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THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE RUSSIAN, IRANIAN AND TURKISH INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

OHANNES GEUKJIAN*

ABSTRACT

The Arab revolts that began in 2011 led to a major transformation in the contemporary history of the Middle East and ushered in a new pattern of power vying by international and regional powers for influence in the Middle East (ME). The West and Turkey supported the rebels while Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah backed the Syrian regime. The turning point occurred in 2015, when Russia intervened militarily with the aim of returning to the global stage as a major geopolitical power. Russia's direct involvement in Syria changed the geopolitical alignment in the region. This article examines the geopolitics of the Syrian conflict by focusing on the national interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran. The political agendas of the three countries in the different stages of the conflict diverged and converged due to the complexity of the conflict and the policies of other external actors in Syria. This article also refers to the internationally sponsored Geneva peace talks, and to the parallel Astana peace track that was sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran, and the strategies used by them to achieve their geostrategic and geo-economic goals.

INTRODUCTION

What was happening in Syria was no longer about an insurgency that demanded democracy and freedom; nor was it a civil war between two camps: the opposition and the Syrian regime. Syria became the theatre of a proxy war with the potential to spill over to its neighbours. Syria's complex and devastating civil war drew in multiple foreign powers after it broke out in 2011. Consequently, focusing only on the departure of President Bashar al-Assad as a strategy to end the Syrian conflict, without taking the regional and global geopolitics into account, was doomed to failure. The departure of al-Assad, as demanded by the opposition, would not achieve a lasting ceasefire to stop the bloodshed and guarantee a transition to a new political system. The West, Turkey and the Gulf States supported the rebels while Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah heavily backed the Syrian regime. The turning point

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occurred in September 2015, when Russia intervened militarily with the aim of returning to the global stage as a major geopolitical power. Geopolitics was important primarily as it affected economic and political interests. This article examines the geopolitics of the Syrian conflict by focusing on the national interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran, whose political agendas diverged and converged due to the complexity of the conflict. It also analyses the abortive attempts of the internationally sponsored Geneva peace process that began in 2012 and the Astana talks that were sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran that began in 2017, and the strategies they used to achieve their geopolitical goals.

Russia's Geopolitical Interests

Joost Hiltermann argued convincingly that 'at the core of the Syrian war's inexorable internationalisation stands the fundamental disagreement between the US and Russia over the fate of the regime'.¹ For Moscow, externally engineered 'colour revolutions' in former Soviet space (FSS) and the ME, for regime change, would destabilise the Russian Federation. Russia's direct military intervention in Syria was a foreign policy objective to shore up al-Assad and the Syrian regime, Moscow's ally since the Cold War period, and keep Syria together as a united state and maintain the Russian foothold in the ME. For Russia, the removal of al-Assad by the externally backed and financed opposition could not be a precondition for any deal to end the civil war. We argue that Russia's intervention in Syria aimed not only to strengthen al-Assad's position, but also to change the political outcome in a region that had been out of Moscow's sphere of influence for decades. As Dmitri Trenin explained, 'Russia did not crave world domination, and its leaders did not dream of restoring the Soviet Union. They planned to rebuild Russia as a great power with a global reach, organized as a super corporation.'² Soon, after intervention in Ukraine and annexation of the Crimea in 2014, Russia's military campaign in Syria would change its place in a status hierarchy because military power was an attribute of status.

It has been argued that, like the US, Russia had a strong interest in defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but 'it had no interest in allowing the US to install its choice of regimes in Syria or elsewhere'.³ Vladimir Putin, who was cultivating geostrategic relationships with Egypt and Israel, was not likely to yield to American pressure and refrain from military intervention. John J.

¹ Joost Hiltermann, 'Russia a Reluctant Driver in the Syrian War', *International Crisis Group*, 26 February 2018, p. 1.

