

A new conflict management strategy for Syria

Creating a Safe, Calm and Neutral Environment

CRU Report

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Summary

The search for peace in Syria faces a deep crisis. The battlefield has reached a stalemate, the Constitutional Committee never emerged from its cul-de-sac, and the UN's 'step-for-step' approach suffers from flawed conceptual underpinnings as well as a lukewarm reception. Meanwhile, Syria remains divided into three areas that risk drifting further apart amid deteriorating humanitarian conditions. This reality on the ground should serve as a marker for recalibrating Western policy on Syria beyond the current focus on sanctions, accountability, and humanitarian aid.

Western policy makers – mostly those from the US, European Union and Turkey – must base a much-needed new conflict management strategy on three 'ground truths': 1) the conflict is largely frozen and Syria is likely to remain divided into competing areas of control that are supported, or overseen, by external powers for the foreseeable future; 2) questions of national legitimacy and power sharing are not currently solvable and must be temporarily put on the back burner; c) diplomatic efforts to stabilise Syria and prevent partition are likely to be more effective when they focus on restoring practical connectivity between the different areas of control in terms of flows of people, goods and trade/aid/investment, as well as education.

Such a strategy can take shape by operationalising the UN-sanctioned concept of a 'safe, calm and neutral environment' (SCNE) via a clear set of principles for engagement, a detailed stakeholder/interest mapping of the various conflict parties, and a focus on pragmatic measures to improve daily conditions. The objective of such a strategy is to enable a durable return to relatively normal life for Syrians still living in the country, and to create linkages between the country's war-torn parts that can open windows of opportunity in the longer term for a political process reflecting the intention of UNSCR 2254.

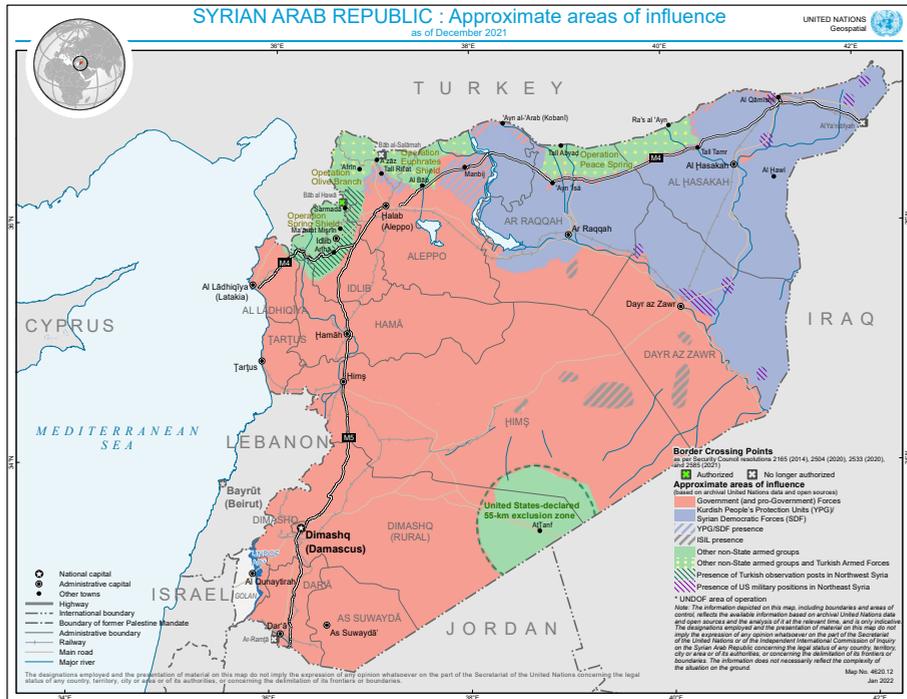
Introduction

The search for peace in Syria is in deep crisis. The decade-long UN-led negotiation process, which was originally designed as a multilayered approach to facilitate a political transition, has been reduced to a single dimension. That dimension, the Constitutional Committee,¹ is made up of Syrian regime, opposition and civil society representatives who have held eight fruitless rounds of talks since 2019 to draft a new constitution.² The process has reached a dead end because President Bashar al-Assad and his backers, who consider themselves the war's victors, do not see any need to compromise and because the negotiations in Geneva no longer bear any reality to events on the ground. However, since the Russian-backed Astana process has also ground to a halt, there are currently no alternative negotiation tracks.³ Diplomatically, the search for peace in Syria is deadlocked.

