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## MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EAST SPECIAL GROUP (GSM)

# THE SITUATION IN SYRIA: AN UPDATE

## Draft Report

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## I. INTRODUCTION: A SIGNIFICANTLY ALTERED BATTLEFIELD

1. The tragic and bloody civil war in Syria has, since its inception, exposed many of the fundamental fault lines dividing that region and threatening its stability. Those fault lines, moreover, have global implications as well, and, in some respects, mirror rivalries that are shaping contemporary international politics. Precisely for that reason, it would not be accurate to characterise this conflict simply as a civil war. Rather, it has become something of a “great game” in which both regional and external powers as well as non-state actors hold high stakes and conflicting interests.

2. But it is a great game that has also had terrible humanitarian consequences which have spilled into the neighbouring countries, broader region and beyond to Europe. A horrific refugee crisis that has compelled millions to flee their homes is the most obvious expression of the transnational humanitarian consequences of this war. Since March 2011 an estimated more than half a million people have been killed, more than a million have been injured and roughly 12 million people (half the country’s pre-war population) have been forced from their homes.

3. The mass movement of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has foisted enormous financial and social burdens on several regional countries including Jordan and Lebanon. While Turkey is far larger than these two countries, it too has made enormous sacrifices to accommodate more than 3.6 million desperate people fleeing the conflict. The refugee flows that have become a major issue between the EU and Turkey is yet another expression of how this conflict has ramified into unforeseen areas of international politics while fomenting new divisions along international, sectarian, ethnic and class lines. On the other hand, the EU-Turkey statement, adopted by EU Member States and Turkey on 18 March 2016 has already put forward tangible results in controlling irregular migration. Irregular crossings in the Aegean Sea already decreased dramatically. The agreement has put forward a positive outcome by giving a clear message to the migrant smugglers that the Aegean Sea will no longer be used for their business. It also provided legal ways for refugees to enter Europe. Furthermore, for the well-being of Syrians, Turkey has spent almost USD 37 billion (including municipalities and Turkish NGOs). Another essential component of the Statement is EU’s promised contribution of EUR 3+3 billion for Syrians in Turkey. The first EUR 3 billion have totally been contracted. Out of this amount, EUR 2.07 billion have been disbursed to various institutions. Turkey expects the remaining part to be disbursed as soon as possible and the implementation to be speeded up. As addressing the needs of Syrians is quite a heavy burden for a single country to carry, it is essential that Turkey receives more international assistance for delivering sufficient response to dire requirements of the Syrians in the most efficient way.

4. It is also important to consider the ways in which this war has created opportunities for extremist terrorist organisations to fill the vacuum created by collapsing state authority. These groups, and Daesh in particular, have posed a serious threat to regional and indeed to global security. One of the central features of this conflict has been that extremist terrorist groups operating in the south and west of the country ultimately failed to win the loyalty of the population. Their fanaticism and horrific violence helped fracture the opposition to Assad and made it all the more difficult for governments opposed to that regime to identify and support viable alternatives. Their presence also prompted a US-led coalition to take active measures to challenge the control Daesh exercised over parts of Syria and Iraq.

5. The good news is that Daesh lost much of the Syrian and Iraqi territory it has once occupied. The bad news, of course, is that a despotic regime remains in place and Daesh itself has not been defeated in the broader sense, and is now in the process of reinventing itself. Moreover, the sheer violence Daesh committed against those it was seeking to woo has opened up an opportunity for al-Qaeda which has recently unrolled a campaign to market itself as the moderate extremist option dedicated to directing its attacks only against non-Sunnis (NATO PA, 2018). It is important to point out here that Turkey, in particular, is also deeply concerned about the role the Democratic Union Party’s People’s Protection Units (PYD/YPG) is playing in the north of the country. It has designated

the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation which is the Syrian branch of the PKK that poses a grave threat to its national security and regional stability.

6. The situation on the ground in Syria has changed dramatically over the past five years. The Russian and Iranian interventions in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, have, by almost any measure, proven decisive, at least in the southern part of the country. The Syrian state itself has displayed a degree of resilience that initially surprised many and compelled a number of countries to revisit their strategies with regard to the region. Russia has played an instrumental role in this regard and is emerging from the conflict as a key protagonist in the region (IISS, 2019).

7. Whereas the Assad regime was clearly on its back foot in 2012, it has subsequently managed to retake a significant swathe of lost territory while winning the loyalty of some groups that had essentially been sitting on the fence. The fractured nature of the opposition, the lack of foreign support and the prominent role played by extremists in it has had the effect of driving elements of Syrian society back into the arms of Bashar al-Assad. Daesh has seen its area of control diminish significantly over the past two years. It now controls a small area near Abu Kamal, although it is surrounded by regime forces to the West and PYD/YPG dominated SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) to the East.