² Dmitri Trenin, 'Russia Redefines Itself and its Relations with the West', in Alexander T. J. Lennon and Amanda Kozlowski (eds.), *Global Powers in the 21st Century: Strategies and Relations* (Washington: The Center for Strategic and International Studies and The MIT Press, 2008), p. 237.

³ Jeffrey D. Sachs, 'A Resolution in Syria Must Run Through the Security Council', *The Daily Star*, 22 September 2015, p. 7.

Mearsheimer argued that since 2003 'the West's triple package of policies – NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion – added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite'.⁴ Although NATO had no designs of regime change, the West's move into Russia's backyard was a threat to Russia's strategic interests. In addition, any dialogue between Russia and the West about NATO's expansion was driven by status politics. The Kremlin came to the conclusion that Western expansionism could be reversed only with an 'iron fist', as Sergey Karaganov put it in 2011.⁵

Putin's address to the UN General Assembly on 27 September 2015 had geopolitical implications. Putin was determined to fight international terrorism. He said it was 'an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces, which were valiantly fighting terrorism face-to-face ... Russia could not allow these criminals, who were fighting under the banner of the so-called ISIS, to return back home and continue their evil doings'. Putin was referring to thousands of recruits from former Soviet republics and Chechnya who were fighting for ISIS. Concerning the international liberal order dominated by the US, Putin said that Russia 'could no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world' and that Russia proposed an order that should be 'guided by equality, common values and common interests rather than ambitions'.⁶ It is worth noting that Russia was advocating multipolarity.

Russia's military intervention in Syria on 30 September was an indicator that Moscow would try to enhance its status, including through efforts to outdo the US in its area of strength, i.e., geopolitical power in the ME. To protect the Syrian regime so that it would not suffer the same fate as Iraq and Libya was a Russian foreign policy objective. Direct military intervention was Russia's best method to achieve strategic objectives, as was the case in Kosovo, Georgia and Ukraine, where decisive military intervention substantially altered the situation in Moscow's favour. Yet, for the US, 'Russia's approach in Syria was wrongheaded and strategically shortsighted' because 'it attempted to fight extremism while not also at the same time working to promote the political transition' away from al-Assad.⁷ For the Kremlin, intervention in Syria was always about much more than Syria. Russia was motivated by the prospect of filling the vacuum and thus once again playing a major role in the world. As the US stepped back in the ME, the vacuum was filled by Russia and Iran: the new masters in the region. Both countries, Russia and Iran, saw 'the promotion of Western values as an insidious

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), p. 80.

⁵ Quoted in Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Putin's Foreign Policy, the Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May/June 2016), p. 34.

⁶ President Putin, 'Text of Address at Seventieth Session of the UN General Assembly', 28 September 2015. Available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

⁷ Michael Totten, 'Moscow on the Tigris: Russia Joins the Terror Nexus', posted at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org>, accessed 20 November 2016.

plot to bring regime change in Moscow and Tehran'.⁸ Putin was willing to take major strategic risks to demonstrate that Russia was a strong nation and could project hard power beyond its own borders. Yet, Putin would face the challenge of preventing the deterioration of the Russian economy and restoring order in a region that was long influenced by the US.

For Putin, fighting ISIS seemed to be an existential matter for a Russia with a large and growing Muslim population.⁹ If Russia was the re-enforcer against ISIS, 'this could mean a fundamental change in power relations in the ME with Russia bidding to become protector not just of al-Assad but of a Europe that was frightened about terrorism, refugees and energy supplies'.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that almost 90 per cent of the sorties flown by Russia in Syria were not against ISIS, supposedly the target of the military intervention, but against al-Assad's non-jihadi opponents. By equating terrorist and non-terrorist opposition, Moscow signalled that any sustainable settlement would require the defeat of all parts of the opposition.