The diplomatic stasis in Geneva is mirrored on the battlefield. The Turkish-Russian ceasefire signed in March 2020⁴ in large part stabilised the conflict, although sporadic clashes persist. But Syria is now divided into three distinct areas: the Russia- and Iran-backed Assad regime controls 60 per cent of the country's territory and population; the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)/ Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) controls 30 per cent of the territory and 15 per cent of its population, and the Turkey-backed opposition (Syrian National Army (SNA)/Syrian Interim Government (SIG)) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)/ Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) control the remaining 10 per cent of the territory

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- 1 We would like to thank Dara Conduit (University of Melbourne) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) for their constructive review of this paper. Its contents naturally remain our own responsibility.
 - 2 For background on the Constitutional Committee, see: Hauch, L., *Syria's Constitutional Committee in Review*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.
 - 3 In January 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran came together for a summit in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), the capital of Kazakhstan, marking the start of the Astana process. Building on the negotiations about the withdrawal of armed opposition groups from besieged East Aleppo, the three governments met to discuss a nationwide ceasefire they had declared on 28 December 2016. Despite the UN Security Council endorsing the Astana process as an important contribution to peace efforts, in many respects Astana competed with Geneva as the main venue for diplomacy on the Syrian conflict. After facilitating a number of important ceasefires, land swaps and prisoner exchanges, the Astana process had run out of steam by early-2021, principally because Russia and Turkey reached the limits of what they could agree on.
 - 4 See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/12/turkey-says-idlib-ceasefire-details-largely-agreed-on-with-russia> (accessed 8 May 2022).

and 25 per cent of its population.⁵ None of the conflict parties can conduct major military operations without risking defeat or a major regional, or even international, conflagration. As such, the conflict is frozen at the macro level.⁶



Source: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

While there are few serious prospects for overall change in Syria in the near to medium term, the conflict continues to evolve within the different areas of control in terms of the power relations between competing foreign and armed group interests. This paradox of national conflict stalemate and local conflict evolution represents a new reality that should act as a rallying point to recalibrate Western policy on Syria. If Brussels and

5 Hashem, A., *Variables of Demographic Identity and How they Affect the Social Fabric, Property Rights and the Return of Refugees*, The Day After Association, 2021, p.28.

6 This status quo is susceptible to external pressures, such as the fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Turkish domestic politics that recently saw the renewal of threats of further incursion into northern Syria. Nevertheless, at this moment in time, a major change in the balance of power seems unlikely. See: Lund, A., *Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2018, (accessed 4 April 2022), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4640--SE>.

Washington maintain their present approach of isolating and sanctioning Assad-held Syria while leaving the different areas of north and east Syria to their own devices, they risk enabling the country's long-term partition, as well as short-term humanitarian emergencies and growing warlordism in the local war economies. Both of these outcomes run counter to EU and US stated policy objectives.

It is therefore imperative that Western policy makers consider a new conflict management strategy. This strategy must first put currently unsolvable questions of national legitimacy and power sharing on the back burner to focus on more practical issues that can be addressed productively and centre on improving the lives and prospects of Syrian civilians trapped in a frozen conflict. This can be accomplished through meaningful Western support for the development of northern and eastern Syria, beginning with the restoration of the flow of people, education, goods and trade/aid/investment across Syria's three areas. This report outlines the contours of such a conflict management strategy based on the concept of a safe, calm and neutral environment (SCNE).

Box 1 The UN is clutching at the final straw

Since 2020, the UN Special Envoy for Syria – Geir Pedersen – has been trying to break the diplomatic deadlock by exploring ‘how a broader political process beyond the Constitutional Committee could be constructed’⁷ based on a reciprocal set of concessions between the US and Russia. This so-called ‘step-for-step’ approach has yet to be clearly spelled out, although a European diplomat described it as a ‘bazaar’, referring to a lack of clear parameters that define the nature and scope of any concessions.⁸ The Syrian Negotiation Commission, the UN-recognised opposition body that represents the opposition in UN talks, has rejected the initiative based on concerns that the regime would be offered structural concessions such as sanctions relief, in return for one-off gestures such as the release of small groups of political detainees or engaging half-heartedly in the Constitutional Committee process.⁹ Although it has gained little momentum, the step-for-step approach is likely to live on if no alternatives

7 See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/united-nations-special-envoy-syria-geir-o-pedersen-briefing-security-11> (accessed 29 March 2022).

8 Interview with EU diplomat, 13 January 2022. In a similar fashion, representatives of the EU, the League of Arab States, the US and Turkey did not voice open support for the step-for-step initiative in a joint statement on 3 March 2022, but instead said only that they ‘took note’ of it. See: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-syria-special-envoy-meeting/> (accessed: 22 March 2022).

9 <https://syrianobserver.com/news/73394/syrian-opposition-rejects-pedersens-step-for-step-approach.html> (accessed 6 April 2022)

are introduced.¹⁰ Russia's invasion of Ukraine has worsened the prospects for 'step-for-step' diplomacy, which relies heavily on trust and understanding between Moscow and Washington – something that is currently in scarce supply.¹¹ The poor performance of the Constitutional Committee process,¹² together with lackluster support for the step-for-step approach,¹³ underscores one of the UN's weaknesses: its inability to devise a meaningful and pragmatic conflict management mechanism. Indeed, in some ways the UN has been given an impossible task of facilitating a peace process without leverage at a time when the Security Council is deadlocked.