8. There are few analysts today prepared to argue that any of the domestic forces still fighting the regime have mustered the leverage needed to challenge its pre-eminence, although pockets of resistance are still operational. The Assad regime does not control a large part of the country along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, and this is a region that is now drawing the lion's share of international attention (see below). But in the south, Syrian regime forces or military groups loyal or allied to it have recaptured large tracts of territory once under the control of opposition groups. Assad has used these battlefield successes to take on opposition groups throughout the country. However, the resistance in south Syria against the regime is still happening even if low. Additionally, the reconciliation agreements prevented the regime from entering certain terrains, and it was under the control of opposition forces for several years.

9. Accordingly, in the region east of Damascus known as Eastern Ghouta, the Syrian army supported by Russian military police patrols recaptured an opposition-held enclave. In Deraa, Syrian regime forces working with their Russian allies launched an offensive against opposition groups in the territory. This resulted in the capture of an array of towns in the southern provinces of Quneitra and Deraa. These forces then moved toward the demilitarised zone with Israel created in 1974. By July 2018, all of Deraa province has been recaptured from opposition groups. This offensive included bombing raids that drove an estimated 160,000 Syrians from their homes.

10. In Northern Syria, Turkish troops and Syrian opposition forces have conducted counter-terror operations (*Operations Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch*) against Daesh and PYD/YPG units that have enjoyed American support along the Turkish and Iraqi border. Currently, the PYD/YPG-dominated SDF controls a large swathe of territory in the north-eastern reaches of the country including the cities of Raqqa, Qamishli and Hasakah. The SDF are the key force in the region but they are dominated by the PYD/YPG, which Turkey has designated as a terrorist group linked to the PKK.

11. The northwest province of Idlib has remained a final bastion for opposition forces—predominately members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Now that the Syrian regime has consolidated its grip over most of the south, it is turning to the north. Bombers have pummelled the region, and this is likely the first phase of an all-out offensive that could pose serious risks to the nearly 3 million people living in the region, many of whom are refugees from other parts of the country. There are currently an estimated 70,000 persons operating in opposition forces in the province. The region abuts Latakia, which hosts the largest Russian airbase in the country (Chughtai, 2018).



## II. THE CURRENT DIPLOMATIC CRISIS OVER SYRIA

14. In December 2018, after a telephone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Trump tweeted: "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency." He then ordered the Pentagon to pull the remaining 2,000 US troops out of Syria immediately—a decision that led to the resignations both of Defence Secretary James Mattis and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to counter ISIL Brett McGurk. There has been widespread opposition to President Trump's decision to rapidly withdraw US Troops from Syria. Turkey, as a NATO Ally, supported the decision of the US and offered to coordinate the withdrawal of the US Forces. Turkey, which is a leading member of the anti-Daesh Coalition, stresses the importance of Turkey, US and NATO Allies continuing to work together to fight and eliminate the remaining Daesh elements so that they can no longer pose a security threat in the region.

15. Given the fact that Daesh poses a serious and ongoing threat to regional stability and international security, it is premature to claim that that terrorist organisation has been defeated as it has planted the seeds for its own regeneration. The problem is that while the anti-Daesh Coalition has achieved important battlefield victories in Iraq and Syria, the ideology continues to have an attractive power to those alienated from political and economic life in the region and beyond. This loosely constructed organisation still has as many as 35,000 fighters placed around the region typically where state authority is weak. It is worth noting that al-Qaeda has quietly regrouped in recent years and is operating with a force of some 30,000 members.

16. Because of these military defeats, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh began to inform followers not to travel to Syria but instead to head other centres of activity in North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. This change of tactics aims to ensure the longevity for the group and has meant that new attacks in the West, such as the Manchester concert bombing, were planned in these regions and not from Iraq and Syria. This suggests that the organisation is decentralising and developing a new form to compensate for the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq. Of the group's 35-40,000 fighters from 120 different countries, some 15,000 have fled Syria and Iraq and have moved to hot spots like Sudan or repatriated to their home countries, including many who have returned to Europe. A series of attempted attacks on civil airlines, some of which have been successful, illustrate the degree to which the group remains active and exceedingly dangerous.

17. In the same way, al-Qaeda has sought to make itself impervious to decapitation and it too has decentralised its operations and planning centres. It has adapted in other ways as well and has begun to refrain from and criticise terrorist attacks targeting Muslims – a policy that in comparison to that of Daesh some might characterise as moderate extremism. This is clearly a play to win back support from political extremists who are nonetheless alienated by the tactics of Daesh (NATO PA, 2018).

18. Turkish President Erdogan initially endorsed President Trump's announcement that US forces would withdraw from Syria, although he also argued that this must be planned carefully and coordinated with key partners. He also argued that Turkey is the only country with the power and commitment to perform the task of replacing US forces in that region of Syria. It should be noted that Turkey was the first country to deploy ground combat troops to fight against Daesh in Syria. President Erdogan says that this operation severed the group's access to NATO borders and impeded its ability to carry out terror attacks in Turkey and Europe. Turkish troops along with fighters from the Free Syrian Army had engaged in door to door fighting to root out insurgents in Al-Bab, which until then had been a stronghold of Daesh. Because it did not engage in aerial bombing, that city's infrastructure was left intact. Turkish troops have also liberated the small town of Dabiq which is also the name of the famous Daesh propaganda magazine, and the area where Daesh expected to fight its Armageddon war.

