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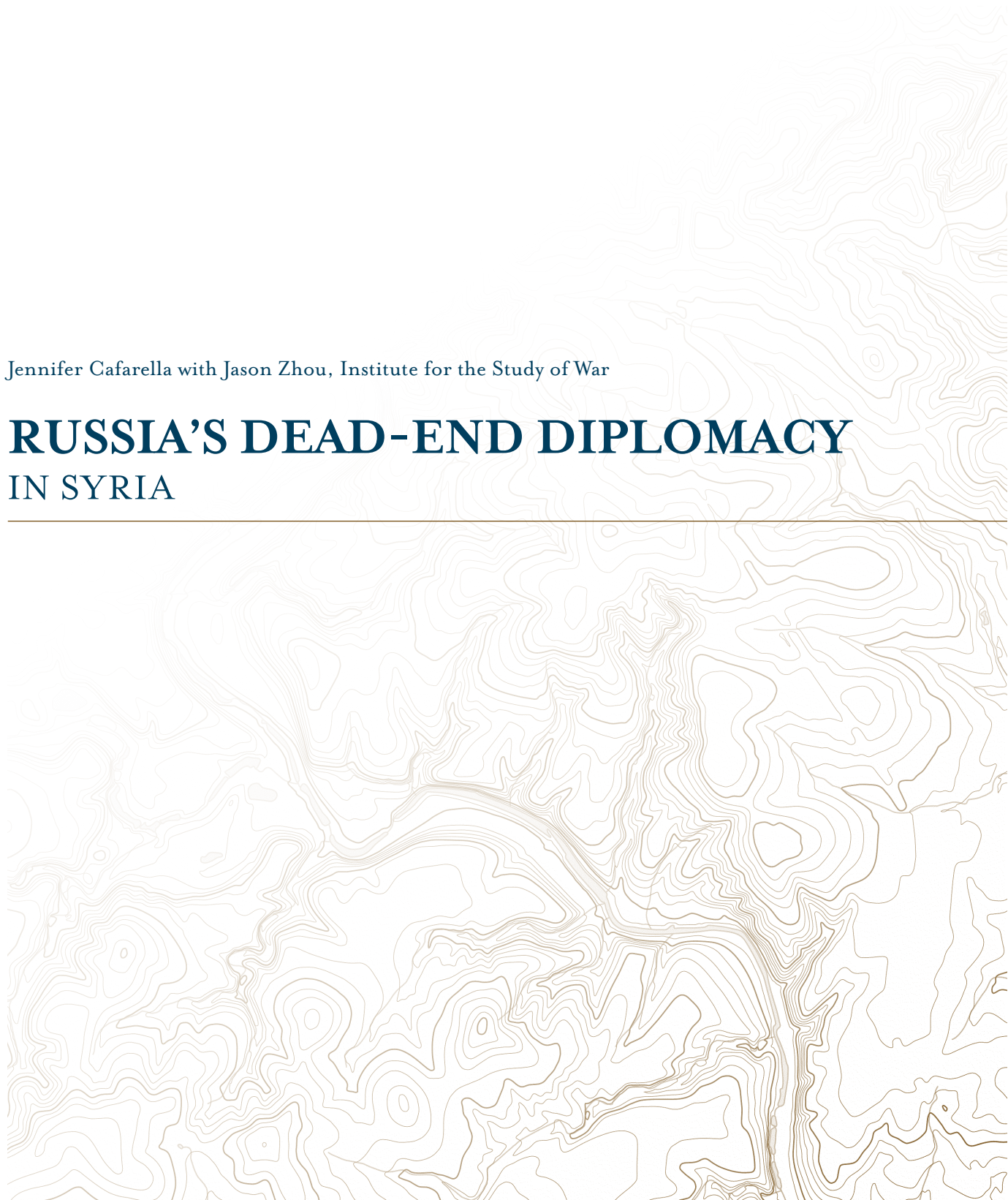
JENNIFER CAFARELLA WITH JASON ZHOU

RUSSIA'S DEAD-END DIPLOMACY IN SYRIA



Jennifer Cafarella with Jason Zhou, Institute for the Study of War

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Cover: Russian military vehicle is seen nearby a poster of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin during reopening of the road between Homs and Hama in Rastan, Syria, June 6, 2018. REUTERS/Omar Sanadiki

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RUSSIA'S DEAD-END DIPLOMACY IN SYRIA

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RUSSIA'S DEAD-END DIPLOMACY IN SYRIA

Executive Summary

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remains the primary obstacle to peace in Syria. He has consistently spoiled any diplomatic process. His actions show that he will accept only the full defeat of his opponents. Even then, he will punish those who previously defied him, as he has done in former pro-opposition communities including in Aleppo and Dera'a Provinces. Yet he cannot win the war, so the West cannot resign itself to accepting his “victory” for the sake of stability. He does not have the resources to reconquer and reintegrate all of Syria.

U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump mistakenly expected Russia to compel Assad to accept a diplomatic process. The Kremlin seeks to thwart any Western effort to replace Assad and to instead reach a superficial political settlement that legitimizes his regime and neutralizes his opposition. Buying into Russian-driven efforts thus empowers Russia to undermine American interests. Russia cannot deliver Assad to the negotiating table, moreover. Assad depends on Russian (and Iranian) military help but is not controlled by them. A fragile power balance exists between them in which Assad often gains an upper hand. Russia has limited bandwidth and resources to commit to Syria, which Assad knows and exploits.

Russia has waged a sophisticated campaign of linked military and diplomatic efforts to shape the trajectory of the war in accord with its interests since 2015. Russia has strengthened Assad's military position, shaped international negotiations, and gained recognition as a diplomatic arbiter. The U.S. still has an opportunity to displace Russia from the center of Syrian diplomacy, however. Russia's inability to persuade or compel Assad to respect the terms it brokers is costing it influence within opposition communities.

The West's current diplomatic framework in Syria, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, may do more harm than good under current circumstances. UNSCR 2254 calls for a ceasefire and the drafting of a new Syrian Constitution followed by UN-monitored elections. These fall far short of the opposition's initial demands, which included Assad's departure and a transitional government, and thus represent a major compromise to Assad's backers. The implementation of UNSCR 2254 will likely alienate opposition communities and empower Salafi-Jihadist Groups. Assad will manipulate it to allow his further consolidation.

- UNSCR 2254's notion of a free, fair, and internationally-monitored election in Syria, is particularly unrealistic. Assad openly opposes the notion of election monitors and has scheduled his own presidential election for 2021, which he will almost certainly rig. Most dangerously, he may try to coopt the UNSCR 2254 process to legitimize his election with monitors from friendly countries in Russia's orbit.
- Assad will spoil the implementation of UNSCR 2254 while continuing to consolidate power slowly. He allowed the Syrian Constitutional Committee to form in September 2019 only after manipulating its composition to give himself *de facto* veto power over its deliberations. He will use this leverage to deny meaningful progress towards reform.

American policymakers are biased toward viewing a cessation of hostilities as the most important sign of diplomatic progress in Syria and thus overlook opportunities to shape Syria's long-term trajectory. The U.S. must widen its aperture for what diplomacy in Syria can and must achieve.

- Continuing forward with UNSCR 2254 risks making a settlement even more difficult by further discrediting the few opposition figures still willing to negotiate with the regime, even indirectly. Syria's prospects for a political compromise grow more distant as the number of opposition leaders willing to accept one shrinks.
- The existence of a diplomatic process that opposition groups view as credible is essential to denying recruitment opportunities to Salafi-Jihadists. Al Qaeda and affiliated groups have doubled down on their longstanding claim that Syrians face only two credible options: jihad or subjugation to Assad. This narrative will only be further entrenched if the international community falsely trumpets superficial diplomatic progress as meaningful change in the lives of Syrians.

The U.S. is pursuing the wrong diplomatic goal. American policymakers are biased toward viewing a cessation of hostilities as the most important sign of diplomatic progress in Syria and thus overlook opportunities to shape Syria's long-term trajectory. The U.S. must widen its aperture for what diplomacy in Syria can and must achieve. The U.S. should set as its overarching goal keeping space open for political competition within Syria and reinvigorating and relegitimizing a stale and discredited diplomatic process.

The U.S. can shape Syria's long-term trajectory with relatively limited resources. American economic pressure limits the scope and scale of what Assad and his backers can achieve, thereby preserving space for competition. The U.S. should further constrain Assad's access to funds, including through sanctions and pressing the UN to apply greater scrutiny to the misappropriation of humanitarian aid in Syria. The U.S. should also continue to prevent the normalization of the regime's atrocities by supporting European efforts to prosecute former and current regime members for war crimes at minimum.

The U.S. should work with the UN and other partners to launch a new diplomatic initiative to begin an intra-Syrian dialogue through conferences and Track II initiatives that include as much of Syrian society as possible. The existence of such a process is valuable even though it will not soon end the war nor gain wide participation at first. It can provide an outlet for Syrian civil society to remain active as well as a mechanism for the U.S., UN and other Western states to apply political pressure on Assad and his backers. It can isolate states with problematic roles such as Turkey and incentivize changes in their behavior in the future. It could also provide a new way to incorporate groups currently excluded from the UNSCR 2254 process, such as the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Within Syria, the U.S. should do more to gain local leverage and connect it to a reinvigorated diplomatic framework. The U.S. should recommit to its partnership with the SDF in Eastern Syria to build credible and inclusive governance as an alternative to both Assad and Salafi-Jihadist Groups. The U.S. should deploy additional forces to work with the SDF to stabilize the east and block further Turkish incursions. The U.S. State Department should also expand its local dialogue with Syrian communities in order to broaden America's understanding of their needs and goals, including in Eastern Syria where U.S. forces operate, and should explore ways to support civil society groups in Northwest Syria attempting to dampen Al Qaeda's influence. The U.S. should also seek opportunities to reengage in other parts of Syria as conditions on the ground change. For example, the brewing insurgency in Southern Syria may generate new local leaders with whom the U.S. can engage.

President Trump is unlikely to take these steps given his desire to disengage from the Middle East. Yet the U.S. does indeed have vital national security interests in Syria including preventing the growth of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other Salafi-Jihadist Groups; blocking and ultimately reversing the long-term military presence of Iran and Russia in Syria; and halting attacks that amount to ethnic cleansing against the Syrian Kurds. If the Trump Administration remains committed to its current course, it is virtually certain to fail to secure the vital interests of the U.S. in Syria, including reaching an enduring diplomatic settlement to the war.

Introduction

Two U.S. administrations have mistakenly looked to Russia for help solving the fundamental obstacle to a political compromise in Syria: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's refusal to accept any outcome short of total military victory. Both U.S. President Barack Obama and U.S. President Donald Trump pursued diplomatic strategies that hinged on an assumption that Russia could—and would—compel Assad to accept a compromise. They correctly judged that Russia seeks to limit its military costs in Syria but overestimated its ability to shape Assad's behavior. Russia cannot deliver Assad to the negotiating table.

Russia is playing a complex diplomatic game. The Kremlin's ultimate goals in Syria include thwarting any Western effort to replace Assad. It has deliberately drawn the U.S. and UN into diplomatic processes on Syria to buy time until conditions are suitable for it to either coopt the peace process or make a diplomatic push of its own that preserves Assad's regime. Russia worked with the Obama Administration to pass a new UN Security Council Resolution on Syria in December 2015, three months after Russia intervened in Syria in September 2015.¹ The resolution—UNSCR 2254—calls for a ceasefire, constitutional revisions, and new free and fair elections monitored by the UN.² These terms fall far short of opposition demands for a transitional government and the removal of Assad.³ UNSCR 2254 thus provided a diplomatic track favorable to Assad and vulnerable to manipulation by Russia.

Assad eagerly accepts Russia's military support but not its diplomatic agenda. He has shown in the past eight years of war that he would rather see the complete destruction of his country than step down or compromise with his opposition. Often, he exploits gaps between Russia and Iran to play his backers against one another. His intransigence ensures that the armed insurgency against him will continue and radicalize further. He does not have the strength to win outright, however, even with aid from Russia and Iran. He has thus put Syria on a path toward generational conflict.

Assad eagerly accepts Russia's military support but not its diplomatic agenda. He has shown in the past eight years of war that he would rather see the complete destruction of his country than step down or compromise with his opposition.

Assad's intransigence has not changed Russia's commitment to his regime but does illustrate the limits of the Kremlin's influence in Syria. Russia has pursued five major diplomatic efforts in Syria since 2015. Assad has opposed—and often actively thwarted—them all. Russia has adapted after diplomatic setbacks and focused on learning to influence Assad's opposition far more than Assad. Russia has offered guarantees to opposition groups multiple times and then failed to prevent Assad from spoiling. Russia's overpromising is further discrediting the notion of a meaningful political settlement among the population that rebelled against the regime and thereby fueling its radicalization. Assad undoubtedly favors this outcome, which sustains a requirement for Russian military support to his regime.