10 One Arab diplomat described 'steps-for-step' as a 'zombie initiative that won't die until someone kills it'. Interview with Arab diplomat, 19 April 2022.

11 For example, a European External Action Service (EEAS) diplomat noted that progress on step-for-step diplomacy is unlikely considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the Clingendael event 'Stabilizing northern Syria: Try for a pragmatic & gradual approach' on 3 May 2022.

12 Due to political and legal obstacles, the Constitutional Committee will not be able to produce an amended constitution that can serve as a positive milestone for negotiations. Even though it was aware of that fact early on, the UN nevertheless proceeded with the Committee, hoping that it could become a forum for dialogue capable of producing fresh ideas. This hope has not yet materialised.

13 Except for the UK and the EU, which have voiced open support for step-for-step, the rest of the Syria Small Group members are quietly doubtful that the approach will work. Few governments have voiced open criticism though for fear of being accused of undermining the UN process.

Mitigating the risk of drifting from division to partition

Normalisation with the Assad regime continues to be broadly off-limits for major stakeholders like the US, the EU and some members of the Arab League,¹⁴ but cracks in this consensus have nevertheless emerged. The battlefield stalemate, shifts in regional priorities, perceived US disengagement from the region and Assad's stubborn grip on power have caused some Arab capitals to pursue a cautious re-accommodation with Damascus. This was illustrated most recently by Assad's trip to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where he was welcomed by the Emirates' Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum and Abu Dhabi's then-Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan.¹⁵ Although tangible outcomes, such as the Egypt-to-Lebanon gas deal,¹⁶ remain elusive, Damascus is likely to see such developments as proof that its isolation has a regional expiry date that will eventually both supersede Western demands and the provisions of UNSCR 2254. Indeed, obstinance has proved a useful principle for Assad and his regime in repressing a domestic uprising and fighting an internationalised civil war. But it is less suited to generating stability and development in a conflict frozen at the macro level. Ultimately, obstinance will not enable Assad to reunify Syria or help him address the economic problems that loom large for many Syrians.

Economic and humanitarian hardship¹⁷ in Syria are linked to the country's territorial division. The separation of the three main areas of control aggravates an already profound socioeconomic crisis by fragmenting the resources, trade flows and initiatives

14 See: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2517416> (accessed 19 March 2022).

15 See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-60804050> (accessed 19 March 2022).

16 Announced in August 2021, the plan foresees natural gas to flow from Egypt to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria as well as additional gas flows to Syria and Jordan for electricity production and export to Lebanon. The plan was signed in June 2022. However, US sanctions waivers had not been solved at the time of writing yet. See: <https://syrianobserver.com/news/76185/recap-egypt-syria-and-lebanon-sign-gas-transfer-deal.html> (accessed 28 June 2022.)

17 60 per cent of Syrians are food insecure and 90 per cent live below the poverty line. These figures are likely to increase. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/joint-statement-occasion-world-food-day-and-syria-crisis-enar> and <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2021-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-march-2021-enar> (both accessed 1 June 2022).

that could help reduce it.¹⁸ In turn, the crisis further solidifies existing divisions because people are forced to turn to the limited services and governance provided by the patchwork of state/semi-state/non-state armed groups present in the places where they live, which reinforces the control of such forces. This dynamic risks turning the de facto division of Syria into a permanent partition, a situation that is seemingly in nobody's interest given that maintaining Syria's unity and territorial integrity is one of the few issues on which all conflict stakeholders agree.

In other words, there is a strong political (preventing permanent partition), diplomatic (developing pathways for conflict resolution) and humanitarian (better crisis response) case for prioritising a practical and more local conflict management strategy over a normative and national one. Big-ticket items of identity, national legitimacy and power sharing can be put on the back burner for now: they are important, but not urgent and, anyhow, not resolvable at present. Instead, a practical strategy can structurally alleviate the desperate humanitarian situation in northern Syria, durably improve livelihood prospects, and prevent a further slide towards permanent partition.

The key to a new pragmatic conflict management strategy lies in enabling the movement of aid, goods and people across internal borders in a regulated manner that allows for volume growth, greater transparency in the distribution of revenues, more predictability, and simple collaborative practices between different (armed) groups and parties. It can be designed in a manner that is in the interest of all conflict parties and their backers (see Table 1 below).

Until now, crossline activities have taken place largely in the shadows because they are politically delicate for the warring sides. Any form of engagement with 'the other' runs counter to predominant friend-foe patterns and the public rhetoric of those in power. But, of course, such activities already exist and crossline trade constitutes an integral element of the war economy.¹⁹ In its current form, however, crossline trade tends to benefit only those who control frontlines, internal border crossings and smuggling points. Trade volumes and efficiency are constrained by the same dynamics of control that inflate prices for consumers and make doing business a preserve of those 'connected' to armed actors.