19. Turkey's views on developments along the northern borderlands of Syria has been consistent and are very much conditioned by its opposition to the attempts that could endanger the territorial integrity of Syria. The Erdogan government strongly objected to the Trump Administration 2017 decision to provide weapons to the PYD/YPG in North of Syria and has long characterised these forces as an extension of the PKK which it, the United States and many other countries have designated a terrorist organisation. Turkey has been very concerned that ceding this region to PYD/YPG control would have highly adverse implications for Turkish security and turn that region into a sanctuary for PKK terrorists from Turkey and Iraq.

20. President Erdogan has called for the creation of a stabilisation force in this particular region that would engage security forces from all parts of Syrian society including the Kurdish community. Turkish authorities, however, would not want to include fighters with links to terrorist organisations in the new stabilisation force, nor for that matter would it agree to these fighters participating in popularly elected local councils, which President Erdogan says Turkey will help establish. He has promised that Turkey will work with friends and allies, including Russia, to stabilise the situation (Erdogan, 2019).

21. In early January, national security advisor John R. Bolton seemed to backtrack from President Trump's early withdrawal announcement, telling journalists that US forces would indeed remain in Syria until all remnants of Daesh were defeated and Turkey provided guarantees that it would not strike the SDF, with which the United States has been working in Syria. On the other hand, Ankara clearly expressed that it would not accept any arrangement including the PYD/YPG, which is the dominant power in the SDF.

22. Iran is also factoring into US calculations. Earlier in September, Mr Bolton told journalists that the United States would remain in Syria as long as Iranian forces were on the ground in that country (Sanger et al., 2018). The Israeli government has also expressed alarm over the Iranian presence in Syria and was apparently surprised by the sudden shift in US policy announced in President Trump's earlier tweet. Mr Bolton's restatement of US policy, linking the mission to the Iranian presence, appeared to return the US deployment to a longer time frame, particularly as few expect Iran to begin withdrawing its presence from Syria anytime soon. Ousting Iranian-led forces from Syria might remain a desired objective but achieving this would require significantly more US forces deployed in the region. If anything, President Trump seems to be moving in the opposite direction.

23. Turkey has expressed its strong opposition to this more extensive view of the US mission, rejected its premise, and asked Washington to hand over its bases in Syria to Turkey. It fears that a continued US presence in Syria would provide cover for the SDF and the PYD/YPG to build a kind of proto-state which would invariably conflict with Turkey's vision for regional stability (Stein, 2019). In January, President Erdogan told parliament that Turkey would never agree to an arrangement that protected the PYD/YPG (Chulov, 2019).

24. President Trump has since confirmed his initial decision to pull US troops out of Syria, albeit at a slower pace than he had originally suggested. The policy path has thus been set. The key questions now are how this policy shift might alter the situation on the ground and what it means for Syria, Turkey, Russia and the broader Middle East.

25. As the United States reduces its presence in Syria, Turkey is preparing to assume a more prominent position there. The government has begun to lay the diplomatic groundwork with Russia. It has also moved substantial military forces and assets along the Syrian border, both as an insurance policy and to signal its determination to prevent this region of Syria from obtaining any form of sovereign autonomy. In line with President Trump's plans to create a safe zone, Turkey started talks with the United States to detail the steps of the process through which Turkey aims to

create a twenty-mile safe zone to prevent the PYD/YPG from operating along or near the Turkish border.

26. For its part, Russia has been very focused on contributing to the restoration of its ally in Damascus. But it has to play a balancing game as it also wants to maintain a collaborative relationship with Turkey. President Putin congratulated President Trump on his decision to pull US troops out of north-eastern Syria and saw this as providing an opening for his broader ambitions in the region and beyond. Moscow, however, is concerned that Turkish deployments to the region could undercut Russia's support for al-Assad's ongoing effort to restore sovereign control over the entire territory of Syria. Russia needs to balance its ambitions in Syria with its quest to build closer ties with Turkey. This will not be easy, as Turkish views on developments in north-eastern Syria lie at the core of its national security interests. It will not indulge Russian ambitions if doing so might compromise these core interests.

### III. RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO SYRIA

27. Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, which it publicly defended as a "war against terrorism", has been perhaps the most significant reason al-Assad has managed to hold power in Syria (Simons, 2019). In fact, Russia has carried out very few sorties against Daesh and left this role to the US-led coalition. Instead, it focused on injecting new life into the nearly collapsed and globally discredited al-Assad regime. Moscow's support started with financial and diplomatic aid. It then sold military equipment to the regime at cost and ultimately deployed its own forces to carry out critical operations (Daher, 2018). The Kremlin also provided the regime with important diplomatic cover and, on several occasions, used its veto power at the UN Security Council to counter Security Council measures condemning al-Assad for the conduct of a war against his own people (Phillips, 2017).