President Trump's recent decision to reverse the American withdrawal from Eastern Syria provides a new opportunity for the U.S. to craft a more effective policy to shape the trajectory of the war in Syria. The complex interactions between Assad, Russia, and Syrian opposition groups since 2015 provide a case study in how military and diplomatic efforts can—and cannot—determine outcomes. The U.S. has typically overlooked the

value of even limited action. American decision-makers should learn from these examples to develop a more tailored approach to affecting both the war and its conclusion.

Russia, Iran, and Assad: A Fragile Interdependence

Differences between Assad and Russia exist but are not exploitable in the ways the U.S. has assumed. A complex and dynamic power balance exists in regime-held Syria. The relationships between Assad, Russia, and Iran depend on a complicated interaction between their relative goals and balance of power, which evolve as the situation changes on the ground. This fragile interdependence limits the effectiveness of their coalition but makes it resilient against pressure from the West. Each has leverage over the others that they can—and do—use to spoil policies that they oppose. These complex relationships will determine the trajectory of Assad's Syria and possibly of the wider conflict.

Western observers must be careful not to make assumptions about what happens behind closed doors. There is much we do not know from public information about how Russia, Assad, and Iran interact in Syria. More robust conversations certainly occur between them than are observable publicly, especially because each state controls its domestic information space and withholds details of deliberations. Yet it is still possible to analyze how all three actors interact and make decisions based on their observable activity.

Goals

Assad, Russia, and Iran cooperate closely in pursuit of shared objectives while simultaneously pursuing independent lines of effort toward separate national interests. This tension occasionally causes them to work at cross-purposes. At times, it causes paralysis. Overall, it generates a balance of power that keeps their coalition aligned toward the regime's recovery but risks turning Syria into a battleground for regional and great power confrontations.

Assad

Assad retains an uncompromising determination to recover his regime's pre-war grip on power but remains militarily weak and economically crippled.

He seeks to preserve the dominance of the ruling (but minority) Alawites and reestablish the patronage networks among both minorities and the majority Sunni Arabs that have enabled his family's dominance since the 1970s. He intends to completely reconquer Syria and expel uninvited foreign forces (i.e. the U.S. and Turkey), and is willing to spend decades fighting if necessary.⁴ As of November 2019, ISW assesses that Assad's immediate strategic objectives are:

- Eliminating current and future threats to his regime by retaking all of Syria;
- Regaining international legitimacy by ending his isolation and status as a pariah-state;
- Reestablishing basic mechanisms of regime control including patronage networks, local governance structures, and restrictive population controls;
- Securing limited economic relief for his regime and its support base;
- Protecting his sovereignty by resisting Russian and Iranian co-optation of his regime.

Assad pursues these objectives by accepting Russia and Iran's military help while taking independent action to shape the trajectory of the war toward his interests—even when that conflicts with the objectives of his backers. He is stronger in November 2019 than at any point since 2011, but he still faces serious challenges as discussed below.

Russia

Russia deployed to Syria to save Assad but also to accomplish wider goals for which Assad's regime is a useful tool. Russia's grand strategic objectives that relate to Syria include reestablishing its standing as a great power and diminishing the global influence of the U.S. and NATO. Its subordinate strategic objectives in Syria focus on using the Middle East to expand its military and diplomatic influence.⁵ These include:

Military

- Expanding Russia's global access to strategic basing;
- Rebuilding Russia's military power & developing new military capabilities;
- Increasing Russia's weapons sales.

Political

- Disrupting and dividing NATO;
- Legitimizing Russia as an international mediator;
- Broadening Russia's influence in the Middle East and Europe;
- Normalizing Russia's violations of international norms;
- Creating a constellation of international alliances that gravitate toward Russia.

Moscow has pursued these goals by building a military hub in Syria to project power in the Levant and beyond while reestablishing its former sphere of influence in the Middle East. Russia secured forty-nine-year leases from Assad for the Hmeimim Airbase and the Tartus Naval Facility on the Syrian Coast in 2017 and 2019, respectively.⁶ Russia can use these bases to contest NATO in the Mediterranean Sea and challenge Turkish and U.S. aerial dominance in the Levant by extending its anti-access / area denial network.⁷ Russia is already using this infrastructure to project force into Africa.⁸ It is also using the conflict to train its military and market its weapons before a global audience.

Moscow has used its involvement in Syria to increase its stature as an international mediator. Russia has repurposed diplomatic processes ostensibly focused on resolving the Syrian war to advance its wider objectives, such as co-opting Turkey from NATO and gaining access to reconstruction funds. Moscow's campaign to exploit its role in Syria internationally has been so successful that it has even used it to draw states far outside the Middle East with limited interests in Syria deeper into its orbit. The most prominent example is Belarus, which attended a Russian-brokered meeting on Syria in November 2018.⁹ Subsequent sections of this report will examine these successes.

Iran

Iran sees the survival of Assad's Alawite-dominated regime as an existential requirement for its own interests. It has at least four grand strategic objectives at stake in Syria:

- Preserving and exporting the Islamic Revolution;
- Establishing regional hegemony at the expense of Saudi Arabia and (to a lesser degree) Turkey;
- Expelling the U.S. from the Middle East;
- Eliminating the state of Israel.

Beyond preserving Assad, Iran's priorities in Syria include expanding its regional Axis of Resistance – its network of largely Shi'a militant groups including Lebanese Hezbollah that give it strategic depth and leverage against Israel.¹⁰ After 2011, Iran significantly expanded its proxy deployments to Syria to augment the failing Syrian Arab Army (SAA), which in turn increased its ability to threaten the U.S. and Israel from Syria. Iran has invested heavily in building long-term military infrastructure across Syria; recruiting for a new branch of Syrian Hezbollah; and conducting religious and cultural outreach to Syrian Sunnis located in the Golan Heights and Eastern Syria.¹¹ In 2019, Iran began shifting some missile factories from Syria to Iraq after repeated strikes in Syria by Israel.¹² U.S. officials later reported Israel conducted multiple airstrikes in Iraq targeting arms depots run by Iran's proxies in Iraq beginning in July 2019.¹³

Friction Points

Assad aligns more closely with Iran than Russia. Russia and Assad are on the same side of the war but disagree on the desired endstate and means to achieve it. Russia does not share Assad's maximalist goal to reconquer all of Syria. Russia is largely content if it can secure its bases on the Syrian Coast, the Assad regime remains intact enough to guarantee their long-term presence, and the West fails at removing Assad. Everything else is a bonus. Russia's metrics for success are thus much lower than those of Assad and Iran. Moscow has pursued a diplomatic settlement of the war that legitimizes Assad in part to



FIGURE 1. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Embraces Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali al-Khamenei in Tehran in February 2019

help reduce its military expenditures and lift some international pressure on both Russia and Assad. Russia is willing to grant concessions in pursuit of this goal that Assad refuses to consider. Iran similarly shares Assad's desire to expand the regime's control deeper into Eastern Syria and does not share Russia's interest in a diplomatic settlement.

Assad actively supports Iran's wider regional goals, while Russia seeks to dampen the escalation cycle between Iran and Israel. Assad views Iran as a useful tool against Israel. This alignment deepened after President Trump recognized Israel's annexation of

the Golan Heights in March 2019.¹⁴ Iran's hegemonic goals do not align with Russia's desire to play a mediating role in the Middle East. The Kremlin has pursued close relationships with both Israel and Saudi Arabia in order to position itself as the key international interlocutor and dampen the regional conflicts fueled by Iran. Russia has provided assurances to Israel that it will work to constrain Iran in Syria in order to dissuade further escalation.¹⁵ Moscow has bought time with these pledges but has failed to deliver meaningfully on its promises to Israel.

Balance of Power

Neither Assad, Russia, nor Iran have a clear upper hand over the other members of their coalition. Assad does depend on Russia and Iran for survival but is not controlled by them. Each actor needs support from the others to accomplish its own objectives. All three have advantages that they can—and do—use to outmaneuver and gain more leverage over the others when it suits them. This competition is intensifying in recaptured areas of Syria as all three compete for revenue streams and other sources of power. Assad may hold the ultimate advantage in the post-conquest phase.

Russia's greatest source of leverage over its partners is its military support (particularly airpower) for the design and execution of operations that Assad and Iran could not conduct on their own. Without Moscow's intervention in 2015, Assad likely would have needed to contract his regime to the Syrian Coast, which would have significantly disrupted Iran's goals in Syria.¹⁶ Russia also has diplomatic leverage through its veto in the UN Security Council, which insulates both Assad and Iran from greater international pressure. Russia's support has preserved the Assad regime and through it Iran's regional agenda.

Russia cannot dictate terms to either Assad or Iran, however, and it similarly depends on them to enable its operations in Syria. Moscow frames its intervention as a request from the 'legitimate' Government of Syria and therefore depends—though to a lesser extent—on Assad's permission to operate in Syria. Russia likely would not withdraw its military forces if asked by Assad, but retaining at least superficial legal justification strengthens Russia's international effort to legitimize its activity and discredit America's.¹⁷

Moscow was able to draw the U.S. and the UN into multiple ceasefire deals, each ostensibly a building block toward implementing UNSCR 2254, without demonstrating any serious ability to force Assad to uphold them.

Moscow does not have enough independent combat power in Syria to secure its bases or defeat the opposition to Assad, making it reliant on forces loyal to Assad and Iran. Russia's military presence relies at minimum upon infrastructure and logistics support from Syria. The Kremlin has accepted this dependence due to resource constraints but also to train its military on how to fight within a coalition.¹⁸ Russia also benefits from the plausible deniability of embedding with Syrians. Assad similarly cannot provide enough capable military forces to secure the Syrian Coast—a fact that appears to have originally surprised Moscow. Former Russian Commander in Syria Col. Gen. Aleksander Dvornikov commented publicly that Russia was disappointed to discover the true extent of the regime's weakness after intervening in Syria.¹⁹ Moscow thus also depends on Iran to secure its bases on the Syrian Coast and thereby advance its wider regional campaigns to constrain NATO's freedom of movement in the Mediterranean Sea and project force into Africa.

Russia has repeatedly attempted to mitigate this vulnerability with limited success since 2015. The Kremlin tried to reform the scattered array of pro-regime militias into a more capable and centralized force responsive to the Government of Syria in late 2015. Iran blocked the effort, having invested heavily in the creation of the pro-regime militias that Russia attempted to reorganize and repurpose.²⁰ Russia later adopted a new approach to recruit irregular pro-regime militiamen and former opposition fighters into two new units: the SAA Fourth Corps and Fifth Corps. These efforts achieved only limited success and often faced resistance from Iran.²¹ The full extent of these tensions is not visible from publicly available sources, which cannot penetrate opaque funding mechanisms and covert forms of influence and competition within these structures.

The observable activity nonetheless illustrates a complicated and fragile interdependence between Russia and Iran.

Russia and Iran are both working to generate new military forces for Assad, ameliorating some of his manpower shortage while extending their own patronage networks within Syria. However, Russia and Iran are competing—rather than cooperating—to generate these forces. Their competition also extends to economic opportunities in regime-held areas, including smuggling networks that overlap with paramilitary groups.²² Russia seeks to use the forces it generates to offset its reliance on Iran, which in turn is enlisting the forces it generates into its Axis of Resistance. Russia and Iran's force generation provides them additional influence on the ground in Syria insofar as their forces support new offensive operations by Assad. Russia has thus far experienced relatively limited success in generating combat-capable formal fighting formations. Iran has experienced more success due to its relatively more limited model, which seeks to augment and infiltrate state structures rather than build brand-new military units.

Assad relies on Russia and Iran's military assistance but still acts independently to advance his own interests.²³ He cooperates with Moscow's efforts when it suits him and undermines them when it does not. He will often support Russian-designed military operations up to a point and then sabotage them or otherwise shape their outcome. His behavior reflects his intent to retain as much freedom of action as possible but also reflects tensions in his relationship with Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin has stood alongside Assad but does not view him as an equal. In one prominent case, a Russian military officer even constrained Assad from walking alongside Putin during a visit to Russia's Hmeimim Airbase in Syria.²⁴ Anti-regime media widely distributed a photograph of the incident, which almost certainly inflamed Assad's commitment to preserving his independence and his claim to sovereignty.²⁵

Iran likely has more leverage over Assad than Russia. Assad cultivated a close relationship with Tehran before the Syrian Revolution and relied on increasing levels of Iranian military involvement to keep his regime afloat long before Russia's intervention in 2015. Even Iran's influence in Syria has limits, however. As in Iraq and Lebanon, Iran and its proxies have infiltrated state institutions and thereby subverted some of the sovereignty of Syria. The old guard of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, the vehicle of the regime's control, has a deep discomfort with perceived domination by Iran.²⁶ Assad marginalized some of these leading figures early in the conflict, but aversion to Iranian influence remains and internal pushback at minimum can apply some constraints on Iran.²⁷ Furthermore, U.S. sanctions on Iran have already disrupted Tehran's economic lifeline to Syria, which could decrease the relative value of Iran's support to Assad. Assad does not have good alternatives to replenish these losses, however.