18 Areas of control in north and northwest Syria have for instance phased out the Syrian lira and instead adopted the Turkish lira as the medium of exchange. In the northeast, a similar process has occurred with the 'dollarisation' of the local economy. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/cash-crash-syria-s-economic-collapse-and-fragmentation-state-july-2020> (accessed 10 June 2022).

19 See: Hatahet, S., Aldassouky, A., *Competition, collusion and smuggling: Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq*, Policy Briefs, 2022/16, Middle East Directions (MED), Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria.

Take for instance the HTS-affiliated Watad fuel company, which in June 2019 made US\$1.67m in net profit selling petrol to consumers in Idlib.²⁰ Imports from Turkey provide part of what it sells, the rest comes from crude oil purchased from SDF-controlled oil wells in the northeast. On 22 January 2022, it was reported that representatives of Watad met with SDF officials at the Um Julud crossing near Manbij to discuss importing 600 tonnes of crude oil per day at a price of US\$120,000.²¹ A logistics company affiliated with the Levant Front, the SNA group acting as middleman, will ensure smooth transit through the Euphrates Shield area,²² for which it will be paid US\$500,000 per month. All sides publicly deny the existence of such a deal, but it was nevertheless confirmed by an HTS security source.²³

Trade relations like this demonstrate that conflict parties can cooperate if the expected pay-off is high enough.²⁴ But, due to political sensitivities, corruption and the vagaries of the war economy, such deals are shrouded in secrecy and hidden in layers of middlemen who raise costs and pass prices on to consumers, aid agencies or businesses. It also means that the price of fuel in Idlib is high compared with the regime-held areas or even SNA-controlled northern Aleppo.²⁵ The regime moreover regularly conducts aerial attacks on such crossline trade, most recently in February 2022, which resulted in the destruction of a Watad fuel storage facility west of Aleppo city.²⁶ Such attacks underscore the need for deals that all conflict parties feel serve their interests. In addition to meeting the 'self-interest test' of conflict parties, such deals require negotiation and enforcement mechanisms that are guaranteed by external stakeholders. It is also important that neither the content nor the scope of such deals should undermine UNSCR 2254 as basis for a future political settlement. Bringing deals out into the open through transparent discussions on crossline movement would facilitate greater international scrutiny and would also give civilians on the ground access to information on decisions that affect their livelihoods.

20 See: <https://opc.center/the-economics-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham/> (accessed 5 April 2022).

21 See: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/544059> (accessed 4 April 2022).

22 The Euphrates Shield area is a roughly 30km deep enclave in northern Aleppo province that stretches from the towns of Azaz in the west to Jarablus in the east. It was carved out in the 2016– 2017 Turkish Armed Forces-led military operation against ISIS and the SDF that was fought on the ground largely by the SNA. The SNA is made up of Free Syrian Army factions that had in the past received military support from the US. The Levant Front is one of the most powerful and business savvy SNA groups in the Euphrates Shield area.

23 Interview with a member of HTS's security apparatus, 8 April 2022.

24 Tokmajyan, A. and Khaddour, K., *The reshaping of the Syrian-Turkish borderlands*. Carnegie Middle East Center, 2022.

25 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/protests-break-out-syrian-city-controlled-jihadist-faction> (accessed 9 May 2022).

26 See: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-civilians-killed-attack-oil-company-restore-north-west> (accessed 6 April 2022).

Box 2 A Safe, Calm and Neutral Environment – What does it mean?

Gradually achieving a safe, calm neutral environment requires operationalisation of the concept. The following definitions serve to lay out the concept's constituent elements while leaving room for discussion.

'A safe environment': As a minimal condition, people must be free from physical harm and undue threats from military, intelligence and security actors. Operationalisation: Progress can be measured through the monitoring of military attacks, security operations, casualty reports and human rights violations.

'A calm environment': A situation in which the basic condition of safety is met and food security, access to adequate shelter and health care are guaranteed to a degree that allows people to settle and lead 'normal' lives. Operationalisation: Progress can be measured through the analysis of data on food security/housing/health, as well as data on home construction and the return of refugees and IDPs.

'A neutral environment': Neutrality refers to the impartial treatment of people by authorities and any stakeholders that have a role in providing and granting access to basic needs. Operationalisation: Progress can be measured through the analysis of access to and distribution of resources, primarily aid.

Developing a new conflict management strategy

The call for a ‘safe, calm and neutral environment’ (SCNE) has its roots in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012 and UNSCR 2254 of 2015, the latter of which endows the notion with a degree of international legitimacy. However, to this day, SCNE has not been conceptualised by the UN.²⁷ The twin merit of using SCNE²⁸ as the basis for a new conflict management strategy is first that it acknowledges UNSCR 2254 as the *most internationally legitimate* formula for the future reunification of Syria by reconfiguring and upgrading national governance under a new constitution, and second that it recognises that this formula is not feasible at present.