In addition to its military and financial support for the al-Assad regime, Russia supported the regime diplomatically by vetoing UN Security Council Resolutions to prevent external pressure on the regime to change its behaviour. Russian intervention in Syria stemmed from Syria's geostrategic location in the ME. Russia as a great power had the incentive to mediate the conflict and reach a settlement that would be favourable for maintaining Russian geostrategic and national interests. For Russia, status was connected to the capability to resolve conflicts and provide order. Putin aimed to embrace a political process that would enable him to demonstrate Russia's central role in shaping the future of the ME. While supporting the internationally backed Geneva peace process that began in 2012, Moscow also sponsored indirect peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition in Astana, Kazakhstan, that began in January 2017. On 30 June 2012, the Geneva conference (also known as Geneva I) called for:

Establishment of a transitional governing body, which can establish a neutral environment in which the transition can take place. That means that the transitional governing body would exercise full executive powers. It could include members of the present government and the opposition, and other groups, and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.¹¹

⁸ 'The Fall of Aleppo: Vladimir Putin's Victory; the West's Failure; and a Warning of What Happens When Interests Triumph Over Values', *The Economist* (17–23 December 2016), p. 11.

⁹ Ekaterina Stepanova, 'The Islamic State as a Security Problem for Russia: The Nature and the Scale of the Threat', *PONARS, Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 393, October 2015.

¹⁰ Dmitry Gorenburg, 'What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell us About Advances in its Capabilities', *PONARS, Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 424, March 2016.

¹¹ See 'Geneva-1 Final Communique of the Action Group for Syria; and the Basis for Geneva-2 Meeting', 29 January 2014. Posted at <http://www.reasonedcomments.org/2014/01/012801->

The Astana trilateral initiative, which was a parallel peace track to Geneva, was sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran – the states that possessed leverage on the ground. The US attended only as an observer, and there was no participation at all from Saudi Arabia, reflecting that ‘the talks were in Russia’s geopolitical backyard, and the ball was now largely in Moscow’s court’.¹² The statement made by Alexander Lavrentyev, the head of the Russian delegation, that Russia ‘gave birth to the Astana process’ demonstrated that Moscow had become the main power broker since its intervention in September 2015.¹³ For Russia, the priority in Syria was to fight terrorism and not to remove al-Assad from power; something that brought Iran into the idea of a three-way peace push.

Seeking a resolution in Syria and restoring stability in the extremely volatile ME was a Russian political objective. Therefore, Russia tried to adjust its strategy to push the Syrian conflict toward an initial settlement, especially with Moscow’s decision to help implement a cessation of hostilities that was negotiated between the US President Barack Obama and the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in February 2016. Russian mediators who ‘worked in the shadows’ were also helping the Syrian government to broker deals with rebels seeking to lay down their weapons or to relocate to rebel strongholds in Idlib and Raqqa provinces. Russia saw mediation as a way of extending and enhancing its own influence by becoming indispensable to the parties in the conflict. Yet, the barrier to implementation of the ceasefire stemmed from the inability of Russia and the US to put real pressure on the regional players of Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose interests diverged on the fate of al-Assad.

David Ignatius wrote that if ‘Yevgeny Primakov, in the late 1990s, dreamed about reviving Russian power in the ME and globally, Putin was now doing it’.¹⁴ However, satisfying Russia’s aspirations depended on US policies. Russia’s regional diplomacy demonstrated Moscow’s role in negotiating regional divides and forming alliances to fight international terrorism, which posed a common danger to the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon and Jordan. For example, when the Russian military operation began in 2015, Russia stayed in close touch with Israel to make sure that Israel did not feel threatened by the deployment of the Russian planes at the Humeimeem airbase in the Latakia province and the use of its Mediterranean Soviet-era naval base in the port city of Tartus. The port at Tartus had a strategic and geopolitical importance and could prove valuable if conflict with Ukraine or Turkey obstructed the

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¹² Noah Bonsay, ‘What’s at Stake in the Syrian Peace Talks in Astana?’, Commentary, Middle East and North Africa, *International Crisis Group*, 24 January 2017.