28. In September 2015, when the Syrian regime seemed near the point of collapse, the Kremlin stepped up its assistance, ultimately deploying its own forces to Syria in what would later be understood as the key military turning point of the conflict (Giustozzi, 2019). Since then, Moscow has demonstrated its military capacity to project power in the region with accurate missile strikes, sustained aircraft sorties, and a now proven capacity to conduct complex and decisive sealift operations (Borchshevskaya et al., 2018). Russia has also provided pivotal advisory support to the Syrian army on force restructuration and manoeuvre warfare. Since 2017, the Russians have slowly turned the leading role back over to the Syrian Arab Army, which is now planning and conducting key operations. In delivering the S-300 air-defence system to Damascus, Moscow further clarified its support for al-Assad and his Iranian allies operating in the field (Giustozzi, 2019). In short, the regime's success in reconquering territory would not have been possible without sustained Russian support, and this has helped restore Russian leverage throughout the broader region.

29. Along these very lines, with the al-Assad regime ineluctably regaining control of Syrian territory, Russian advisors are encouraging it to reintegrate former opposition commanders back into Syrian society. Russia is also pushing for a final political resolution of the conflict that could help cement Moscow's status as a regional powerbroker. Moscow is looking to identify those compromises that might provide pillars for a broad agreement. Russia, for example, has helped establish de-escalation zones while encouraging the PYD/YPG and the Government of Turkey to create a security zone in northeast Syria. It has also maintained relations with the Gulf states while working closely with their greatest nemesis Iran. It turned a blind eye both to Iran's support for Hezbollah in Syria and to Israeli retaliation against Iran and its proxies in Syria (Gvosdev, 2019). This delicate balancing game has helped Russia cultivate the image of a peacemaker while it nevertheless doggedly pursues its narrow national interests, which, by any definition, is a testimony to its deft strategy with regard to the conflict (Giustozzi, 2019).

30. Indeed, Russia's approach to the Syrian conflict reflects its broader global grand strategy (Gvosdtev, 2019). The Kremlin has sought to rebuild Russia's capacity to project power in the Eurasian space in order to safeguard its military, economic, and energy interests. It has also sought to cultivate the notion that other countries believe that Russian power can be instrumental to the defence of their own interests. The Kremlin's involvement in Syria is a case study in this regard. Through its role in the conflict, Russia has sought to reinforce its image as a challenger to the West and an indispensable power more generally (Omelicheva, 2019).

31. Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict has proven an invaluable training ground for the Russian military. It has allowed it to demonstrate its prowess, given it a permanent base for regional operations, and entrenched Syria's dependence on its trainers and weapons systems. It has also granted Moscow access to invaluable regional intelligence (Borshchevskaya, 2018). In addition to the Khmeimim air base, operated by Russia since 2015, in early 2017 Moscow and Damascus signed an agreement allowing Russia to maintain its forces at the port of Tartus for 49 years, where it claims it will base 11 warships and nuclear submarines (Sogoloff, 2017). Russia has thus enhanced its power-projection capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean and developed and deployed a credible anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capability that vastly complicates US military planning in the region (Borshchevskaya, 2019).

32. Russia also has important economic interests in Syria. Russian energy companies have long sought a foothold in the Syrian energy sector (Borshchevskaya, 2018). Rather than seeking a direct share in the country's resources, they have actively invested in oil and gas infrastructure. Russia does not see Syria as a key supplier of oil and gas as such, but rather as an important potential energy hub that will play a role in directing energy supplies to the European market. Moscow thus holds a dual objective: expanding its political and military leverage in the eastern Mediterranean while exercising influence over those global oil and gas supplies on which the West, and Europe in particular, relies (Borshchevskaya, 2018). The more control it exercises, the more political leverage it will be able to exert in Europe.

33. Finally, Moscow's role in Syria fits within its broader counterterrorism policy. Between 2011 and 2015, an estimated 900-2,400 citizens of Russia travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight with extremist terrorist organisations. In 2015, Daesh set up a Russian affiliate, *Vilayat Kavkaz*, after most mid-level commanders of the Caucasus Emirate organisation defected to Daesh (Omelicheva, 2019). Although Russia's experience with this form of terrorism is not new, recent events, such as the bombing of a flight between Sharm El-Sheikh and Saint Petersburg in 2015 or the explosions two years later in the Saint Petersburg metro, have illustrated the security threat posed by these groups to Russia (Clarke, 2017). Russia has thus had a counterterrorist mission even if this was clearly subsumed by its broader ambition to carve out a safe space from which to project power in the region. Yet such preoccupations remained secondary and often served as a pretext for the use of direct force. As Mariya Y. Omelicheva writes: "For the Kremlin, Syria represents a tactical theatre in a broader strategy of anti-Westernism, while counterterrorism offers a tried-and-tested method for achieving desirable political objectives" (Omelichera, 2019).

34. Four years after the beginning of its military intervention, Russia has achieved many of its key objectives. It has presented itself as the key peace broker by mediating between a wide range of actors. It has succeeded in maintaining al-Assad in power while entrenching its long-term military presence and economic access to the region. Russia has thus seized the opportunity presented by disarray in Syria to strengthen its status on the international stage.