The SCNE agenda is therefore a framework that acknowledges the current reality of Syria’s de facto division, but attempts to develop pragmatic arrangements concerning security, trade and travel that can initiate a transition period ahead of ‘final status’ negotiations that reunify Syria under a reformed government as envisaged in UNSCR 2254. Stimulating crossline aid, trade and movement can advance UNSCR 2254 if it operates from clear normative parameters such as those outlined in Box 3 below.

27 The call for a safe, calm and neutral environment as a necessity for a political transition was made in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012 and confirmed by UNSCR 2254, which reiterated the need for the Communiqué’s full implementation. According to the then UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, it was again confirmed in November 2017 at the sidelines of a US-Russian meeting in Da Nang, where both presidents recognised that ‘a constitutional reform and UN-supervised elections in a safe, calm and neutral environment opens the way to concretely implement resolution 2254’. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/briefing-security-council-staffan-de-mistura-united-nations-special> (accessed 22 March 2022).

28 Work on the conceptualisation of SCNE was undertaken in December 2020–November 2021 as part of a Track 1.5 project implemented by International Alert and CMS. See: <https://www.international-alert.org/blogs/creating-safe-calm-and-neutral-environment-step-path-inclusive-peacebuilding-syria/>.

Box 3 Principles for working towards a Safe, Calm and Neutral Environment

Syrian negotiated, externally guaranteed, UN endorsed. While guarantees by external stakeholders are required, and the endorsement of the UN is crucial, crossline deals should be negotiated between Syrian parties in direct talks. The experience of the Astana process has shown the limitations of agreements that are negotiated between external actors without the meaningful participations of Syrian parties that have their own interests and red lines. Despite its deficiencies, however, the Astana format can serve as a basis for a wider, UN-endorsed process that includes the US and EU. A precedent already exists: the UN's Constitutional Committee was born out of the Russia-sponsored 2018 Sochi conference.

De-link practical issues from big ticket items. The mechanism for negotiating pragmatic deals to improve ground conditions should not be tied to the Constitutional Committee or any other negotiating format where questions of national legitimacy, state identity, power sharing and other highly contentious 'big ticket items' are discussed. Doing so risks conflation between practical concessions and those of high principle.

Like-for-like. While an improvement in ground conditions will involve negotiations between Syrian parties and their regional/international backers, these negotiations should not become an arena for trading concessions on issues that are not comparable. Structural concessions like sanctions relief should not be traded for one-off gestures or token concessions. Instead, baskets of issues should be identified (e.g. re-opening highways, facilitating trade, agricultural exchange, civilian travel) and discussed on their own merits.

Inclusivity and parity. Because of the pragmatic nature of the deals sought, no state or group should be excluded from negotiations, regardless of mutual perceptions. Without this principle, agreements will be inequitable and unlikely to last. Any negotiation mechanism should also assume parity between all sides, including HTS and the SDF. This will go some way towards resolving chronic deficiencies in the current UN-led political process on questions of integrating non-state actors in a future peace process.

Technical proposals first, political agreement later. The starting point of SCNE negotiations should be the initiation of technical talks to identify baskets of crossline issues that can be discussed. Each basket can be addressed separately by a team of experts nominated by each party, after which agreement will be sought from the external stakeholders and relevant local political and security authorities from the Assad regime, the recognised Syrian opposition's Interim

Government, the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. A precedent for this approach exists in Libya where the UN-facilitated 5+5 Joint Military Commission managed to reopen major highways.²⁹

International normalisation with Assad is off the table. Bringing the regime back into the international community is outside the scope of a pragmatic conflict management strategy because it is inextricably linked with the more profound question of national legitimacy. Operational engagement with the regime should nevertheless be tolerated for the greater good of improving conditions for civilians.

29 See: <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/unsmil-welcomes-opening-coastal-road-praises-efforts-55-joint-military-commission> (accessed 8 May 2022).

Political attractiveness: Why the SCNE agenda might work

The SCNE agenda offers key external stakeholders a way out of the present stalemate. This includes the UN, which can use the agenda as an opportunity to enable backdoor progress on two of the four Geneva negotiation 'baskets',³⁰ namely those on governance and terrorism.³¹ This will in turn reduce pressure on the Constitutional Committee to produce quick results and could even revitalise it as a national dialogue forum operating under the legal mandate of UNSCR 2254.