Assad retains his own leverage over Russia and Iran. He maintains deep patronage networks across many sectors of society, including the Sunni Arab majority and the Christian and Druze minorities. His outright control over powerbrokers within his regime has frayed considerably over the course of the conflict due to his reliance upon quasi-independent militias funded by key oligarchs to hold and reclaim terrain. These alternate centers of power developed some ability to check Assad's behavior. He is far more adept at navigating these complex dynamics than Russia, however. The EU noted in May 2019 that Assad "presides over a system that comprises competing and complementary—formal and informal—networks, creating symbiotic relationships predicated on both his survival and their continued cooperation."²⁸ He is able to manipulate this web of loyal powerbrokers and create new ones from the informal militias that have emerged since the start of the conflict. This skill is an important source of influence that he can—and does—use to outmaneuver Russia and Iran.

Russia's Linked Military & Diplomatic Campaigns

Russia used its intervention in September 2015 to shape international negotiations over Syria while preserving and strengthening Assad on the ground. Putin stated in October 2015 that Russia aimed to “stabilize the legitimate authorities and create conditions for finding a political compromise” in Syria.²⁹ Russia designed and supported a series of key pro-regime military operations over five phases from 2015 to 2019. The Kremlin attempted to broker a wider political settlement at the end of each phase but failed each time to secure buy-in from either Assad or his opponents in Syria.

Russia did achieve significant diplomatic traction in the West, however. The West's desperation for a cessation of hostilities in Syria made it vulnerable to manipulation by Russia. Moscow was able to draw the U.S. and the UN into multiple ceasefire deals, each ostensibly a building block toward implementing UNSCR 2254, without demonstrating any serious ability to force Assad to uphold them. The U.S. and Europe repeatedly accepted these superficial attempts to reduce the violence in Syria. Yet Russia simultaneously continued to improve Assad's position on the ground, making him more uncompromising and unwilling to grant even limited concessions to end war.

Russia's Initial Entry into Syria

Russia designed its first phase of major military operations to soften international and local resistance to a diplomatic settlement favorable to Assad. Russia's intervention enabled Syria and Iran to establish secure defensive lines in Latakia, Hama, and Homs Provinces in Northwest Syria.³⁰ These operations stabilized the regime, which had lost control of Idlib City in April 2015 and faced a major jihadist threat to Hama City and the Alawite heartland on the Syrian Coast.³¹ Assad was also losing territory to ISIS in Central Syria, creating a potential future threat to Damascus.³² Moscow initially prioritized efforts to secure its new airbase and long-standing

naval base on the Syrian Coast. It then set the objective to seize Aleppo City and thereby eliminate a key stronghold for opposition groups backed by Turkey and the U.S.³³

Russia and Assad worked to mitigate their resource shortages by establishing mechanisms for opposition groups to surrender.³⁴ Moscow opened the Russian Reconciliation Center at the Hmeimim Airbase in February 2016 to negotiate with opposition groups in close coordination with the Syrian Ministry of National Reconciliation and Turkey.³⁵ In July 2016, Assad expanded a preexisting amnesty law to grant formal pardons to fighters who surrendered and agreed to “regularize their status” with the state.³⁶ This process included submitting to investigation and agreeing formally not to conduct future anti-regime activity. The law stated that fighters who agreed to the amnesty would be “exempted from full punishment” for what the regime considered acts of terrorism, which implied that participants would not suffer severe reprisals.

Meanwhile, international efforts to broker talks between the regime and its opposition broke down in early 2016. The UN attempted to convene a new round of talks in January 2016 but suspended the effort in less than a month after the opposition refused to attend, citing the regime's refusal to grant good-faith concessions such as a halt to airstrikes.³⁷ Then-High Negotiating Committee (HNC) Chair Riyadh Hijab—the head of a joint bloc of political and armed opposition—reiterated opposition demands for political concessions that far exceeded UNSCR 2254, stressing that “the opposition will only talk about a ceasefire when there is a political transition that does not involve Bashar al-Assad.”³⁸

The U.S. nonetheless launched a bilateral effort with Russia to implement a ceasefire and draft a new Syrian Constitution in accordance with UNSCR 2254.³⁹ Moscow played along with this effort to distract the West while it bolstered Assad. The U.S. and Russia released a joint statement on February 22, 2016, announcing a ceasefire and establishing a “Ceasefire Task Force” to “develop effective

mechanisms to promote and monitor compliance with the ceasefire” by the regime “and other forces supporting [it]” as well as the armed opposition.⁴⁰ Russia violated the ceasefire repeatedly with airstrikes, including several targeting the headquarters of a U.S.-backed opposition group.⁴¹ Russia later announced a military withdrawal from Syria that drew praise from the UN. Yet its withdrawal was actually a troop rotation in preparation for a major pro-regime offensive to retake opposition-held Eastern Aleppo City.⁴² Russia’s manipulation muddied the diplomatic waters and bought time for its military operations in Syria.

The Obama Administration continued to try to work with Russia even as it ramped up the offensive on Aleppo City. In July 2016, the U.S. offered Russia cooperation against ISIS and Al Qaeda in exchange for a cessation of pro-regime airstrikes, hoping to avoid further bloodshed in Aleppo.⁴³ Russia viewed the offer as an opportunity to legitimize its role in Syria through a military partnership with the U.S.⁴⁴ The U.S. and Russia announced an agreement in mid-September 2016 to establish a Joint Implementation Center (JIC) that would share intelligence and coordinate airstrikes against ISIS and Al Qaeda in return for a Russian-guaranteed “genuine reduction of violence” in Syria.⁴⁵ Russia used this process to buy time to soften opposition defenses and set conditions for the upcoming urban assault on Aleppo City through mid-2016.⁴⁶

Assad and Russia quickly violated the agreement with the Obama Administration. Regime warplanes conducted airstrikes within hours of the start of the ceasefire on September 12.⁴⁷ Russia similarly continued its airstrikes, including a strike against a humanitarian aid convoy headed to Aleppo City on September 19.⁴⁸ The U.S. withdrew from the deal on October 3, stating that Russia was “either unwilling or unable to ensure Assad’s adherence to the arrangements to which Moscow agreed.”⁴⁹ The statement did not cite Russia’s own violations of the deal.

Assad, Russia, and Iran succeeded in capturing all of Aleppo City in December 2016. However, this victory did not lead to the political breakthrough sought by Russia. Opposition groups and civilians refused to accept a reconciliation deal with Assad

and chose instead to evacuate to Idlib Province. Pro-regime forces initially disrupted the evacuation and then retaliated against civilians by detaining and executing numerous military-aged males and conducting additional extrajudicial killings in formerly opposition-held areas of Aleppo City.⁵⁰ These abuses occurred despite guarantees of safe passage offered by Russia, signaling Assad’s unrestrained ability to punish his citizens for their resistance despite his reliance upon Russia and Iran.⁵¹

I. Russia’s 2017 Astana Attempt

Russia made its first attempt to reach a diplomatic settlement to the conflict immediately after the recapture of Aleppo City. Putin once again postured by claiming a partial military withdrawal from Syria in late December 2016.⁵² Russia later hosted a meeting with Turkey and Iran in Moscow on December 20 to form a new diplomatic mechanism on Syria separate from the UN. The three states released a joint statement declaring that they would cooperate to “facilitate and become guarantors” of an agreement between the Syrian regime and its opposition in what became known as the Astana Talks, as its meetings were hosted in Astana, Kazakhstan.⁵³ The Kremlin aimed to use the Astana Talks to draw the UN into a Russian-driven process that would allow it to shape the ultimate implementation of UNSCR 2254.

Russia, Turkey, and Iran convened the first set of Astana Talks in January 2017 but failed in their attempts to dictate a settlement to the conflict. The UN, Syrian regime, and opposition all attended the meeting—the latter demonstrating its weakened position after the loss of Aleppo City.⁵⁴ Russia circulated its own unilateral draft of a new Syrian Constitution and argued that the parties should accept it as the start of implementation of UNSCR 2254.⁵⁵ Turkey and the opposition delegation rejected the draft and began to pull back from the process by March 2017.⁵⁶ The Syrian regime took no public stance on the draft but likely also opposed it given the document’s emphasis on decentralization, which Assad publicly rejects.⁵⁷

The Astana Talks nonetheless proved a success for Russia's wider goal to gain diplomatic stature through its role in Syria. Russia used the framework of the talks to start a successful long-term effort to co-opt Turkey away from NATO towards an alignment with Russia and to gain disproportionate influence within international efforts to implement UNSCR 2254. The UN released a statement in late January 2017 praising the Astana Talks as an "important step towards the resumption of intra-Syrian negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations."⁵⁸ Finally, Russia used the Astana Talks as a valuable proof of concept for its future efforts to pull additional states into its independent diplomatic track on Syria.

Russia adjusted its military and political strategy in subsequent phases based on the outcomes in Aleppo City and the Astana Talks. Several Russian commanders have described Aleppo City as a "Syrian Stalingrad" and noted that it necessitated a new approach to military operations in Syria, citing the high casualties suffered by the pro-regime coalition. Former Russian Commander in Syria Col. Gen. Alexander Zhuravlev, who served during the Battle for Aleppo City, stated that Russia learned to "simultaneously plan and carry out measures to remove civilians ... while carrying out combat missions" during the fighting in Aleppo. Pro-Kremlin experts also openly discussed Russia's initial failure at Astana as a lesson learned in Syria.⁵⁹

Russia would continue to hold the Astana Talks, but it adjusted its overall approach in 2017 to focus on a more limited way forward that combined narrow military operations with a new diplomatic effort focused on convening an intra-Syrian dialogue to implement UNSCR 2254.

2. Russia's 2018 Sochi Conference

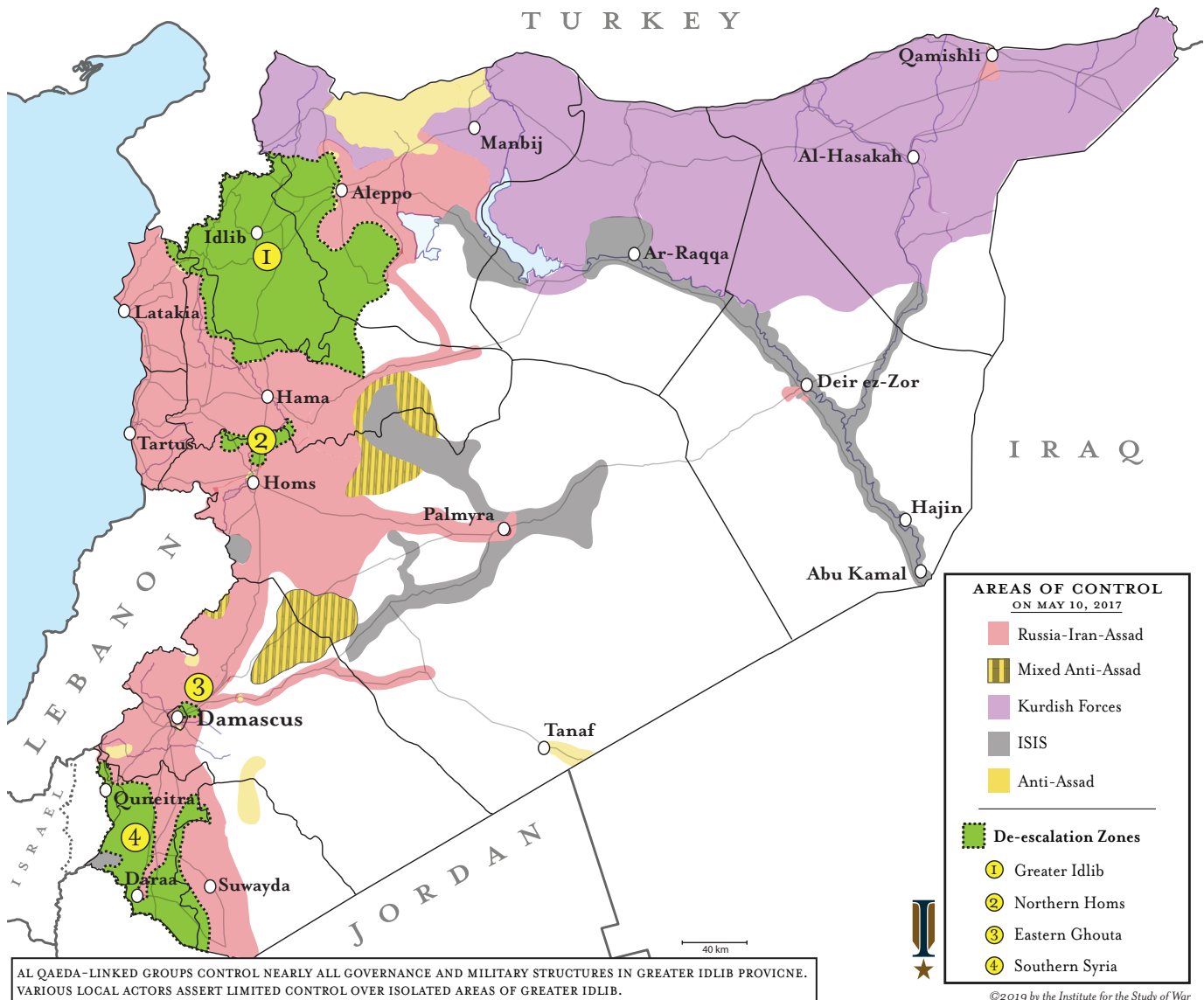
Russia undertook a yearlong campaign to set diplomatic and military conditions before its next attempt to reach a political settlement to the conflict in January 2018. First, it established a new framework of de-escalation zones in Western Syria via the Astana Talks. Second, it enabled a military campaign