¹³ See ‘Assad Allies, Turkey Agree to Oversee Truce Deal’, *The Daily Star*, 28 January 2017, p. 1.

¹⁴ David Ignatius, ‘Even in Death, Primakov Continues to Inspire Putin’, *The Daily Star*, 22 October 2015, p. 7.

operations of the Russian Black Sea fleet. The Soviet navy began to use the port at Tartus for submarines and surface vessels under the 1971 agreement with Damascus.¹⁵ In addition, in 2016, when the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, apologised to Putin for the downing of the Russian bomber by Turkish fighters in November 2015, the Russian leader accepted the apology and included Ankara in 'Moscow's strategy for Syria'.¹⁶ It is important to stress that Moscow's pragmatic relations with Turkey, Iran and Israel put Russia at the centre of regional diplomacy in any conflict resolution framework for the Syrian conflict.

Within this context, Moscow carefully calibrated its response to Turkey not to jeopardise its main objective in the region, which was to rally international support for its view on how the conflict in Syria should be resolved. At the level of economic interest, Russia was the largest destination for Turkey's exports, and the two countries were bound by plans for the new Turkish Stream pipeline that would allow Russia to export gas to the European Union (EU) through Turkey and reduce its reliance on transit through Ukraine. Although both countries supported different sides in the Syrian war, their economic interests converged. On 19 December 2016, the assassination of Andrei Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, by a former Turkish police officer did not undermine the Russian–Turkish rapprochement. Both the June 2016 terrorist attacks on Turkey and Karlov's assassination were a message to Ankara to stop its advance in Syria against Kurdish militants and to undermine its strategic cooperation with Moscow. In mid-January 2017, the first joint Russian–Turkish airstrikes against ISIS militants in the town of Al-Bab signalled the improving ties between the two countries.

The entire Geneva process of getting the talks going indirectly between the government delegation and the representatives of the opposition had been entangled in regional power-jockeying and geopolitics. In February 2016, Russia called for the inclusion of Kurdish representatives in the talks. Amid a push by the Kremlin to include the Kurds in the talks, Syrian Kurds opened an office in Moscow despite Turkey's objections. The opening of the office would fuel tensions in Russia's relations with Turkey. Ankara, which was supporting the rebels and providing assistance to the refugees, rejected the participation of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the talks and criticised the US for supporting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the PYD, and not recognising it as a terrorist organisation. It is important to stress that the YPG was a key ally to the US in its fighting against ISIS. Now, the YPG was branded as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the most

¹⁵ Ron Synovitz, 'Explainer: Why is Access to Syria's Port at Tartus so Important to Moscow?', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Russia Report*, 19 June 2012.

¹⁶ Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 101.

effective fighters in the Syrian war. Under the circumstances and with an emerging Russian-Syrian-Iranian-Lebanese Hizbullah alliance (the so-called Shiite Crescent alliance) threatening other states in the region, Turkey and Israel vowed to cooperate to manage the threat from Iraq, Iran and Syria, as well as from ISIS.¹⁷

As mentioned above, Russia's military campaign in Syria had broader objectives. Concerning the prospects for solving key international issues, in his speech at the 52nd Munich Security Conference in February 2016, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticised NATO's and the EU's approaches toward conflicts and their non-cooperative behaviour with Russia. He added that 'a reform of the world order should be negotiated because such NATO-centric egotism, which reflects political nearsightedness, does much damage to seeking solutions to real, not invented, threats'.¹⁸ Still, the Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, in a combative speech at the security forum, responded to rebukes over Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria by blaming the West for a series of regional and global problems. He reiterated that relations between Russia and NATO had 'slid into a new period of Cold War'.¹⁹ Moscow demonstrated that the West should recognise Russia as an indispensable global player and any effort to resolve the Syrian crisis must take Russian interests in the ME and FSS into account.