For the US and EU, the SCNE agenda provides an opportunity to develop a more coherent policy on Syria – one that addresses their actual interests rather than their aspirational goals. The SCNE agenda provides a framework that is also likely to resonate with Russia, Iran and Turkey, whose engagement in the Astana process illustrates their tendency to favour pragmatic understandings that do not take normative questions of legitimacy as a starting point. Consultation with actors that are sanctioned, designated terrorist organisations or known for their human rights abuses is politically sensitive. But the intention of SCNE-based strategic engagement and diplomacy is to transform realities that already shape daily life in Syria in a constructive manner. While regional and international concerns need to be addressed, experience shows that pragmatic necessities often outweigh ideological considerations as demonstrated by Washington's de facto non-aggression approach to HTS, or Ankara's tolerance of oil exports from SDF-controlled northeast to areas under Turkish control. There is also the bigger picture to consider, since an SCNE agenda can create new conditions in Syria that advance and align major long-term political objectives of key stakeholders, namely refugee returns, stabilisation and more effective governance.

30 In 2017, then UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, introduced the four 'baskets' of governance, constitutional reform, elections and counter terrorism to structure the negotiation efforts. While it puts aside the question of constitutional reform for the moment, the SCNE agenda's integrated approach makes it a suitable framework to improve governance in the different areas of control, facilitate local elections, and achieve security coordination on different issues, such as fighting ISIS.

31 See: <https://syrianobserver.com/news/53608/pedersen-notes-the-four-baskets-and-stresses-the-release-of-prisoners-as-a-priority.html> (accessed 6 April 2022).

Table 1 A provisional mapping of stakeholder interests in creating an SCNE-based strategy

	Why is SCNE attractive to this party?	Does pursuing it require a change of policy?	Are there specific factors to consider?
United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stabilisation and convergence between NW and NE Syria can help de-escalate tensions with Turkey, stabilise NE Syria and strengthen NATO. Ease humanitarian access to, and make developmental assistance and private investment in, NE Syria possible. Maintains relevance of UNSCR 2254 as a basis for future political solution. Reduces pressure to lift sanctions against Assad. 	<p>US policy already recognises Syria's de facto division by virtue of its selective sanctions waivers. It could go further by indicating its willingness to sit alongside Russia, Iran and Turkey in a forum that maps out areas of crossline cooperation based on respective red lines.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allaying Turkey's fears about the SDF will require reciprocal and genuine confidence-building measures. The US needs to do more to ensure that Arab allies do not undercut its position by unilaterally normalising their relations with Assad. Linking Ukraine with Syria will not help Syria. The two conflicts are separate and should be treated as such.
European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates room for convergence between NW and NE Syria, leading to de-escalation of tensions with Turkey. Cooperation with Turkey on refugee resettlement will stem future migration. Provides entry points for dialogue with Turkey and Syrian actors on housing, land and property (HLP) and human rights issues. Enables early recovery programmes with a crossline focus. Maintains relevance of UNSCR 2254 as a basis for future political solution. Reduces pressure to lift sanctions against Assad. 	<p>The EU will need to improve relations with Turkey to make any progress on the question of IDP/refugee resettlement. This includes moving beyond stated positions on Turkey's 'illegal' occupation in Syria to something more pragmatic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The EU's low-visibility approach to Syria on anything other than humanitarian assistance risks it being left out by the big four (US, Russia, Iran, Turkey). A more political stance is needed. The EU should not allow its position on HLP issues and human rights to slide. This might require a larger diplomatic presence in southern Turkey and possibly northern Syria.

	Why is SCNE attractive to this party?	Does pursuing it require a change of policy?	Are there specific factors to consider?
Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a practical pathway to negotiations with the US on ceasefires/ spheres of influence that recognise Russia's military investment. • Can help unlock EU early recovery funding to regime-held areas, reducing the financial burden of maintaining Assad-held areas. • Could become a means of future de-escalation with the West following a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine. 	<p>Russia should consider moving away from a military-focused policy in Syria run by army generals and embrace diplomacy that recognises the limits of Moscow's ability to shape the conflict environment and that appreciates the net gains possible from cooperating with other external powers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A perception of weakness in Syria could encourage the West to escalate in Ukraine. This impression could be counteracted by strong diplomatic engagement by Moscow. • Pressurising Assad to make concessions on crossline issues will make Moscow vulnerable to Iranian interests. Moscow should ensure Tehran's good faith cooperation.
Iran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a means of improving Iran's relations with the West by demonstrating pragmatism and positive regional influence. • Provides a forum that recognises and potentially legitimises Iran's interests in Syria. 	<p>Recent electoral defeats for Iran's allies in Iraq and Lebanon have shown that Tehran cannot overcome the laws of economics. Its projects in the region cannot thrive by force of arms alone.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences of freezing Iran out of UN talks are negative. Iran is willing and able to spoil deals it is excluded from. • Iran has considerable experience in negotiating ceasefires, prisoner swaps and humanitarian access with the armed opposition. • Iran is likely to remain distrustful of any international convergence of interest.
Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlocks EU financial assistance for Ankara's stated plans to resettle 1 million Syrian refugees in northern Syria. • Recognises Turkey's sphere of influence in Syria. • Reduces and possibly ends YPG/SDF guerrilla attacks against the Turkish military. • Provides leverage to Ankara on discussions with the US on the future of the NE. • Boosts Turkey's economy by re-opening land access to Gulf markets. 	<p>Turkey's pursuit of a zero-sum victory against the YPG has paradoxically led to the strengthening of the group. Turkey may want to review this policy as it grapples with a Syria file that is becoming as much domestic as regional. Maintaining a peaceful and prosperous enclave in Syria might present a more realistic goal for Turkish policy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turkey's economic difficulties present opportunities for creative diplomacy. But grand bargains should be avoided in favour of incremental and verifiable transactions. • Turkey's detente with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE has shown Ankara's reduced room for manoeuvre and its need for support. • Turkey will hold on to NW Syria until a solution is found that addresses its security concerns.