to reassert Assad's control over oil and natural gas reserves held by ISIS in Eastern Syria.⁶⁰ Assad would exploit Russia's military assistance but once again act to spoil its wider diplomatic line of effort.

Russia helped spoil an attempt by the UN to convene yet another set of intra-Syrian talks in February 2017. Russia pushed to invite the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)—a stance rejected by the opposition, Assad, and Turkey.⁶¹ The PYD is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) currently waging an insurgency in Turkey.⁶² It also seeks to establish a semi-autonomous region in Northern Syria. Russia held a round of Astana Talks on February 15–16, 2017, one week before the talks began on February 23. UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura met separately with regime and opposition delegations but made no meaningful diplomatic progress.⁶³

Russia, Iran, and Turkey later agreed to establish four de-escalation zones in parts of opposition-held Western Syria at a new set of Astana Talks on May 6, 2017. The zones included (1) Greater Idlib Province; (2) Northern Homs Province; (3) the Eastern Ghouta Suburbs of Damascus; and (4) Southern Syria.⁶⁴ The agreement called for an indefinite ceasefire in these zones, although the parties did not finalize their boundaries and terms until September 17.⁶⁵ The deal catapulted Astana to the center of international negotiations over Syria. Yet the opposition delegation refused to attend the Astana Talks.⁶⁶ They condemned the agreement over to its failure to cover all parts of Syria, its lack of constraints on Assad, and its inclusion of Iran.⁶⁷ Assad did not negotiate or sign the deal and his forces would violate its provisions repeatedly despite his public claims to support the results reached at Astana.⁶⁸

Turkey's support for the de-escalation zones marked a turning point in the conflict and brought Ankara closer to Moscow. The deal reduced the military pressure against areas in Northwest Syria where Turkey supported anti-regime groups, which helped it regain credibility among its proxies after failing to intervene in Aleppo City. Turkey exploited the reduction in violence to develop and reinforce



its client opposition groups in Northern Syria.⁶⁹ It also used the Astana Talks to negotiate with Russia for freedom of action to fight the Kurdish PYD-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, which constituted the primary ground partner of the U.S. Anti-ISIS Campaign. In January 2018, Moscow conceded to a military operation by Turkey to invade and ethnically cleanse majority-Kurdish Afrin Canton on the Syrian-Turkish Border.⁷⁰

Russia also used the negotiations over the de-escalation zones to resume talks with the U.S. over

Syria, this time with the Trump Administration. The Kremlin once again sought to coopt the U.S. into a diplomatic alignment focused on counterterrorism. President Trump had stressed a desire for de-escalation in Syria following a phone call with Putin on May 2, 2017, opening the door for Russia to make him an offer.⁷¹ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed that Russia intended to stay in Syria for the indefinite future and that the West should work with Russia rather than try to remove Assad. Lavrov stressed this point after a meeting with President Trump on May 10, declaring: “We do

not have a notion of an exit strategy. The obsession with ousting particular leaders—look what it has led to. Why don't we try to learn from our mistakes, focus on process, defeating terrorism?"⁷²

Russia, Jordan, and the U.S. agreed to implement a separate ceasefire in Southern Syria in July 2017 to augment the original deal reached by Russia, Iran, and Turkey at Astana.⁷³ The new deal called for a military de-escalation zone in Southern Syria that Russia had already agreed to in principle with Turkey.⁷⁴ Moscow also agreed to exclude Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah from the Golan Heights.⁷⁵ The U.S. stressed that the agreement aimed to prevent a buildup by Iran and Hezbollah in Southern Syria that could ignite a broader conflict with Israel.⁷⁶ Yet the deal also helped legitimize Russia's role as mediator and guarantor in Syria despite its involvement as a belligerent fighting on behalf of Assad. Syrian opposition leaders condemned the new deal for excluding them from the negotiations and creating new channels outside of the UN.⁷⁷

Russia, Iran, and Assad exploited the de-escalation zones to mitigate their military risk in Western Syria as they shifted forces east to seize lucrative oil and natural gas infrastructure from ISIS and block further gains by the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition in Eastern Syria in May 2017.⁷⁸ They began this shift while still negotiating the details of the de-escalation agreements in Astana. Moscow shifted the focus of its airstrikes in the first weeks of May 2017 to target ISIS in Eastern Syria while pro-regime forces moved over the next several months to secure oil fields and logistics routes in Central Syria, Southern Raqqa Province, and the Middle Euphrates River Valley.⁷⁹ Pro-regime forces broke ISIS's siege of Deir ez-Zour City in early September 2017.⁸⁰ They later seized the Abu Kamal Border Crossing with Iraq in early November 2017.⁸¹ Russia and Iran thus gained access to key oil and natural gas infrastructure, for which Assad granted them operating contracts.⁸² These gains also strengthened Assad's claim to power in Syria. Russia likely hoped that these gains would force new concessions from opposition groups. However, Assad's newfound strength further deepened his resistance to a diplomatic settlement.

The Trump Administration sent a clear signal in mid-January 2018 that it lacked the will to pursue a more aggressive policy in Syria. Then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson provided the first (and only) clear articulation of the administration's goals in Syria on January 17, 2018, affirming that America's priority remained the defeat of ISIS while also framing a desire to use economic and diplomatic pressure to achieve a "post-Assad" Syria.⁸³ President Trump would not take serious action to change the course of the war or force the departure of Assad. Tillerson also added additional objectives—including diminishing Iran's influence in Syria, enabling refugees and internally displaced persons to return home, and eliminating the regime's weapons of mass destruction—but outlined no new steps to achieve these goals. President Trump later fired Tillerson, but the Trump Administration and new Secretary of State Michael Pompeo have continued to articulate these expansive goals.⁸⁴

The Kremlin made its second major diplomatic attempt in Syria in January 2018. Putin declared victory in Syria during a trip to the Hmeimim Airbase on the Syrian Coast in December 2017 and yet again claimed to order a withdrawal from Syria.⁸⁵ Moscow then attempted to convene an intra-Syrian "Syrian People's Congress" in Sochi on January 30.⁸⁶ Its stated purpose was the formation of a committee to revise the Syrian Constitution in accordance with UNSCR 2254.⁸⁷ Russia's true goal was once again to assert control over the implementation of UNSCR 2254 to shape an outcome that would preserve the Syrian regime. The symbology of the conference was overtly pro-regime, including regime flags.⁸⁸

However, Russia failed to secure meaningful participation from either the regime or the opposition in Sochi. Moscow successfully convened 1,500 Syrians but most were marginal or pro-regime figures with no significant influence.⁸⁹ Opposition leaders largely refused to participate on terms so openly favorable to Assad despite pressure from Turkey.⁹⁰ Despite the favorable orientation of the conference, the Syrian regime gave strict orders to the pro-regime delegates (none of whom officially represented the regime) to accept only modifications

to the existing constitution rather than a complete rewrite.⁹¹

Russia recalibrated again after its failure in Sochi. Kremlin-linked analysts observed that the conference had attempted to accomplish too much, too fast.⁹² Russia did not focus on gaining buy-in from Assad. It concluded that the opposition's distrust of the regime would preclude its desired diplomatic resolution of the war. But the opposition's general willingness to accept Russia as a mediator presented an opportunity. Moscow began to seek new ways to expand the regime's control while gaining acceptance among opposition communities ahead of yet another attempt at a diplomatic solution in Syria.

The Sochi Conference nonetheless marked a second victory for Russia's efforts to assert greater control over the implementation of UNSCR 2254 and bolster its international standing regardless of the outcome in Syria. Russia released a list of twelve principles reached at the conference, including the need to establish a committee to "reform" the Syrian Constitution—a stance consistent with Assad's demands.⁹³ Faced with gridlock at the Sochi Conference, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the UN took it upon themselves to organize a constitutional committee composed of fifty members each from the regime, opposition, and civil society. The UN took responsibility for compiling the civil society list.⁹⁴ The UN moved forward with this vision despite the fact that neither the regime nor prominent opposition groups had accepted the process itself. The Syrian regime consistently spoiled the effort to form the constitutional committee throughout 2018.⁹⁵

3. Russia's 2018 Reconciliation Experiment

After Sochi, Russia redirected its attempts to broker a favorable diplomatic settlement away from major international conferences toward local reconciliation deals aimed at neutralizing opposition strongholds. Russia implemented its lessons learned from Aleppo City and positioned the Russian Armed Forces as interlocutors and guarantors of on-the-ground deals with opposition communities. This approach succeeded in changing the calculus

of several opposition groups. One of Russia's commanders in Syria directly stated that the experience gained in Aleppo enabled the success of subsequent reconciliation efforts.⁹⁶ Russia's play was a gamble, however. Moscow lacked enough leverage over Assad and Iran to ensure they would abide by the terms of any deal brokered by Russia. Assad and Iran would extensively violate most of these deals.

Moscow used its Russian Reconciliation Center to execute a new phase of local reconciliation agreements in the de-escalation zones in Western Syria. The Kremlin framed the deals as a stepping-stone toward a meaningful negotiated settlement and exploited a widespread perception among opposition leaders that Russia was "seriously interested in the political process" in Syria.⁹⁷ Russia's Commander in Syria from October 2018 to April 2019 attributed the success of reconciliation negotiations to the "personal guarantees of [Russian] officers."⁹⁸ Each successful offer of reconciliation reduced the required military cost to capture opposition-held areas by convincing large numbers of the opposition, who were genuinely interested in a diplomatic settlement, to accept a return of regime control upon guarantees from Russia. The Syrian regime still faced resistance from Al Qaeda-linked groups, who refused to reconcile with Assad.

Russia's strategy enabled pro-regime forces to seize three of the four de-escalation zones in quick succession from February 2018 to July 2018. Assad, Russia, and Iran first prioritized recapturing the Eastern Ghouta Suburbs of Damascus in order to solidify their military and political stranglehold over the capital.⁹⁹ They then targeted the de-escalation zone in Northern Homs Province to secure the strategic M5 Highway connecting Damascus to Hama City.¹⁰⁰ Finally, they forced the surrender of opposition-held Southern Syria, which held symbolic value as the birthplace of the Syrian Revolution and economic value due to the Syrian-Jordanian Border.¹⁰¹ However, they failed to repeat this success in the final de-escalation zone in Greater Idlib Province in August 2018, where Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) successfully pressured civilians and

other opposition groups to reject the reconciliation offers from Russia.¹⁰²

Russia sought to co-opt reconciled opposition leaders into a regime-tolerated internal opposition that could participate in a future intra-Syrian dialogue per the terms of UNSCR 2254.¹⁰³ Assad seems to have supported this effort, likely because it excluded the UN and the West and because he had already demonstrated that Russia could not force him to grant major concessions. Beginning in September 2018, Syrian regime figures worked with Russia to hold a series of meetings to build support for a new national dialogue among reconciled opposition members in Southern Syria.¹⁰⁴

Assad and Iran almost immediately violated the terms of the reconciliation agreements, however, thereby undermining once again Russia's ability to parlay its victory into a diplomatic settlement. It is unclear from publicly available information whether Russia had negotiated an agreement with Assad and Iran to uphold the reconciliation deals or if it knowingly accepted the risks of providing guarantees that Assad and Iran might disregard. The latter seems more likely. Assad and Iran's violations of Russia's promises rapidly destabilized the reconciled de-escalation zones, in turn undermining Moscow's attempt to build a new intra-Syrian political process.