According to Vladimir Frolov, the strategic objective of the Russian intervention was 'to revive the bipolar format of Russian-American cooperation and rivalry for influence in the ME and the world. It was obvious that the Kremlin would like to make Syria a template not only for bilateral relations with the US, but also to develop new rules of the game in a broader sense, and in other regions, like Ukraine.'²⁰ Yet, the activation of a ballistic missile defence shield in Romania, the deployment of US troops into Poland to protect Europe against Iranian ballistic missiles in early January 2017, and Montenegro's joining NATO in June 2017 created additional tension between Russia and the West and perceived security threats to Russia.²¹ Although not aimed against Russia, Moscow considered the deployment of the defence system onto its periphery a threat to its nuclear arsenal. For its part, Russia deployed nuclear-capable Iskandar missile units to Kaliningrad, a Russian

¹⁷ Murat Ulgul, 'The Decline of the Syrian Effect in Turkish-Israeli Relations', *Uluslararası İlişkiler-Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 62 (2019), pp. 140–141.

¹⁸ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's speech, 13 February 2016.

¹⁹ 'Combative Medvedev Raises Specter of World War, Global Caliphate', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 13 February 2016.

²⁰ Quoted in Brian Whitmore, 'The Road from Damascus to Yalta', *RFE/RL Russia Report*, 15 March 2016, p. 1.

²¹ Polina Sinovets, 'The European Missile Defense System and Russia: Can there be Dialogue than an Arms Race?', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, February 2017. Also, see 'US Troops Enter Poland, at Russia's Doorstep', *The Daily Star*, 13 January 2017, p. 11.

enclave between Poland and Lithuania, in response to NATO's activation of a US-built missile shield in Poland. Moscow's policy was in line with Russia's updated national security strategy of 2016 that considered NATO's 'military activation, its continued expansion, the approach of its military infrastructure to Russian borders, all created a threat to national security'.²² Putin sought to leverage his military success in Syria and Russia's indispensable role in the Syrian peace process into more global clout, of the sort the Soviet Union once enjoyed. For example, Moscow sought lifting of the sanctions imposed on Russia as a result of its annexation of the Crimea, a free hand in the FSS, and a new revision of the post-Cold War international order.

Russia was compelled to make adjustments to its diplomacy to secure Iran's and Turkey's cooperation in and outside the ME. For example, on 7 August 2016, Putin took part in a trilateral summit with his Azerbaijani and Iranian counterparts in Baku. The three leaders discussed joint efforts to fight terrorism, settle regional conflicts, work together on Caspian-related issues such as south Caucasus stability, and develop ties in the energy sector, transport corridors and pipeline infrastructure.²³ Moscow wanted to strengthen its relations with Tehran, a key partner for Russia in Syria and the Caspian region. Russia and Iran would also begin the construction of two additional nuclear reactors at Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant. Russia wanted to demonstrate that Moscow, not Washington or other states, was the key power broker in Caspian issues. In the ME, Putin also wanted to host an Israeli–Palestinian summit to revive peace talks between the two nations.

Within this context, Putin's visit to Iran on 1 November 2017 was crucial for the success of the Syrian peace process. Both Moscow and Tehran wanted to marginalise US hegemony in the region and establish a balance of power. Putin vocally backed the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) and called for the improvement of transport links, trade and energy cooperation between Russia, Turkey and Iran. During the visit, Russia's state-owned Rosneft oil firm and the National Iranian oil Company signed a roadmap deal to develop projects in Iran worth up to \$30 billion.²⁴

The West's support of the opposition and its overall approach to the Syrian conflict enabled Putin to use Syria to achieve Russia's goals. On 6 October 2016, Russia's parliament ratified a treaty with Damascus that allowed Russian troops to stay indefinitely in Syria. In January 2017, Moscow and Damascus

²² Russia's Updated National Security Strategy, 1 January 2016, available at <http://www.newcoldwar.org/russia-updated-national-security-strategy-for-2016>

²³ See, 'Trilateral Meeting of Presidents of Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia', 8 August 2016, posted at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52666>.