	Why is SCNE attractive to this party?	Does pursuing it require a change of policy?	Are there specific factors to consider?
Assad regime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides relief from economic woes. • Likely to encourage greater UN humanitarian and early recovery assistance. • Potential to develop goodwill with the West that might develop into constructive dialogue. • Opportunity to rebuild ties with Arab states. 	Assad's declared goal of taking back every inch of Syria militarily is not realistic and should be dropped. The policy priority should be to alleviate humanitarian and economic conditions while working to reunify Syria through political means.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of, and dealing with, non-state armed actors such as HTS, the SNA and SDF will be highly problematic for Assad, who jealously guards his 'sovereignty'. • Mechanisms to ensure that international funds do not line the pockets of cronies are likely to be rejected.
Hayat Tahrir al-Sham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhances HTS' standing as a political actor by becoming a partner in multi-stakeholder deals. • Improves prospect of more aid to areas of control. • Provides opportunity for economic growth in Idlib through commerce and private investment. 	Replicating the Gaza model in Idlib is a poor idea that risks further isolating civilians from essential trade and aid. HTS should work to create or contribute to an opposition administration more palatable to Turkey and the West.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The transition of HTS from Al-Qaeda to Sunni Syrian nationalism reflects the determined power-seeking nature of its leader. As long as he remains an agent of stability, he can be constructively worked with in principle.
Syrian Democratic Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhances SDF as a political actor by becoming a partner in multi-stakeholder deals. • Enhances prospect of more aid to its areas of control. • Provides opportunity for economic growth in NE Syria through commerce and private investment. • Greater ability to push back against a resurgent Islamic State. 	Waiting out Erdogan in the expectation that he will lose the 2023 election is not a policy, but a gamble. It would be smarter to offer Turkey a ceasefire and bank on US support to rebuild economic linkages with the rest of Syria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NW/NE convergence is likely to be resisted by the regime and its backers. A strategy should be in place to confront spoiler tactics. • SDF-regime trade, civilian travel and minimum-level security coordination already exists, albeit not formalised.
Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), Syrian Interim Government (SIG), Syrian National Army (SNA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opens the door to once again receiving EU/US stabilisation support. • Provides a workable political programme to unify the three wings of the Syrian opposition (political, armed, civil society). • Makes the goal of merging Idlib into a wider Syrian Opposition Coalition aligned government more likely. 	The opposition's legitimacy should no longer be just about negotiating a political solution in Geneva. Instead, the public narrative should focus on consolidation of opposition-held areas and good governance. Expanding civil society space and promoting democracy, dialogue and human rights are goals in themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of confidence in official opposition bodies is dangerous for the peace process and requires urgent attention. • Turkey needs to invest in Syrian agency and allow the SIG to take on more authority. • SNA groups should be offered carrots to become responsible security and political actors. Local elections could be one vehicle to accomplish this.

A dose of pragmatism: How SCNE can be operationalised

A new conflict management strategy that is based on SCNE can be implemented gradually along two main dimensions:

First, put pragmatic crossline arrangements in place that ease civilian trade and travel, bolster local economies, meet basic educational needs, improve security, and facilitate aid flows. Despite their potential, the manifold dimensions of crossline relations have not been the subject of concerted political discussion. Expanding trade between opposition areas of northwest Syria, the SDF-held north and east, and regime areas would stimulate the economies of each area and will go some way to meet, for example, significant food security challenges. This requires steps such as:

Agreement on the formalisation and expansion of trade by:

1. Licensing traders to do business across the north and east, regime areas and Turkey, and eliminating dependency on smuggling routes and middlemen
2. Negotiating arrangements for maintaining storage facilities and truck stops at crossline transit points, including security coordination to ensure smooth operations
3. Agreeing a simplified and transparent customs/taxation scheme that offers benefits to all parties but is also commercially viable for traders.

Agreement on agricultural cooperation and exchange. Meeting the increasing challenge of food security is hindered by the obstacles to investment in – and trading of – agricultural produce and livestock between areas of control. Establishing markets at suitable locations along the frontlines and easing restrictions on farmers will enhance complementarity and boost local food production.