Russia deployed Russian Military Police to the reconciled areas but was unable to provide adequate security or control other pro-regime forces. The Military Police were composed primarily of Russian Sunni Muslims from Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya.¹⁰⁵ Their presence provided a buffer between former opposition fighters and pro-regime forces.¹⁰⁶ They also appealed to the local population on religious grounds, praying openly in public spaces and providing humanitarian aid to traumatized civilians. They played a key role in local-level diplomatic outreach, convening meetings and mediating directly between conflicting parties.¹⁰⁷ One Russian Commander in Syria praised these operations as a

“turning point.”¹⁰⁸ Russia withdrew many of these units after an initial six-month period, however, and thus did not sustain long-term stability in the reconciled de-escalation zones.¹⁰⁹

Case Study: Southern Syria

Southern Syria offers a valuable case study of the failure of Russia's reconciliation efforts. It also provides illustrative examples of how the complex interdependence of Assad, Russia, and Iran shaped ground events in Syria. Southern Syria is a compelling example of their disingenuous approach to de-escalation.

Southern Syria was the most difficult de-escalation zone for pro-regime forces to seize and the most symbolically important to the Syrian Revolution. In 2018, Southern Syria remained a stronghold of moderate opposition groups that posed a political threat to Assad and that had previously received covert support from the West. Russia rightly identified that the outcome of reconciliation in Southern Syria would determine the shape of a future diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Russia also sought to position itself as the mediator who could de-escalate rising tensions between Israel and Iran (exacerbated by Iran's military buildup in Southern Syria) as well as between the West and Iran.

Russia brokered the reconciliation of opposition-held Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces in Southern Syria in July 2018. The Russian Reconciliation Center established a subordinate Supervisory and Follow-up Committee (SFC)

in mid-2018 to organize and conduct the talks.¹¹⁰ Russia's officer responsible for the “southern region” in Syria likely oversaw this effort.¹¹¹ Russian officers worked closely with regime officials, exiled opposition leaders, and local notables to negotiate with military and civilian opposition leaders.¹¹² Russia's approach was consistent with its involvement in reconciliation deals in Homs Province and Eastern Ghouta but occurred on a much greater scale in Southern Syria.¹¹³

Assad's continued violation of the reconciliation deals prompted the resumption of an insurgency in Dera'a Province in October 2018.

The specific terms of the reconciliation deals varied somewhat across Southern Syria, but the first major agreement offers a general framework. Major opposition figures based in Eastern Dera'a Province signed a reconciliation deal in Busra al-Sham on July 6, 2018. The terms of the deal as reported in pro-opposition media demonstrated that Russia's guarantees were the decisive factor in gaining buy-in from armed opposition groups.¹¹⁴ The reported terms offered to local opposition fighters included:

- an immediate ceasefire;
- a gradual handover of heavy and medium weapons;
- a guarantee of safe return for internally displaced persons;¹¹⁵
- an accelerated return for civil society organizations;
- a six-month grace period before residents needed to enroll for conscription;
- an opportunity to volunteer for irregular units backed by Russia such as the Fifth Corps;
- the withdrawal of pro-regime forces from several towns on the Syrian-Jordanian Border;¹¹⁶
- an agreement that pro-regime forces would not enter Busra al-Sham or its countryside;
- the restoration of state institutions including police, health, and “security” (presumably intelligence services) in Eastern Dera'a Province;¹¹⁷
- the deployment of Russian Military Police to Eastern Dera'a Province;¹¹⁸
- a guarantee of safe evacuation for fighters and civilians who refused to accept these terms to Greater Idlib Province in Northern Syria.¹¹⁹

Assad and Iran did not fully align with Russia in Southern Syria. They supported Russia's general approach to reconciliation, rightly calculating that it would accelerate the recapture of opposition-held areas and could lead to new economic opportunities via cross-border trade with Jordan. Assad and Iran nonetheless contested Russia's relationship with Israel. Both Assad and Iran opposed Israel's control of the Golan Heights. They therefore worked together against Russia after agreeing to the reconciliation agreements in Southern Syria. They acted jointly to undermine Russia's ability to build

stabilization mechanisms that included former opposition members who previously received humanitarian or military aid from Israel.¹²⁰

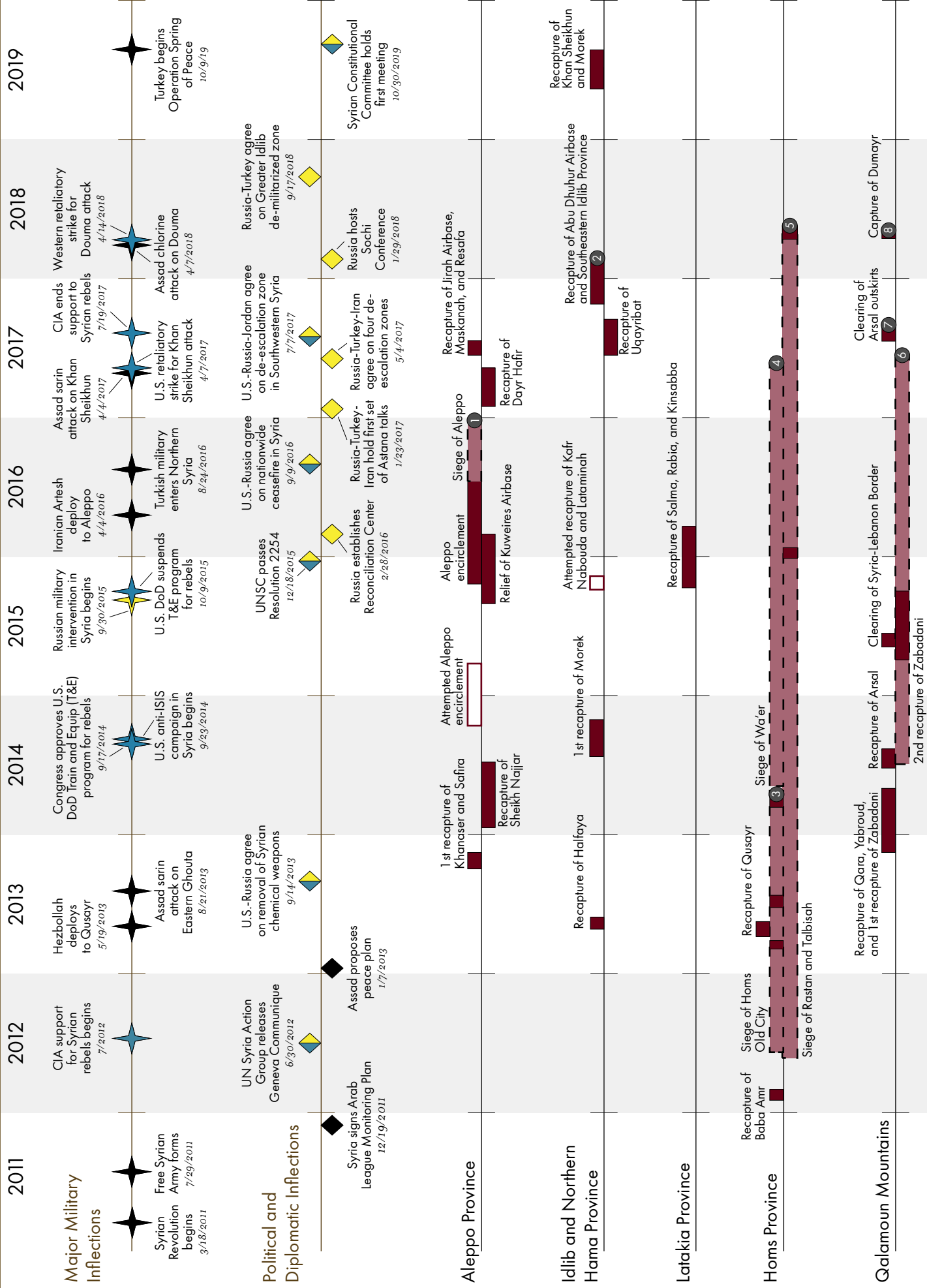
Assad immediately began an aggressive effort to reestablish his intelligence services in Southern Syria. He also sought to intimidate the now-reconciled population and demonstrate to them his intent to return to the pre-war status quo. He dispatched agents into reconciled areas of Southern Syria to ensure that former opposition fighters and their supporters “settled” their status with the regime by submitting to questioning and an evaluation of whether they could be detained for any crimes against the state.

Syrian Air Force Intelligence quickly took the lead in Southern Syria. It established fixed and mobile “settlement centers” and issued deadlines of ten-to-fifteen days for locals to present their paperwork for review.¹²¹ This process occurred in piecemeal over the next two months from late July 2018 through September 2018.¹²² The definition of who needed to settle their status varied, ranging from all military-aged males to every man and woman in a locality.¹²³ Russia mediated new rounds of technical negotiations between local leaders and regime officials over the settlement process.¹²⁴ Local negotiation committees that had agreed to reconciliation often provided lists of former opposition fighters to the authorities to identify individuals who would need to settle their status.¹²⁵

The Syrian regime imposed harsh requirements for residents to successfully settle their status. Syrian Air Force Intelligence required participants to answer extensive questions regarding their involvement in anti-regime activities and inform on others by providing the personal information and funding sources of civilian activists and armed opposition fighters.¹²⁶ It also required participants to sign an agreement vowing “not to carry out any activities that harm the internal or the external security of the Syrian Arab Republic.”¹²⁷ These terms were consistent with terms the regime imposed in Homs City in 2014. Syrian Air Force Intelligence also issued lists of names of individuals wanted for “desertion” since the start of the Syrian Revolution and demanded that they report immediately to a settlement center.¹²⁸



Pro-Assad Regime Offensives 2011 - November 2019



Russia attempted to use its relationship with Syrian Military Intelligence to uphold the terms of its reconciliation deals but could not compel cooperation from other regime intelligence agencies. Moscow had cultivated a close working relationship with Syrian Military Intelligence Chief in Southern Syria Luay Ali.¹²⁹ Syrian Military Intelligence participated in the settlement process and some reports suggested occasional direct participation by Russia.¹³⁰ It issued “settlement cards” to individuals who had completed the process and removed their names from the regime’s wanted lists. These cards in principle authorized freedom of movement within Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces.¹³¹ In practice, other regime intelligence agencies and pro-regime forces disregarded them.¹³² The Syrian regime’s unconstrained ability to impose these intimidation tactics demonstrated yet again the relative lack of leverage held by Russia.

Pro-regime forces beholden to both Assad and Iran began retaliating against the reconciled population even while the settlement process remained underway, forcing Russia to intervene repeatedly to dampen tensions in Southern Syria. Pro-regime forces quickly began arresting former opposition leaders and refused to withdraw from parts of Eastern Dera’a Province.¹³³ The Syrian regime also sent forces into Busra al-Sham on July 17.¹³⁴ These actions constituted direct violations of the reconciliation agreements. Jizah in Eastern Dera’a Province asked Russia to enable an evacuation to Greater Idlib Province on August 2 after weeks of retaliation and looting by pro-regime forces.¹³⁵ A similar convoy departed Jassim north of Dera’a City on August 11.¹³⁶ Pro-regime forces reportedly stopped several of these convoys and made some arrests, taking advantage of the absence of escorts from the Russian Military Police.¹³⁷

Assad took other steps to signal to reconciled populations that no one — not even Russia — could protect them from the regime’s wrath. He publicized the regime’s mass executions of detainees by sending death notices to their families in July 2018.¹³⁸ He reestablished statues of his father, former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, in reconciled areas

of Southern Syria. He also fired large numbers of public employees who had worked in opposition-held areas but remained on the regime’s payroll and required them to submit for screening by the Syrian National Security Directorate.¹³⁹ Assad used these harsh measures to signal his willingness to quash further insubordination and punish those who had aided the opposition, regardless of the guarantees offered by Moscow.