#### IV. IRAN'S ROLE AND AMBITIONS IN SYRIA

35. Iran's objectives in the Syrian conflict have remained consistent, and it has ardently supported the al-Assad regime throughout. As early as 2012, Iran operated an air bridge to Damascus which provided critical military supplies to al-Assad's regime (Gordon, 2012). Furthermore, it encouraged al-Assad to safeguard a strategic swathe of territory from Damascus northward and to sharpen its capabilities before attacking opposition strongholds – advice that has proved highly useful to the regime (Phillips, 2018). Iran also likely helped the Syrian regime expand its chemical-weapons arsenal and provided much-needed financial assistance, including a USD 4.6 billion loan in 2013 (Sadjapour, 2013).

36. Tehran has also deployed military forces to Syria, primarily the Revolutionary Guards' elite Quds Force. It first dispatched advisers to the al-Assad regime to help in the creation of an allegedly 50,000-strong Syrian paramilitary group, *Jaysh al-Sha'bi* (US Treasury Department, 2012). As the situation for al-Assad worsened, Iran gradually stepped up its military involvement, ultimately deploying several thousand Iranian troops to Syria. Iran also dispatched the Quds Force as well as elements from Iran's conventional army, the Artesh – an unusual decision given that the Artesh usually manages the country's territorial defence (Bucala and Kagan, 2016). Iranian forces in Syria have taken on different roles, most by serving in advisory or supervision positions, with Shia militias forming the bulk of fighters and the core of Iran's military intervention (Hubbard et al., 2018).

37. Although estimates vary, approximately 20,000-30,000 foreign fighters have engaged in the Syrian conflict. Roughly 6,000 of these are Hezbollah fighters and advisers; the others are to a large extent Afghan, Iraqi, Lebanese or Pakistani Shia combatants who enrolled for financial or religious reasons. These militias, founded, trained and funded by Iran, do not answer directly to the Syrian regime but rather to the Quds Force (Ghaddar, 2018). In essence, this is a replication of the Hezbollah and *Hashd al-Sha'bi* model. Beyond their military activities, the militias are indoctrinated into Iran's ideological and political doctrines, and even if Tehran were to withdraw formally from the theatre, it would retain significant influence through these irregular forces (Ghaddar, 2018).

38. Iran has also pursued a range of religious and cultural goals in Syria and has exploited the movement of the population to reinforce this effort. Iran has pushed Sunni communities and opponents of the regime out of the suburbs of Damascus and replaced them with pro-al-Assad groups (Ghaddar and Stroul, 2019). "Law No. 10", issued in April 2018, provides a case in point: it gives property owners 30 days to appear in person with real-estate documents to prove their claim to property. Should they fail to comply or to provide the proper documents, they face expropriation. Given that many property owners fled the fighting or, in some instances, face arrest or execution should they return, this law should be understood as an attempt by the regime to target its opponents and refugees with expropriation. Many of the expropriated belong the Sunni community, and Shia allies of Iran and al-Assad have essentially seized their homes (Ghaddar, 2018). Legally, foreigners cannot take over the property of exiled Syrians, yet Iranian companies can own real estate in Syria if they participate in the reconstruction process (Fisk, 2018). According to Syrian records, more than 8,000 properties around Damascus now belong to foreign Shia. Likewise, Iran has entrenched its influence in the south by compelling local fighters to relocate to opposition strongholds in northwest Syria (Ghaddar and Stroul, 2019).

39. Iran has also provided social, religious and economic services to selected communities in which its proxies are operating. In western Syria, it reportedly built Shia meeting halls, mosques, and schools, sometimes in locations where Sunni institutions once flourished. In the east and south, Iran has established an almost clientelist relationship with local tribes and, for example, has recruited young unemployed Sunnis for non-combat roles in its militias. Finally, Iran has created a network of Farsi-language schools that seek to further entrench its long-term influence (Ghaddar and Stroul, 2019).

40. Iran has also signed an array of economic deals with the regime. By 2018, it had made deals related to mobile-phone licenses, phosphate mines, agricultural lands, and port infrastructure (Sinjab, 2018). In January 2019, Damascus and Tehran signed 11 additional agreements and memoranda of understanding covering a range of fields including economy, culture, education, infrastructure, investment, and housing (AFP, 2019).

41. Iran's sustained and multifaceted involvement in Syria has helped it weave an ever-denser network of links in that country. Tehran's primary objective, of course, has been to protect the al-Assad regime. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's close relationship with Syria has been a bulwark of its regional strategy. For Iranian leaders, Syria has proved a valued Arab ally in what they perceive as a fundamentally hostile region (Goodarzi, 2009). That an unfriendly regime might replace the al-Assad regime represents Tehran's strategic nightmare and would threaten its regional ambitions (Mohseni and Ahmadian, 2018). Iran has thus sacrificed treasure and lives to preserve its leverage and help ensure that a friendly state ruled along its western flank (Phillips, 2018).