²⁴ See 'Putin Offers Support for Iran Nuclear Deal, Hails Cooperation on Syria', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 1 November 2017.

also signed an agreement on modernising and expanding Russia's naval facility at the port of Tartus. Russia also considered reopening Soviet-era bases in Vietnam and Cuba. The first Russia–Egypt anti-terrorism drills that kicked off in Egypt on 15 October signalled the return of Russia as a major geopolitical player.²⁵

Russia would not be dragged into a potential conflict with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In October 2017, the landmark visit to Moscow by the Saudi monarch King Salman, and his agreement on joint investment deals worth several billion dollars at a time when the Russian economy was battered by low prices and Western sanctions, was an indication of rapprochement between Moscow and Riyadh.²⁶ Pavel Baev noted that 'establishing political and military cooperation with Iran and Turkey was a major breakthrough for Russia's foreign policy in 2017'.²⁷ Engaging with Turkey, a NATO ally, and Iran became an unavoidable necessity for Russian diplomacy since both states were key players with significant leverage to influence the situation in Syria. On 26 November 2017, the trilateral Putin-Erdogan-Rouhani summit in Sochi was the culmination of that effort. There seemed to be convergence between Turkey's, Russia's and Iran's Syria policy, as Erdogan seemed ready to forge strong strategic ties with Moscow rooted in energy exports.

On 4 May, once again Russia proved that it was the major player in the ME when in Astana Russia, Iran and Turkey signed a memorandum on establishing four 'de-escalation zones' or 'safe zones' in rebel-held territory in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, in parts of Homs province, in the opposition enclave of eastern Ghouta near Damascus and in southern Syria, particularly Deraa and Quneitra provinces, to shore up the ceasefire and set the stage for a later settlement.²⁸ In June 2017, the Russian and American special envoys, Alexander Lavrentyev and Michael Ratney, met a number of times in Jordan to strike a deal on the boundaries of the proposed de-escalation zone in Deraa because the US wanted no role for Iran in that area of strategic interest to the US, Israel and Jordan.²⁹ In July 2017, Russia deployed military police and set up two checkpoints and four observation posts to monitor two safe zones in the southwest and in eastern Ghouta. In September 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey struck a deal in Astana to jointly police the fourth de-escalation zone around rebel-held Idlib province on the border with Turkey and called for the end of hostilities in mainly opposition-held areas. The Astana VI talks were also attended by representatives of the Syrian regime and the opposition, the UN and

²⁵ See, 'Russian Airborne Vehicles to Land First in Africa Within Drills With Egypt', *Sputniknews.com*, 24 October 2016.

²⁶ See 'Saudi King, Putin Agree Deals on Historic Russia Trip', *Aljazeera*, 6 October 2017.

²⁷ Pavel K. Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War', *Brookings*, 21 February 2018.

²⁸ See 'Explainer: The Very Bad History of Safe Zones', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 5 May 2017.

²⁹ See 'Deraa de-Escalation Zone under Review', *The Daily Star*, 10 June 2017, p. 8.

observers from the US and Jordan.³⁰ As mediator, Russia also took new steps to establish bilateral agreements directly with armed opposition groups on the ground in the de-escalation areas. For example, Russia signed separate agreements with Jaish al-Islam and Jaish al-Tawhid. Russia's mediatory role would enable Moscow to achieve prestige. However, the de-escalation agreements that were based on Russian unilateral guarantee lacked an international guarantor for the opposition and were without international legal mechanisms, such as the UN Security Council. Evidently, as Dmitry Trenin wrote, Moscow sought 'a balance in the region that would maximize its gain without losing credibility with either party'.³¹