Russia, Assad, and Iran competed intensively to generate combat power from reconciled communities in Southern Syria. Russia recruited many former opposition fighters into the Fifth Corps, which it established in 2015 to coalesce fractious pro-regime militias and augment the faltering SAA.¹⁴⁰ The Fifth Corps opened recruitment centers with support from members of local negotiations committees and some prominent opposition commanders.¹⁴¹ Russia issued identification cards to members of the Fifth Corps to protect them from conscription and arrest.¹⁴² It also recruited former opposition fighters to other groups it favored including the Tiger Forces, one of the most capable units fighting on behalf of Assad.¹⁴³

Assad immediately began efforts forcibly to conscript civilians in Southern Syria into the SAA, thereby violating Russia’s promise to exempt reconciled individuals from conscription for six months.¹⁴⁴ Iran also recruited in reconciled areas in Southern Syria via Lebanese Hezbollah, which funneled recruits toward the SAA 4th Armored Division and Syrian Air Force Intelligence.¹⁴⁵ These recruits reportedly received funding from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) separate from the Syrian regime and thus constituted yet another effort by Iran to infiltrate the state apparatus in Syria.¹⁴⁶ These recruits also reportedly remained under the command of officers from Iran or Hezbollah, suggesting that Iran has direct control over specific elements of the 4th Armored Division and Syrian Air Force Intelligence.¹⁴⁷ Iran has reportedly extended protection guarantees to these fighters, competing with the offers from Russia.¹⁴⁸

Assad and Iran have more leverage in Southern Syria than Russia. Assad and Iran focused their

conscription and recruitment efforts on expanding their military capability in Southern Syria. Russia meanwhile committed its new combat power to other parts of Syria rather than developing deeper institutional capacity in Southern Syria. It has deployed reconciled fighters who joined the Fifth Corps to fight in Idlib and Suwayda Provinces.¹⁴⁹ Moscow thus still lacks independent capacity to either enforce its will in Southern Syria or immediately mitigate its continued dependence on Iran in Syria.

Russia's reconciliation efforts in Southern Syria broke down in late 2018. Assad's continued violation of the reconciliation deals prompted the resumption of an insurgency in Dera'a Province in October 2018. A new insurgent group called the Popular Resistance in Dera'a announced its formation on November 15, noting that it intended to deter abuses by Assad and Iran in Southern Syria.¹⁵⁰ The group later condemned opposition figures who cooperate with Russia as traitors who have given up the values of the Syrian Revolution.¹⁵¹ Pro-opposition media outlets have claimed that the organization is prioritizing attacks against Iran in Southern Syria, but its targets have also included other pro-regime forces and reconciled opposition figures.¹⁵² The insurgency continues as of November 2019 with consistent low-level attacks including ambushes, improvised explosive devices, and raids on military positions.

Popular protests also reemerged in Dera'a City in December 2018, a major turning point. Local residents including tribal elders and former opposition fighters held a public demonstration in Dera'a al-Balad District calling for strict adherence to the reconciliation agreements and the removal of Assad.¹⁵³ They also demanded concrete confidence-building measures including a halt to forced conscription and the release of detainees. The protest harkened back to the start of the Syrian Revolution in 2011 and demonstrated the inherent fragility of the reconciliation deals in Southern Syria. Civil disobedience spread across Southern Syria throughout 2019.

4. Russia's First Reconstruction Attempt

Russia also attempted to gain access to international reconstruction funds even as it helped Assad seize the remaining de-escalation zones in Syria. Russia offered to help resettle Syrian refugees from Europe if Europe invested in reconstruction in Syria.¹⁵⁴ Moscow sought to exploit the refugee crisis and growing anti-refugee sentiment in Europe to extract financial concessions for itself, Assad, and Iran. If successful, the flow of international reconstruction funds could have further dampened any momentum towards even half-hearted diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, despite the fact that Assad still controlled only half of the country.¹⁵⁵ Russia could also have used the funds to complement its efforts to coopt reconciled opposition groups into an internal intra-Syrian settlement. However, Assad yet again rejected Moscow's bid to help resettle refugees in Syria in exchange for reconstruction funds. The Trump Administration also pressured Europe to refuse the offer.

The Trump Administration instead intensified efforts to prevent Russia and Assad from accessing reconstruction funds until they implemented UNSCR 2254. It increased sanctions on key regime figures and actively blocked the delivery of reconstruction funds to Syria by threatening to add sanctions on states or companies that invested in Syria.¹⁵⁶ It intensified diplomatic pressure on Russia meant to hold it accountable for abuses by Assad, such as the use of violence against civilians and its resistance to UNSCR 2254.¹⁵⁷ The Trump Administration hoped that Assad would be more likely to negotiate if he remained economically weak and Russia faced greater pressure to curb his behavior. The U.S.—and ultimately the EU—argued that reconstruction first required meaningful implementation of UNSCR 2254.¹⁵⁸ Russia accused the West of tying humanitarian aid to geopolitics and increased its own pressure on the U.S.¹⁵⁹

The Kremlin attempted to convince the Trump Administration to support reconstruction as an expansion of a preexisting military de-confliction

mechanism established to prevent an unintentional air incident over Syria. Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov sent a letter to this effect to then U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford in July 2018. The letter detailed a proposal for the U.S. and Jordan to build on the de-escalation agreement in Southern Syria (which Russia had violated) to form a new joint committee to reconstruct regime-held areas and return refugees.¹⁶⁰ It also asked the U.S. to form a separate joint group with Russia to finance infrastructure in regime-held areas.¹⁶¹ Russia reportedly falsely attempted to portray the offer as an outcome of the July 16 Helsinki Summit between President Trump and Putin.¹⁶² The Trump Administration rejected the offer and reaffirmed that the U.S. would only provide reconstruction aid linked to the implementation of UNSCR 2254.

Assad also acted to spoil this reconstruction pitch despite his need for funds. He likely expected the West to attach conditions to reconstruction funds that could potentially create pretexts for future action against his regime. Furthermore, Assad does not want his dissident population to return, especially since he has not reestablished sufficient security in recaptured areas to suppress a renewed insurgency. Former Syrian Air Force Intelligence Director Jamil Hassan—a close adviser to Assad—reportedly told a closed-door meeting in 2018 that the regime would prefer to govern ten million compliant citizens than accept the return of the over six million refugees back to Syria.¹⁶³

Assad thus signaled to Europe that he would retaliate against refugees if they returned home regardless of guarantees from Russia. The Syrian Parliament passed a law in April 2018 that allowed the state to designate zones for reconstruction and seize privately owned property.¹⁶⁴ It ostensibly allowed Syrians able to prove their ownership to receive shares in new properties, but nearly three-quarters of all property deeds have been lost during the war.¹⁶⁵ The law thus ensured that millions of dissident refugees and internally displaced persons would be unable to reclaim their land.¹⁶⁶ The Syrian Parliament later passed a one-year extension to the

period for citizens to prove property ownership under pressure from Russia.¹⁶⁷ The Syrian regime has nonetheless continued to seize property and even resettle loyalist families in recaptured areas to entrench demographic change.¹⁶⁸ It has also stipulated that its intelligence services must vet all individuals returning to claim property, deterring voluntary returns by most Syrians.

The Syrian regime allowed limited numbers of refugees to return from Lebanon after July 2018 in order to relieve pressure on Lebanese Hezbollah and demonstrate how it would treat refugees from Europe. Syrians in Lebanon faced more desperate conditions than those in Europe and thus they were willing to take greater risks by returning to Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah also compelled some refugees to depart Lebanon.¹⁶⁹ The Syrian regime conscripted many of the returnees into military service and forced others to sign loyalty pledges and provide detailed documentation of their political history.¹⁷⁰ This behavior effectively deterred large-scale returns by Syrian refugees living in Europe.

5. Russia's Second Reconstruction Attempt

Russia adjusted its strategy yet again in late 2018. Russia and Assad attacked Greater Idlib Province in Northwest Syria—the last of the de-escalation zones brokered at Astana. Russia used the leverage it gained from these attacks to extract limited concessions from Turkey, including greater trade between Idlib Province and the remainder of regime-held Western Syria. Russia used this agreement with Turkey to ask once again for reconstruction funds from Europe. Europe once again refused the offer.

Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached an agreement on a roadmap for Greater Idlib Province on September 17, 2018. This Sochi Agreement sought to reopen trade (after a period of demilitarization) between regime-held and opposition-held parts of Northwest Syria.¹⁷¹ Russia promised to “take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on

Idlib [Province would] be avoided and the existing status quo [would] be maintained.” The agreement required a withdrawal of all heavy weapons, tanks, and artillery from frontlines by October 10 and of all “radical” fighters—including Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—by October 15, but it did not explicitly place this responsibility on Turkey.¹⁷² The deal also committed Russia and Turkey to joint patrols along the frontlines to restore “trade and economic relations” in Northwest Syria, including reopening two major highways connecting Aleppo City, Hama City, and the Syrian Coast by the end of 2018.¹⁷³

Al Qaeda and Assad both acted to spoil the Sochi Agreement. HTS and other Al Qaeda-affiliated groups refused to withdraw from the frontlines in Greater Idlib Province.¹⁷⁴ Assad for his part signaled support for a temporary demilitarization but reiterated his intent to regain control of all of Syria during a meeting of the Syrian Ba’ath Party Central Committee on October 7.¹⁷⁵ Assad likely sought to reap the economic benefits of even a short-term resumption of trade. His forces nonetheless conducted repeated artillery barrages targeting Greater Idlib Province, likely to demonstrate his independence from Russia.¹⁷⁶ His violations of the deal further justified HTS’s own refusal to abide by the Sochi Agreement.

The UN’s work to reach a breakthrough on a constitutional committee also stalled in October 2018. UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura announced his intent to resign at the end of November 2018, although he later agreed to remain until December 2018 in order to facilitate a final push by the U.S. and UN to convene a constitutional committee in accordance with UNSCR 2254.¹⁷⁷ De Mistura noted before this departure that it “may not be possible to form a constitutional committee, credible and inclusive, at this stage.”¹⁷⁸

Assad will meter the implementation of UNSCR 2254 so that it either fails or supports his interests. His influence within the Syrian Constitutional Committee enables him to stall the process at will and limit the outcome to only superficial reforms.

Russia used this time to make a renewed pitch for reconstruction aid.

Turkey also conducted a failed attempt to revive Russia’s proposal for Europe to invest in Syria in exchange for help implementing UNSCR 2254 in October 2018. On October 27, Turkey held a multilateral summit in Istanbul with Russia, France, and Germany to discuss the possibility of reconstruction support for Syria.¹⁷⁹ Turkey and Russia likely sought to use the Sochi Agreement to gain a new revenue stream for Syria. The summit itself marked a limited diplomatic victory for Putin because it expanded the Astana Talks and brought in France and Germany. Neither France nor Germany contributed reconstruction funds, however, and neither has attended subsequent Astana Talks. Instead, they reaffirmed the U.S. and UN demand for the formation of a constitutional committee by the end of 2018. Assad refused to accept any such committee and the deadline passed with no tangible progress.

The Sochi Agreement began to break down in January 2019. Russia and Turkey partially reopened trade between Greater Idlib Province and Hama City via the Morek Crossing in November 2018. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu later pressured Turkey to compel HTS to comply with the terms of the deal during a meeting in Sochi on November 20.¹⁸⁰ Turkey successfully compelled HTS to vacate the Morek Crossing on December 7.¹⁸¹ Morek remained open intermittently until May 2019, allowing a temporary resumption of some trade in accordance with the Sochi Agreement. However, HTS moved aggressively to consolidate its control of terrain and dominance over opposition factions elsewhere in Greater Idlib Province.¹⁸² The Turkish-backed National Liberation Front surrendered to HTS following a wave of clashes across Greater Idlib Province in early January 2019.¹⁸³ The Russian Air Force ended

a four-month pause of airstrikes in Idlib Province on January 20, likely in response to gains by HTS.¹⁸⁴ The Syrian Arab Air Force resumed its own airstrikes in Idlib Province on February 24.

Putin and Erdogan attempted to salvage the Sochi Agreement at the next two rounds of Astana Talks in January 2019 and February 2019.¹⁸⁵ They focused their talks on opening a new trade route between Aleppo City and the Syrian-Turkish Border, abandoning previous plans to open a route between Aleppo City and the Syrian Coast.¹⁸⁶ Turkey and Russia conducted joint military patrols on the frontline near Tel Rifaat north of Aleppo City on February 14.¹⁸⁷ On March 5, Turkey announced the reopening of the key Bab al-Salama Border Crossing north of Aleppo City.¹⁸⁸ Turkey and Russia also conducted the first of a series of coordinated frontline patrols in Idlib Province on March 8, with Russia

permitting overflights by the Turkish Air Force over Syria.¹⁸⁹

Russia and Turkey's attempt to save the Sochi Agreement failed, however. Russia, Turkey, and Iran held a new round of Astana Talks in April 2019 and Russia demanded new concessions that Turkey would never be able to compel or convince HTS to support.¹⁹⁰ Russia pressed Turkey to accept joint patrols (rather than separate coordinated patrols) inside opposition-held areas of Greater Idlib Province.¹⁹¹ HTS and local opposition councils rejected this proposal outright.¹⁹² Assad and Russia responded by significantly intensifying their air campaign against Idlib Province.¹⁹³ Pro-regime media claimed on April 30 that Turkey had "definitively aborted" the Sochi Agreement.¹⁹⁴ Russia's reversal demonstrated that it had lost patience with the agreement and was ready to begin a new military escalation in Northwest Syria.