42. Iran has also framed this relationship as constituting an "axis of resistance" against Israel. Syria has offered Iran a land bridge through which it could supply equipment, resources and advisers to its Lebanese ally—Hezbollah (Sadjapour, 2013). From Iran's perspective, the corridor linking Syria's Alawite coastal regions with Hezbollah's territories in Lebanon through Homs, the suburbs of Damascus, and al-Qalamoun is of central importance (Ghaddar, 2019). By consolidating its access to Syria, Iran ensures that it can continue to support Hezbollah and, by extension, to project power in the Levant (Mohseni and Ahmadian, 2018). According to some analysts, Iran's expansion within Syria, both westward and southward, reflects a deeper ambition to move ever closer to the Golan Heights, a move which would pose a direct threat to Israel (Ghaddar, 2018; Yaari, 2018). This could be seen as part of a broader effort to consolidate its regional leverage and deterrence capabilities – something that it might enhance if it moves assets closer to the Israeli border (Mohseni and Ahmadian, 2018).

43. Iran has thus dramatically expanded its influence over decision making in Syria and has, for example, established two military bases in Syria, a missile facility in Baniyas, and a military compound in al-Kiswah, which Israel bombed in 2017 (Delory and Kasapoglu, 2018). Yet it has also entrenched its power in a manner that does not undermine Russia's influence there. It has primarily invested in parallel institutions, leaving state structures more pervious to Moscow's influence (Ghaddar, 2018). Like Russia, Iran has largely achieved its primary objectives in Syria. The al-Assad regime seems to have consolidated its control over much of the country while Iran has a continuing capacity to exercise regional influence (Smyth, 2018).

## **V. THE VIEW FROM ANKARA**

44. The emerging security threats in Syria forced Turkey to change its approach over the course of the conflict. According to some analysts, the increasing reluctance of the United States to project force in the region has created a vacuum that regional powers, including Turkey, have been compelled to fill (Phillips, 2017). When the Syrian war erupted in 2011, Turkey had little choice but to work to shape events (Manhoff, 2017). After several attempts to persuade al-Assad to cease the repression of his own people, and given his reluctance to implement significant reforms, Ankara moved to actively support the opposition in Syria. It also stepped up diplomatic efforts to build an international coalition to push out the al-Assad regime (Manhoff, 2017). Uniting the political opposition and building any kind of coalition willing to intervene militarily proved nearly impossible. Then President Barack Obama, for example, was not willing to commit US forces, particularly in light of his country's very difficult experience in Iraq. At the same time, Russia had begun to mobilise financial resources, diplomatic capital and military assets to bail out the al-Assad regime (Phillips, 2017).

45. Turkish policy is now focused on achieving three main goals. Paramount among these is eliminating terrorist threats and preventing separatist agendas along its borders. The Syrian conflict considerably empowered the People Protection's Units, the Syrian branch of the PKK that Ankara and many Allied countries consider a terrorist organisation, and which has been carrying out terrorist activities in Turkey and other countries for decades (Stein, 2018). Ankara has recognised the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization and considers PYD/YPG-controlled areas to be a threat to its national security (Zandee, 2019). US support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are, in turn, dominated by the PYD/YPG, has thus proven a source of tension between Ankara and Washington. The SDF have received weapons and military training from the United States and have leveraged that support to gain control of the northeastern part of the Syrian territory, close to the Turkish border (Manhoff, 2017). Ankara now aims to block the SDF's territorial extension and prevent the formation of a permanent SDF-PYD/YPG-dominated authority along Ankara's border with Syria (Young, 2017).

46. Ankara repeatedly underlines that the PYD/YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organisation. Moreover, it states that the PKK/PYD/YPG cannot represent Kurdish people. That is to say, Syrian Kurds cannot be identified with the PYD/YPG. Turkish officials further state that the PYD/YPG, as a terrorist entity, has no legitimate representative power that and Turkey has no problems with the Syrian Kurds. Turkey opened its doors to the Kurds fleeing Saddam Hussein's oppression in Iraq and accepted over 200,000 Kurds from Ayn al-Arab, Syria, while incidents were taking place in the city. According to Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the United Nations, PYD/YPG militants have violated international law and committed war crimes by recruiting children, displacing villagers, arbitrary arrests and executions of the PYD's political opponents, abuse in detention, and unsolved abductions and murders (Amnesty International, 2015; UN Security Council Report, 2018). Thus, the PYD/YPG oppresses all groups, Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens and Christians alike, that do not submit to them.

47. Turkey has suffered many terrorist attacks perpetrated by the PYD/YPG in recent years. On 17 February 2016 on Merasim street in Ankara, buses transporting military personnel were targeted by a suicide bomber with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED); 29 people were killed, including 12 military officers, and 80 people were injured. On 13 March 2016, in Kizilay, Ankara, civilians were targeted with a VBIED, 34 were killed and 229 were injured. On 10 December 2016, in Istanbul, near the Dolmabahce palace, a riot-police bus was targeted with a VBIED, and a suicide bomb attacker targeted police officers responding to the terrorists near Macka Park; 45 citizens, including 38 police officers, lost their lives and 237 citizens were injured. Turkish official records also indicate that members of the PKK and the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation operating in Syria have carried out 18 rocket/missile attacks since 2017, targeting the Turkish military guard posts, on the Syrian border, of Kilis, Sanliurfa, Hatay, Gaziantep, Sirnak and Mardin.