In a surprise visit to Syria's Humeimeem air base on 10 December 2017, Putin declared victory over ISIS on both banks of the Euphrates River and over the Western-backed rebels, adding that the focus would switch to the political process. He declared that a 'significant part' of the Russian force could now return home. Russia's partial withdrawal of its troops was unlikely to cause much concern in Tehran because Iran would still be able to operate in Syria and reap the rewards of its intervention by planning the direction of the offensives on the ground. Evidently, 'Putin was keen to leverage the heightened ME influence that Syria had given him to cast himself as a leader who could do diplomacy as well as military force'.³² A real test for Russia was how the Syrian and Iranian ambitions would play out in the de-escalation zones so that Russia could balance its desire to step back with the need to stand behind its allies. Putin's visit to Syria came amid a flurry of ME diplomacy and after the decision by US President Donald Trump on 6 December to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Although for Israel Trump's decision was 'an important step toward peace', it would aggravate conflict in the volatile ME.³³

Throughout 2018 until mid-2019 the Syrian regime liberated most of the opposition-held areas in the de-escalation zones with the exception of large parts of Idlib, where Turkey had established observation posts to prevent escalation and a humanitarian crisis. Idlib was largely controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Western powers, Iran and Russia considered HTS a terrorist group that must be destroyed. On 22 August 2019, the Syrian army captured Khan Sheikhoun, in the Idlib province, effectively cutting off Turkish troops at a military post near the town of Morek, 70 kilometres inside Syria.³⁴

³⁰ See 'Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province', International Crisis Group Briefing No. 56, 9 February 2018, p. 2.

³¹ Dmitry Trenin, *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 112.

³² Andrew Osborn, 'Putin, in Syria, Says Mission Accomplished, Orders Partial Russian Pull-Out', *ukreuters.com*, 11 December 2017.

³³ See 'Trump Defies World Over Jerusalem', *The Daily Star*, 7 December 2017, p. 1.

³⁴ See 'Syria Offensive Puts Turkish Troops, Border Plans in Peril', *The Daily Star*, 23 August 2019, p. 1.

Evidently, Syria's move in Turkish-controlled Idlib complicated Russia's efforts to de-escalate the conflict between Turkey and Syria. To normalise the situation, Putin hosted Erdogan in Moscow on 27 August. Turkey expected that Russia, as a powerful supporter of al-Assad, would take steps to 'alleviate the problem'. In a short briefing with Erdogan, Putin said: 'we have outlined additional joint steps to neutralize the terrorist's nests in Idlib and normalize the situation there and in the whole of Syria as a result'.³⁵ Russia was moving from a military posture to that of a mediator trying to reach a solution to gain status recognition through achievements in areas other than military power.

Since its military intervention in 2015, Russia had changed the balance of power on the ground, and adopted a policy of dealing with the external and internal actors. After stabilising the al-Assad regime, Russia's strategy foresaw that the ultimate success of a peace settlement hinged upon a stable regional environment and cooperation between neighbours who would support the peace process. Thus, Turkey's agreement to buy Russian S-400 air defence missile systems and its acknowledgement that the Astana process was achieving results, and Saudi Arabia's cooperation with Russia in coaxing the opposition to unite for peace talks had greater merit. Russia also kept open channels of communication to all sides, from Iran to Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Hamas movement to Israel. Internally, to prevent risk that would come from spoilers, and to regain its global clout, Russia negotiated intra-regional divides in different parts of the ME.

Turkey's Geopolitical Interests

Before the Syrian conflict began, Turkey had been pursuing a policy of 'zero problems with our neighbours', and Turkish–Syrian relations warmed and trade grew. This policy, which was sometimes called Neo-Ottomanism, transformed the region. However, with the unfolding of the Syrian insurgency in 2011, Turkey became increasingly critical of the Syrian regime over the bloodshed and urged al-Assad to implement reforms to appease the rebels rather than radically modifying the Syrian political system. As the influence of major Arab states, such as Egypt and Iraq, diminished, Turkey wanted to play a new role in the Arab world. On 9 August 2011, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmed Davutoglu, delivered a message from Erdogan to al-Assad that he should end the violence and accept a Turkish-sponsored peace plan.³⁶ Damascus appeared suspicious of Turkey's intentions and ruled out Ankara's mediation and propositions to solve the conflict. The Syrian authorities blamed the unrest on

³⁵ See 'Russia, Turkey Agree Steps to Tackle Militants in Idlib', *The Daily Star*, 28 August 2019, pp. 1, 8.