A "Breakthrough" Implementing 2254

Russia and Assad began a new ground assault against Idlib Province in May 2019 that became their largest military offensive since the 2016 Campaign for Aleppo City.¹⁹⁵ HTS and Turkish-backed opposition groups resisted fiercely and imposed a grueling stalemate on pro-regime forces through June 2019.¹⁹⁶ Russian Spetznaz in turn increased their involvement on the ground sometime in July 2019.¹⁹⁷ Russia used the renewed military pressure on Greater Idlib Province to shape a new round of negotiations over international aid in Syria. Russia held the thirteenth round of Astana Talks with Turkey and Iran in August 2019. The participants discussed holding an international conference on humanitarian assistance to Syria, which Russia hoped would occur in October or November 2019.¹⁹⁸ The talks concluded without a deal, however.

Russia and Assad launched a more successful push into Southern Idlib Province after the Astana Talks in August 2019. Pro-regime forces seized the urban center of Khan Sheikhun in Idlib Province on August 22.¹⁹⁹ Its fall drove a new wave of tens

of thousands of civilians toward the Syrian-Turkish Border, threatening to create a new refugee crisis for Turkey and Europe.²⁰⁰ Russia announced a unilateral ceasefire on August 30 in order to return to negotiations via the Astana Talks, now with greater military leverage.²⁰¹

Putin, Erdogan, and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met in Ankara in September 2019 to discuss the situation in Idlib Province and Eastern Syria.²⁰² Putin reaffirmed his intent to continue military operations in Greater Idlib Province after the meeting, stressing the "need to take additional measures to completely eliminate the security threats coming from the Idlib de-escalation zone."²⁰³ Russian Private Military Contractors (PMCs) began a build-up in Syria in early September 2019 to prepare for possible future operations into Idlib Province.²⁰⁴ Erdogan may have agreed to accept gains by Russia and Assad in Idlib Province in exchange for a green light for his own intervention against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northern Syria,

which began on October 9.²⁰⁵ Russia has allowed the Turkish Air Force to support this operation.²⁰⁶

Russia's decision to commit more force to the fight in Greater Idlib Province appears to have changed Assad's calculus regarding the implementation of UNSCR 2254. After nearly two years of stalling, Assad finally accepted the list of names to form a committee responsible for revising the Syrian Constitution on September 23.²⁰⁷ The Syrian Constitutional Committee nominally represents the first meaningful step toward implementing UNSCR 2254. New UN Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen described the body as "Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, credible, balanced & inclusive."²⁰⁸ The U.S. praised it as an "encouraging step toward reaching a political solution to the Syrian conflict."²⁰⁹

However, Assad accepted the Syrian Constitutional Committee only after shaping its composition and procedures to give regime loyalists *de facto* veto power over its proposals. The Committee technically includes three separate "lists" of fifty members each drawn from the regime, the opposition, and civil society. The regime list includes pro-regime figures, but Assad does not recognize them as an official regime delegation (which would legitimize the process). Turkey nominated the opposition list, which includes sixteen regime-tolerated opposition figures who nominally pursue reform but who are willing to work within the existing system led by Assad.²¹⁰ The UN also granted approval power over the civil society list to Assad, allowing the regime to determine its members.²¹¹ ISW assesses that at least eight members of the civil society list are highly likely to support pro-regime positions, while another thirteen are vulnerable to intimidation by Assad or amenable to compromises that favor Assad. ISW thus assesses that Assad can influence just over half of the delegates to the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which requires a three-quarters vote to approve changes to the Syrian Constitution.²¹²

Assad will meter the implementation of UNSCR 2254 so that it either fails or supports his interests. His influence within the Syrian Constitutional Committee enables him to stall the process at will

and limit the outcome to only superficial reforms. He may intend to delay the political process until he reaches the scheduled 2021 Syrian Presidential Elections.²¹³ He may even attempt to legitimize his planned election by hijacking UNSCR 2254's requirement for a UN-monitored election as the next step after amending the Syrian Constitution. Assad rejected the demand for international election monitors in an interview with state media on October 31.²¹⁴ He may attempt to shape the implementation of UNSCR 2254 to bypass election observers or invite only observers from friendly nations such as Russia.

Assad will also use force to shape the implementation of UNSCR 2254. He has already begun intimidating committee delegates and their family members, leading to the resignation thus far of four members of the civil society list.²¹⁵ He also detained a member of the opposition delegation on October 8.²¹⁶ Assad likely intends to leverage UNSCR 2254 to reduce international pressure as he pushes deeper into Greater Idlib Province. The U.S. and Europe have consistently condemned ongoing military operations in Idlib Province, and a more aggressive offensive will aggravate the humanitarian crisis and attract additional attention from the West.²¹⁷ Assad likely calculates that granting some progress on the Constitutional Committee could help reduce international pressure over Idlib, enabling him to expand his control on the ground and drive radicalization in Idlib that he could use to discredit opposition groups.

The U.S. risks doing more harm than good to the chances of a diplomatic settlement in Syria by implementing UNSCR 2254 under these conditions. The U.S. is overpromising by calling the Syrian Constitutional Committee a "door to peace."²¹⁸ This rhetoric rings hollow when Assad shows no sign of accepting anything less than the full and unconditional surrender of his opponents. The U.S. is similarly not credible with its calls for a nationwide ceasefire in the context of UNSCR 2254. The U.S. has displayed no willingness to enforce previous ceasefires or punish violations by Assad, Russia, and Iran. Pro-regime forces

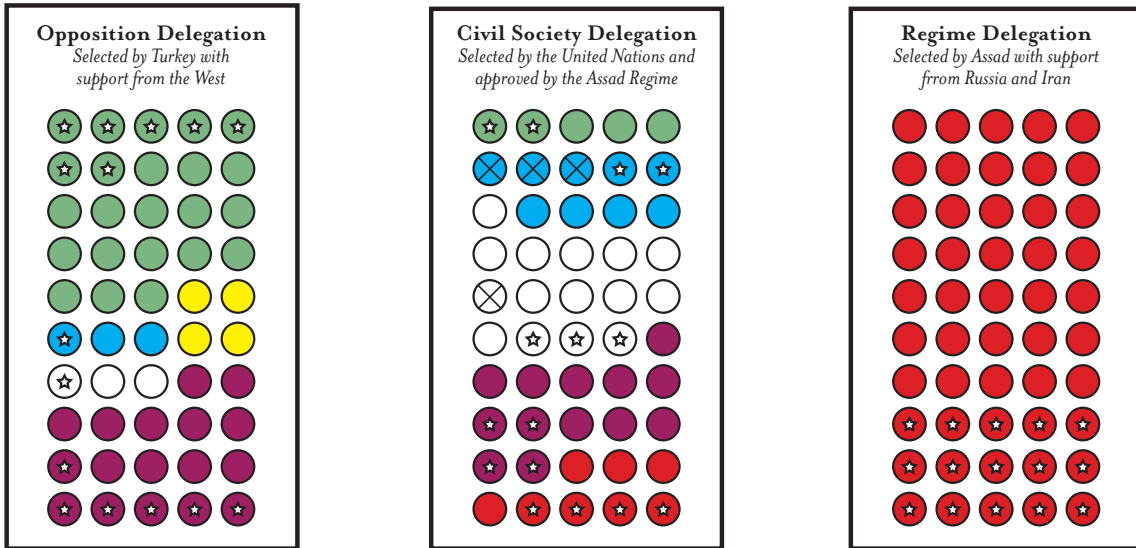


The False Promise of the Syrian Constitutional Committee

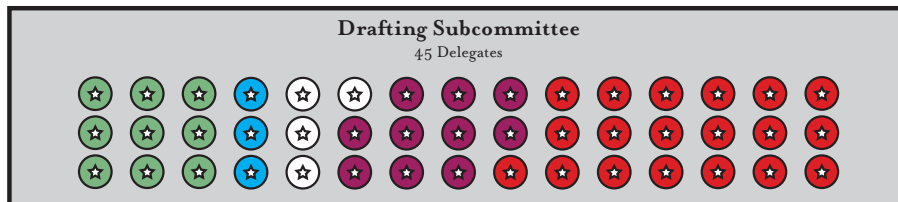
Key Takeaway: The UN announced the formation of a Syrian Constitutional Committee in September 2019 after nearly two years of negotiations facilitated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey. The Syrian Constitutional Committee will debate and approve amendments to the Syrian Constitution or possibly draft a new constitution as part of the Geneva Process to end the war in Syria. Assad retains influence over more than half the committee, however. Assad will likely use progress on the committee in the short term as diplomatic cover for a renewed offensive in Greater Idlib Province. Assad may stall the process in the long term, potentially forcing the UN to recognize as legitimate the planned 2021 Presidential Elections in Syria that he will likely win.

Syrian Constitutional Committee

150 Delegates



Each of the three delegations have selected fifteen members to participate in a **forty-five person subcommittee** tasked with drafting constitutional reforms. Draft proposals must then be approved by a **three-quarters majority of the full committee**.



KEY*

- Votes Assad Can Influence (88)**
- Assad-Aligned Individuals (58):** Individuals with close relations to the Syrian regime who are highly likely to support pro-Assad positions. (e.g. Members of the Syrian parliament.)
 - Assad-Amenable Individuals (30):** Individuals whom the regime tolerates or who are likely under Assad's influence. (e.g. Academics in Syria, regime-tolerated opposition.)
- Anti-Assad Votes (41)**
- Syrian Armed Opposition (4):** Individuals who fought against Assad as members of former armed rebel groups. (e.g. Former Free Syrian Army leaders.)
 - Syrian Political Opposition (28):** Political opposition members living abroad and/or in Turkish-protected zones. (e.g. Members of the National Coalition and Syrian Interim Government.)
 - Humanitarian Actors with ties to Syrian Political Opposition (9):** Humanitarian activists and advocates who seek Assad's removal or work closely with the Syrian political opposition. (e.g. Leaders of NGOs operating in Idlib Province.)
- Voter Position Unclear (17)**
- Position Unknown (17):** Individuals for whom ISW was unable to find sufficient information to assess likely political position.
- Resigned from Committee; replacement unknown (4)**
- Members of Drafting Subcommittee**

** ISW's assessments of committee members' affiliations are based on public statements, previously held positions, and other publicly available information.*

Graphic by Jason Zhou
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have systematically violated prior ceasefire deals in Aleppo City, Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs Province, and Southern Syria. Assad's targeting of opposition members on the constitutional committee sends another clear signal of his intransigence. This stark disconnect between rhetoric and reality alienates Syrians, who have no true protection from abuses by Assad. As a result, UNSCR 2254 already lacks support from the core constituencies it was intended to help protect—the communities that rebelled against Assad.

Turkey also will not be able to build support for UNSCR 2254 despite its influence with the surviving opposition groups in Syria. Turkey is focused primarily on fighting the Syrian Kurds and it is willing to let Assad manipulate the political process in exchange for a free hand in Northern Syria. It might even accept a superficial election in Syria that reelects Assad. Turkey's actions on the ground will nonetheless ensure a long-term divide in Syria. Its client opposition groups remain committed to the Syrian Revolution. They will likely reject any deal that rehabilitates Assad. Salafi-Jihadist Groups that operate among their ranks will also likely act to spoil any settlement between Turkey and Assad.

Continuing forward with UNSCR 2254 risks making a settlement even more difficult by further

discrediting the few opposition figures still willing to negotiate with the regime. The High Negotiating Committee previously lost credibility after its participation in international talks in 2016 – 2018 that achieved no progress while Assad, Russia, and Iran conquered more of Syria. Multiple leaders in the body resigned in protest.²¹⁹ The current process will likely have a similar effect on the limited opposition cadre participating in the Constitutional Committee. Syria's prospects for a political compromise grow more distant as the number of opposition leaders willing to accept one shrinks.

