia and Iran: Economic influence in Syria*, London: Chatham House, 2019; Khatib and Sinjab (2018), *op.cit.* For a longer-term analysis beyond the Syrian conflict: Zandi, D. (ed.), *Dynamics of Iran-Russia relations: Changing regional and international scenes and the necessity of cooperation*, IRS papers # 1/96, 2017.

Second, reconstruction of regime-held areas of Syria is likely to be protracted and partial as the demand for infrastructure, housing, education and governance will outstrip the supply of available funds for the foreseeable future. This observation will hold as long as the US, EU, key European countries and Gulf countries maintain their current policies towards the Syrian regime, which they are likely to do for the time being.

Third, should any of the preceding actors change policy, support for reconstruction will be implemented in a politically contentious and commercially profiteering environment characterised by crony capitalism and nepotism in which Iranian, Russian and Syrian interests compete to influence the shape, focus and functions of the Syrian state as it is re-established.

In the final analysis, the combination of the misaligned global interests of the US (war on terror, anti-Iran) and Russia (re-establishing great power status, keeping Syria on its side) with the regional conflict between Saudi

Arabia and Iran makes the reconstruction of Syria hostage to irreconcilable agendas given the country's association with Iran. Potential intermediaries such as Turkey and the EU will not engage in countrywide reconstruction at this point. Turkey suffers from domestic turmoil and radical shifts in its foreign policy that have made it partisan and limited in its scope, while the EU's foreign policy indecisiveness has relegated it to the sidelines. Israel was never going to engage directly in Syria's reconstruction but also finds itself without political influence other than the one-trick pony of its regular airstrikes.

There is an urgent need for detailed scenario-planning that explores the long-term consequences of the fragmented, incremental and limited reconstruction that will result from the above state of play for the Syrian regime, the Syrian population, Syria's neighbours and beyond.

About the Clingendael Institute

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