48. Ankara often underlines that the PKK and the PYD/YPG share the same leadership cadres, organisational and military structure, modus operandi, strategies, and tactics. They both use the same financial resources and conduct trainings in the same camps. In brief, they constitute different parts of the same entity. In fact, the direct link between the PKK and PYD/YPG has been established by the publications of independent academic and international institutions, including but not limited to: the UK-based Henry Jackson Society (Orton, 2017); the Institute for the Study of War (Kozak, 2016); NATO's Defence Against Terrorism Review (Self and Ferris, 2016); and the US National Counterterrorism Center (Coats 2018; 2019) as well as EUROPOL (EUROPOL, 2016). In light of these facts, Ankara has voiced its expectations in various instances that Allies should support its fight against terrorism and recognise the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation. The findings of Turkish authorities and rulings of the relevant courts on the bombings reveal that the terrorists who staged attacks in Turkey are members of the PKK who received explosives training at YPG camps in Syria, and that the PKK procures equipment like anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons through the PYD/YPG in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, EUROPOL's 2016 report on counterterrorism (TE-SAT) pointed to the PKK's link with the PYD/YPG by highlighting the fact that the funds raised by

PKK-affiliated organisations in several countries, including Allies, have been used to finance the activities of the PYD/YPG. The PYD/YPG is also employing Daesh-like recruitment methods, including through enticing foreign terrorist fighters mainly from Europe and North America (Orton, 2017). Thus, Turkey argues that some Allied countries' indulgence and approach to the activities of the PYD/YPG is not coherent with the soul of the Alliance.

49. Ankara's second objective is to help find a lasting solution to the conflict. Turkey believes that the conflict could only be brought to an end by a political settlement, in which the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, are realised and a legitimate government takes charge in Damascus. This process has to be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, so that only the Syrian people will be the masters of their own future. In order to transform this vision into a reality, Turkey supports the UN-led political process in Geneva. Turkey's ongoing consultations with the other Astana guarantors and the UN have not only reduced violence on the ground, but also revitalised the Geneva process. Also, Turkey's belief in bringing the positions of main stakeholders closer and therefore facilitating the prospect of a political solution has resulted in the convening of a Quadrilateral Summit between the leaders of Turkey, France, Russia and Germany last October.

50. Turkey's third objective is to project a degree of stability in the region and to address the underlying problems that pushed millions of Syrian refugees to seek shelter in Turkey (Young, 2017). As of January 2019, Turkey had registered 3,640,466 Syrian refugees, posing an enormous challenge to Turkish society as a whole to accommodate them (Hacaoglu, 2018). Tensions are especially high in some cities near the Syrian border, where average salaries have been driven down by an influx of migrant workers while rental prices have naturally increased—this in a region where about one in four people is unemployed. The Turkish government estimates it has spent more than USD 37 billion for refugees since the onset of the war (Hacaoglu, 2018).

51. As the situation in Syria evolved, Turkey had little choice but to alter its strategy, and it has now adopted a more conciliatory line *vis-à-vis* Russia and Iran in recognition of the realities on the ground. In August 2016, Presidents Erdogan and Putin met in Russia for the first time since the Turkish military shot down a Russian fighter jet that had strayed into Turkish airspace. The meeting helped initiate a normalisation of political and economic relations. That same month, the Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers visited each other's capitals (Phillips, 2017). These meetings in many ways symbolised the important shift in Turkey's Syrian policy (Phillips, 2017).

52. In August 2016, Turkish forces and supporting Syrian-opposition militia moved into Syria's northern borderlands in *Operation Euphrates Shield*. The intervention showed Ankara's priorities moving away from toppling al-Assad and towards targeting Daesh and destroying the PYD/YPG. The new strategy also lay behind Ankara's decision to withdraw support for opposition factions in Aleppo, enabling the al-Assad regime to regain control of parts of that city (Phillips, 2017). In *Operation Olive Branch*, launched in January 2018, Turkish forces and Turkey-backed militias entered the Afrin district to oust the PYD/YPG (Kasapoglu and Ulgen, 2018).

53. With the end of the campaign, as a result of the infrastructure work and security and stability provided by the Turkish Armed Forces in the region, more than 300,000 Syrian nationals have returned to the *Euphrates Shield Operation* area. In the cities of Jarablus, Azaz, Al-Rai and Al-Bab, liberated by the Turkish forces, hospitals, schools, mosques, bakeries as well as other public buildings and spaces such as playgrounds were restored to ensure that the local population was provided with their day-to-day necessities. Accommodation facilities are provided. Water and electricity services have started to run again. Most importantly, law enforcement units recruited among local Syrians are being trained and deployed.

54. Turkey, along with Iran and Russia, has also established the Astana platform, which has designated a series of cease-fire regimes and de-escalation zones, together with the Sochi summit, which aimed at finding a broader political solution to the conflict. A Russian-Turkish bilateral agreement signed in September 2018 helped prevent a Russian-backed Syrian-regime offensive against Idlib province, which could have triggered a massive refugee influx into Turkey. One of the most important milestones of the Astana platform is expected to be the establishment of the Syrian constitutional committee. The committee will be a significant first step in the efforts to find a political solution to the conflict. The Astana guarantors have also succeeded in implementing projects to release detainees and prisoners of both the regime and the opposition as a confidence-building measure.