The U.S. also risks fueling Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Syria through its policy on UNSCR 2254. The existence of a diplomatic process that opposition groups view as credible is essential to denying recruitment opportunities to Salafi-Jihadists. Al Qaeda and affiliated groups have doubled down on their long-standing claim that Syrians face only two credible options: jihad or subjugation to Assad. One Al Qaeda-aligned coalition in Northern Syria recently condemned the diplomatic process as "suicide" on October 10, 2019.²²⁰ This narrative will only be further entrenched if the international community falsely trumpets superficial diplomatic progress as meaningful change in the lives of Syrians.

Implications

Russia and Assad's relationship provides valuable insight into how to shape the trajectory of the war in Syria. Russia's frequent recalibration of its military operations and diplomatic efforts reflects a sophisticated campaign to shape the decisions of Syrians who are calculating in both military and political terms. Russia has been unable to change the basic calculus of Assad or his opposition but has reset the terms of their conflict in ways that favor Russia's interests, a major accomplishment. Under similar but even more severe constraints, Assad has conducted complex military and political maneuvers to

affect the trajectory of the war to suit his own interests. Their success is far from given, however.

The U.S. is failing to exploit opportunity in Syria because its policy framework is misaligned with the realities of the war and wartime diplomacy. American expectations are biased towards ending the violence as the most important measure of effectiveness. This premise causes the U.S. to overlook ways to affect the war short of this threshold with both military and diplomatic tools. Russia's approach is much more realistic. Assad's is even more calibrated. The U.S. must develop a new set

of policy goals based on a recognition that an end to the war is not achievable in the near term but that America can nonetheless have a valuable impact on Syria's future.

A more constructive policy framework must disentangle diplomacy from the near-term expectation of a cessation of hostilities. It is abundantly clear that Assad and his backers will not grant one and that the U.S. is not willing – nor likely to become willing – to impose one. The U.S. will continue to fail in Syria if it subordinates its actions to this near-term goal. Civilian protection should, of course, remain a focal point of U.S. policy and of wider international action. The systematic killing of Syrian civilians by Assad and his backers, plus similar abuses by jihadists and others, is unacceptable. The demand of Syrian opposition groups to prioritize this issue is morally justifiable. The complete subordination of the diplomatic process to it has discredited the process and failed to achieve an end to the violence, however. The U.S. must widen its aperture for what diplomacy in Syria can achieve in order to be more effective in halting and reversing the momentum of Assad and his backers.

The U.S. should set as its overarching goal keeping space open for political competition within Syria. Assad and his backers cannot win the war outright but can do further damage to Syrian society and make peace even harder to achieve. The U.S. should constrain their efforts to seize more of Syria and reimpose authoritarian structures in recaptured areas. American economic pressure limits the scope and scale of what they can achieve in the near term, thereby preserving space for competition. Salafi-Jihadist Groups also threaten political freedom in Syria. The U.S. must constrain and ultimately defeat jihadist groups seeking their own authoritarian rule at the expense of all Syrians. In addition to preventing an ISIS resurgence, this

requires disrupting Al Qaeda-linked groups who are currently governing in Northwest Syria and who likely will expand operations into Southern and Eastern Syria in coming months.

American presence in Eastern Syria is essential to setting long-term conditions for a future diplomatic settlement of the war. Turkey's incursion is destabilizing areas regained from ISIS and creating new opportunity for Assad, Russia, and Iran to expand their influence. President Trump decided to retain a small military force to garrison oil and natural gas fields in Eastern Syria in October 2019, which has applied important constraints on these trends.²²¹ The U.S. should do much more. The U.S. should recommit to its partnership with the SDF and deploy additional soldiers and diplomats to help stabilize Eastern Syria. It should work with the SDF to build credible and inclusive governance structures that can provide a political alternative to

both Assad and Salafi-Jihadist Groups. This policy would be difficult and require serious commitment. The U.S. would need to halt Turkey's intervention into Northern Syria and find a way to address its legitimate security concerns, which would likely require significant concessions from the SDF. Yet it remains possible if the U.S. has the will to sustain its engagement in Syria.

The U.S. must also sustain a diplomatic process that upholds the principles of basic human rights and justice that Syrians deserve.

The existence of such a process provides a valuable outlet for Syrian opposition groups and a mechanism for the U.S., UN and other Western states to apply political pressure on Assad and his backers even though it will not end the war soon. A fresh diplomatic start is necessary, however. The current UNSCR 2254 process is already too compromised by Russia and Assad's manipulation of it. The U.S. must re-legitimize Western-backed diplomacy in

The U.S. must develop a new set of policy goals based on a recognition that an end to the war is not achievable in the near term but that America can nonetheless have a valuable impact on Syria's future.

Syria by resetting its terms. The U.S. is not constrained to UNSCR 2254. The U.S. should work with the UN, EU and other partners to launch a new diplomatic initiative to begin a pan-Syrian dialogue. The U.S. can help convene conferences and Track II initiatives to broaden the conversation to represent as much of Syrian society as possible. The purpose would not be to reach an immediate political compromise but rather to create a new diplomatic arena that can interact with changing conditions within Syria.

A new U.S.-led diplomatic effort in Syria could put Russia and Assad back on the defensive. Russia will likely veto any U.S. efforts to pass revisions to UNSCR 2254 in the Security Council, but that could suit U.S. interests. Russia's current diplomatic role as a convener and arbiter enables it to shape the terms, timing, and outcome of Syrian negotiations in ways that deny Western interests. Russia has overreached in some ways and begun to lose credibility in Syria, however. The U.S. should exploit this opportunity to displace Russia from the center of the Syrian peace process and constrain its influence to Assad's camp. Maneuvering in a way that requires Russia to begin transparently spoiling diplomacy could advantage the U.S. in a new phase of competition. A new and more credible U.S.-backed diplomatic effort may even create follow-on opportunities within Syria by helping to overstretch Russia's bandwidth.

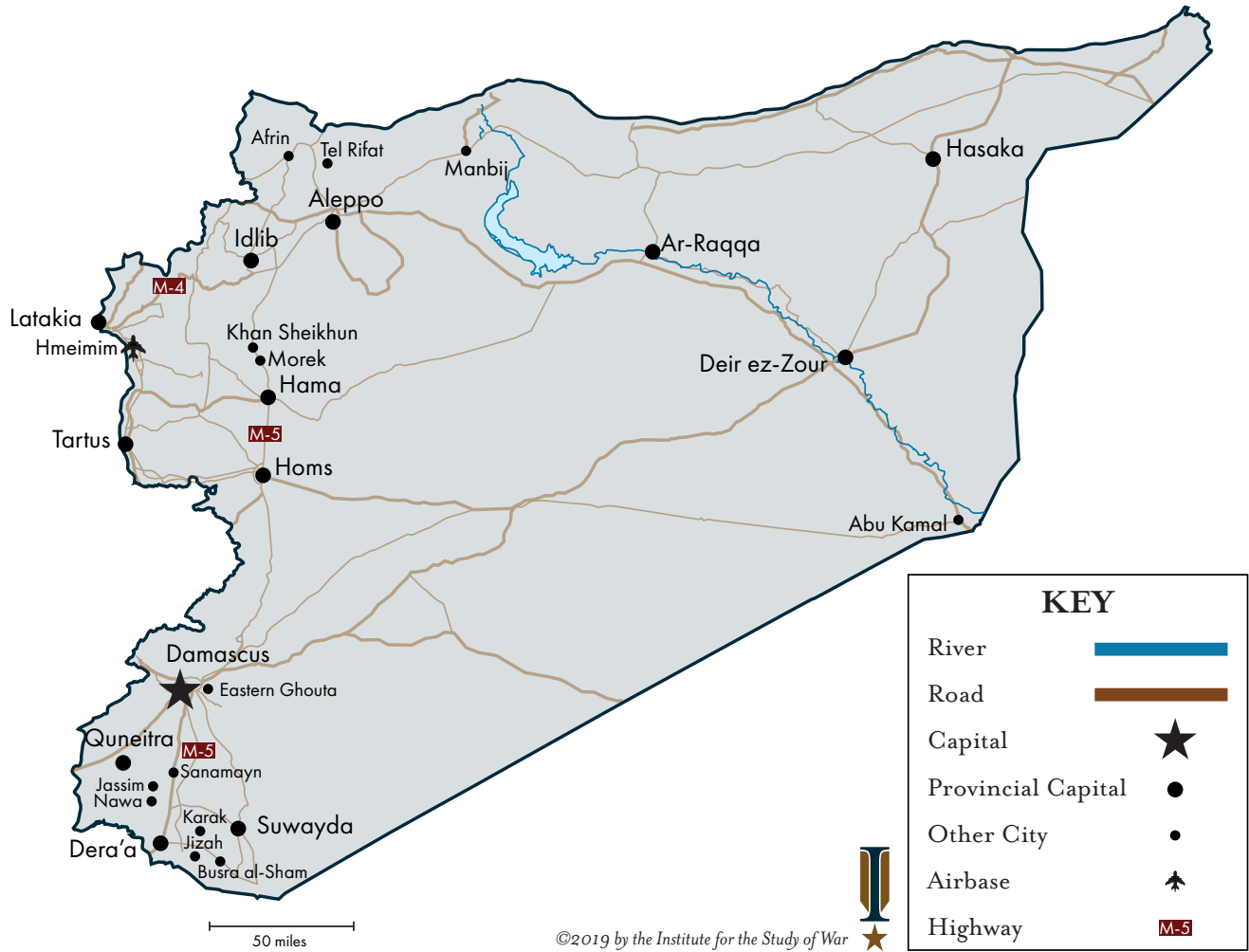
The U.S. should continue to affirm publicly the need to hold the regime and its backers accountable for war crimes in order to reaffirm American values and prevent the normalization of the brutality seen in Syria. The U.S. should at minimum support efforts by Europe to prosecute former and current regime members in order to sustain political pressure on Assad, Russia, and Iran.²²² The U.S. should also do more to support civil society and humanitarian operations within Syria. Regime predation of humanitarian aid remains an unchecked source of Assad's income and a source of rising distrust of

the UN within Syrian opposition communities.²²³ The U.S. should pressure the UN to apply greater scrutiny to humanitarian aid in Syria to ensure that pro-regime forces do not further expand their control of distribution mechanisms or subject shipments to extortion and seizure.²²⁴ The U.S. should condition its own humanitarian support on such guarantees.

The U.S. should also engage diplomatically on local levels in Syria wherever possible. In Eastern Syria, the U.S. has done too little to gain insight and credibility by engaging populations liberated from ISIS. It is not enough for the SDF to implement good governance. The U.S. should also expand its own dialogue within Syrian communities in order to broaden America's understanding of their needs and goals. The U.S. should also seek opportunities to re-engage in other parts of Syria as conditions on the ground change. The brewing insurgency in Southern Syria may generate new local leaders with whom the U.S. can engage diplomatically if not support outright. The U.S. should explore opportunities to support civil society groups attempting to constrain Al Qaeda's influence in Idlib, moreover. This kind of diplomacy will not immediately change ground realities but can help shape the trajectory of Syria's future.

President Trump is unlikely to take these steps given his desire to disengage from the Middle East. Yet the U.S. does indeed have vital national security interests in Syria. These interests include preventing the growth of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other Salafi-Jihadist Groups; blocking and ultimately reversing the long-term military presence of Iran and Russia in Syria; and halting attacks that amount to ethnic cleansing against the Syrian Kurds. These goals—and the requirements to achieve them—have not changed despite the withdrawal announced by President Trump. If the Trump Administration remains committed to its current course, it is virtually certain to fail to secure the vital interests of the U.S. in Syria, including reaching a diplomatic settlement to the war.

ISW Syria Locator Map



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115. Russian officers did escort some internally displaced persons back to their homes in Eastern Dera'a Province. See: ["Residents Return to Eastern Dera'a Under Russian Auspices,"] *SMART*, July 28, 2018, <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/311605/%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9>; ["New Cities and Towns North of Dera'a Reach Settlement Agreement with the Russian Side,"] *SMN*, July 14, 2018, [http://www.shaaam\(.\)org/news/syria-news/%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%84-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9](http://www.shaaam(.)org/news/syria-news/%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%84-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9); ["More Than 200,000 Displaced People Return to their Towns and Villages Which Were Displaced After the Regime Expanded Its Control of More Than 72% of the Area of Dera'a and the Deployment of Its Forces on the Border with Jordan,"] *SOHR*, July 9, 2018, <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=274225>; ["Russian Patrols Guarantee Settlements of the South ... And People are Looking for Services,"] *Asharq al-Awsat*, August 30, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/137946/%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B6%D9%85%D9%86-%C2%AB%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A9%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8D-%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA>.
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