Agreement on mutual recognition of school certificates. One of the main areas of divergence between the different areas of control is education. School certificates issued by one authority are not recognised by the other, and vice versa. Education authorities can initiate talks on mutually recognising certificates, beginning with the primary level, which could be the first step towards integration of the most basic services.

Agreement on facilitating civilian travel. One of the main challenges faced by civilians in Syria is crossing the frontlines to carry out trade or visit relatives. Currently, this process is at best needlessly slow, unreliable and subject to constantly shifting policies and the whims of military actors on the border. At worst, it can be dangerous, exposing civilians

to the risk of unscrupulous smugglers and arbitrary arrest or execution. Over time, security authorities in all areas of control can negotiate the issuance of time-limited entry passes for civilians wishing to enter an area of control with the necessary guarantees that they will not be arrested or hindered if they abide by local laws.

Second, improve governance within the different areas of control. The SCNE agenda is not limited to relations *between* areas of control but can also address key issues *within* them. Crossline arrangements will inevitably extend into local area administrations due to their technical and governance requirements, and this will necessitate authorities to improve their capabilities and organisation. Such entry points can then be used to explore where a broader administrative support agenda might come into being. For example, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) technical directorates and local councils in the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring areas of northern Syria underperform due to a lack of expertise and capacity. The administrative involvement of Turkish personnel, who are paid double for serving in Syria to plug the gap,³² has become a financial burden for Ankara. Internationally supported capacity building based on accountable governance principles provides an entry point to negotiate the gradual replacement of Turkish administrators with Syrian counterparts. Such an effort would increase Syrian agency as well as the capacity and legitimacy of local governance.

Similarly, HTS and the SDF have considerable interest in improving local governance in the areas they control in terms of quality (planning and implementation capacity) and legitimacy (representation, perception and social contracts) as a means of stabilisation and attracting aid.³³ Diplomacy based on pragmatic necessities can nudge the calculus of armed groups and their political institutions, hopefully to the point where more legitimate and capable local governance serves their overall goal of self-preservation. While not ideal, such improvements constitute realistic objectives in a complex conflict environment.

It is important to acknowledge that there is less opportunity to enhance local governance and accountability in regime areas. Nonetheless, the regime is still likely to welcome SCNE initiatives that focus primarily on crossline arrangements because it will increase the availability of food and consumer goods from Turkey, secure more robust imports of oil and wheat from the north and east, and create channels for agricultural exports from areas it considers critical to its support base. In the medium term, carefully designed early recovery projects in regime areas and SCNE progress in other parts of Syria might trigger fresh dynamics that can invite the regime to support aspects of the broader SCNE agenda.

32 Interview with a Turkish researcher, 7 April 2022.

33 In any case, pragmatic dialogue with HTS is necessary to improve the humanitarian situation in areas under its control and to initiate SCNE-informed projects that empower civil society.

Outlook: The need for a paradigm shift

A successful SCNE-based conflict management strategy requires broad social buy-in, the agreement of key local conflict actors, and the assent of external stakeholders. Early SCNE projects must therefore be carefully calibrated to serve both a mix of local popular and elite interests as well as a mix of local elite and international interests. Material incentives alone, such as prospects for economic relief or refugee returns, will not be sufficient to legitimise and mainstream SCNE policies across all the different areas of control in Syria. A public narrative that moves away from polarisation and 'othering' is also required to the extent that the traumatic experience of the past decade will allow. An SCNE agenda merely seeks to identify and increase coordination between conflict actors that are both hostile and interdependent in order to improve everyday life conditions.

Syrian civil society, both inside the country and in the diaspora, is well placed to initiate a discourse that makes sense of a divided state and society, and that finds a way to deconstruct friend-foe patterns as much as possible. To help mainstream the SCNE narrative inside Syria, civil society organisations should be enabled to gather influential societal actors and organisations³⁴ to establish informal SCNE dialogue forums that explain the rationale behind crossline engagement, discuss local needs, and set up initiatives to feed ideas into formal negotiations.

Challenges aside, the de facto division of Syria must be recognised and accepted for the time being as prerequisite for designing, negotiating and implementing SCNE policies that can prevent the different areas of control drifting apart for good. Based on the reality on the ground and the urgency of the humanitarian situation across all of Syria, a SCNE-driven agenda can become a diplomatic multitool for more effective conflict management that brings Syrian civilians back from the precipice of poverty, violence and hopelessness, and enables them to start rebuilding some sort of normal life. The formal and informal linkages between the country's war-torn parts that emerge in this process can, in time, develop into pathways for conflict resolution. The Syrian conflict has changed and so too should the paradigm that shapes diplomacy. A little less theory in Geneva and a bit more practical SCNE work in Syria would be a step in the right direction.

34 Such as representatives of influential families, tribal elders, armed groups, political parties, religious institutions, business, and sports associations.