55. The Syrian conflict, however, has fomented certain tensions in the Turkish-US relationship. US support for the PYD/YPG and Turkey's rapprochement with Russia reveal the two countries' diverging objectives in the war (Arslan, Dost and Wilson, 2018). President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria could repair ties between both NATO allies, but the question of how and when this withdrawal will happen is not yet entirely clear. The definition of what both sides mean by the implementation of a "safe" zone along the Turkish border, specifically, could prove a source of tension and will have to be resolved between these two allies (Sly, 2019).

## **VI. THE VIEW FROM ISRAEL**

56. Israel's involvement in the Syrian conflict has been relatively limited – although it has adopted a more active posture in recent months (Hanauer, 2016). Israel has engaged in cross-border strikes to prevent shipments of weapons to Hezbollah. To a limited extent, Israel has sought to establish links with certain Syrian populations, notably Druze communities, both in the hopes of keeping regime forces out of these areas and to be mindful of the perceptions of its own Druze civilians. Israel has also engaged in a dialogue with Moscow, among other things to ensure deconfliction of forces (Hanauer, 2016).

57. During the first phase of the conflict, Israel's actions aimed at pre-empting attacks on its territory and citizens, although it made a great effort not to entangle itself too deeply into the war. But Israel has recently adopted more assertive tactics out of concern about Iran's growing presence in Syria. In January 2019, it carried out a series of airstrikes against Iranian military targets in the Syrian theatre (Liebermann, 2019). While its earlier strikes were focused on a very narrow range of targets, from late 2018, the list of targets expanded. Importantly, Israel has abandoned its policy of ambiguity and now openly claims responsibility for the strikes and shares information about their targets (Hincks, 2019).

58. Several factors have driven this change of strategy (Abu Ahmad and Zehavi, 2019). The most significant seems to be the prospect of US withdrawal from the Syrian theatre, which Israel feels has left it vulnerable. While it is unlikely that Israeli strikes in Syria could have been carried out without Russia's tacit consent, this does raise some questions about the state of Russian-Iranian relations. Israel's relations with Moscow had considerably deteriorated after Syrian anti-aircraft missiles targeting Israeli planes shot down a Russian aircraft in 2018. They have since seemed to have improved (Abu Ahmad and Zehavi, 2019).

59. The war in Syria has provided an opportunity for Israel to undermine any residual Syrian claims to the Golan Heights, which it occupied in 1967 and annexed in 1981 (Hanauer, 2016). From the Israeli government's perspective, the mounting security threats posed by the presence of Israel's enemies on Syrian territory makes it all the more important to maintain its hold on the Golan (Kenner, 2018).

60. In contrast to most Western countries, which were initially mainly focused on the rise of extremist groups in Syria, Israel has primarily been concerned with the growing influence of Iran close to its borders (Hanauer, 2016). The Iranian presence poses a security threat to Israel in two ways: on the one hand, Iran uses the Syrian territory to supply Hezbollah with weapons (Pollack, 2015). Hezbollah's capacity to launch rockets into Israel's northern territories is designed, at least in part, to deter Israel from attacking Iran, while its military, social, and political power within Lebanon itself enables Tehran to project its influence more broadly throughout the region (Hanauer, 2016; Katz, 2018). Israel worries that Iran may open a front in southern Syria and is determined to prevent this from happening. Hezbollah fighters have indeed been deployed close to the border (Herzog, 2015). Since Hezbollah's last war with Israel, that organisation is believed to have dramatically expanded its rocket and missile capabilities (Kenner, 2018). On several occasions, Iran and its allies have fired rockets at Israel from southern Syria (Kenner, 2018).

61. Israel is concerned that Moscow's support to the al-Assad regime invariably bolsters Iran, both because it protects its ally, thereby enabling Tehran to gain ground, and because Hezbollah's retrieval of some of the weapons transferred by Russia to the regime's forces strengthens Iran's hand (Hanauer, 2016). Almost paradoxically, another Israeli objective is to see that a diminished Bashar al-Assad remains in power and does not cede the state to more radical and dangerous political forces (Hanauer, 2016). For Israeli authorities, the possibility that Assad might be replaced by a regime even more hostile and unstable makes his survival strategically preferable. Yet, if the regime emerges stronger from the war, it would also be in a position to enable Hezbollah and Iran to pursue their ambitions. Israel is thus walking a very fine line (Hanauer, 2016).

62. Israel seeks to contain militant terrorist groups operating in the Syrian theatre. These groups could pose a security threat to Israel if they were to establish themselves anywhere near its border (Dekel and Magen, 2015; Peled, 2015). That said, Daesh has so far not constituted an immediate threat to Israel, since it has primarily focused its efforts against other targets, some of which are also in an adversarial relationship with Israel (Hanauer, 2016).

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