³⁶ Joseph Daher, *Syria after the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), p. 223.

extremist and terrorist groups seeking to destabilise the country.³⁷ Eventually, the Syrian regime's refusal to engage with Turkish recommendations, 'coupled with strong official encouragement from the US', prompted Erdogan to call al-Assad to step down and to allow Syrian opposition groups to operate out of Turkey. From the beginning of 2012, Turkey facilitated the delivery of arms purchased by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to various opposition groups through the Turkish airport of Esenboga.³⁸ The Turkish leaders, like most of their Western counterparts, mistakenly expected the quick demise of the Syrian regime, and 'felt confident that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would lead a transition to democracy'.³⁹ The al-Assad regime stood accused of war crimes by the West and a number of regional allies. Until early 2016, Moscow's and Ankara's geopolitical aspirations were largely incompatible.

Cooperation between regional powers Iran and Turkey was crucial to end the civil war in Syria. In April 2015, Erdogan visited Iran and officials from both countries signed new agreements for commercial, economic and industrial cooperation. Despite the deep differences between them and backing opposite sides in the Syrian war, both countries agreed that regional cooperation was needed to stop the bloodshed in Yemen and Syria. In March 2016, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, met the Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, in Tehran and stressed that both countries supported the ceasefire and preservation of Syria's territorial integrity. For his part, Davutoglu stressed the importance of both countries developing a 'common perspective' to end the 'region's fight among brothers, and stop the ethnic and sectarian conflicts'.⁴⁰ The talks between Rouhani and Davutoglu reflected a will on both sides to manage their differences, mainly to reach regional stability and to reap trade benefits from the easing of international sanctions against Iran. Turkey would also serve as a key transit for Iranian energy supplies to Europe.

Ankara's foreign policy move came in light of the triple bombing at Istanbul's international airport in June 2016, the increasingly tense relationship with Europe over the Mediterranean migrant crisis, and the disdain for Barack Obama's ME policy and his conviction that the US, NATO and the EU were not doing enough to help Turkey confront Kurdish militants and Islamist terrorism. Ankara saw the US policy of supporting Syrian Kurdish militants to fight against ISIS as a serious affront, because Turkey made no distinction between YPG and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the terrorist organisation that had been fighting in Turkey since the 1980s.

³⁷ See *As-Safir*, 10 August 2011, pp. 1, 17.

³⁸ Daher, *Syria after the Uprisings*, p. 224.

³⁹ Kemal Kirisci, 'The New Geopolitics of Turkey, Syria, and the West', Brookings, 14 February 2018.

⁴⁰ See 'Rouhani: Iran, Turkey in Lockstep on Syria Ceasefire', *timesofisrael.com*, 6 March 2016.

It is plausible to argue that when Ankara's and Washington's interests converged, 'Turkey's appetite for exploring ties with Russia as a geopolitical hedge shrank. But when Turkey was frustrated with the West – as it was over US support for Syrian Kurdish forces – it found in Russia a sympathetic ear.'⁴¹ After Russia ended a ban on the sale of package tours to Turkey in the first step to ending broader sanctions slapped on Ankara as a result of shooting down a Russian SU-24 bomber over Turkey's border with Syria, Russian–Turkish relations improved. It is worth noting that Erdogan, on 27 June 2016, sent a letter to Moscow expressing sorrow and regret over the loss of a Russian pilot.⁴² On 1 July 2016, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, met his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, on the sidelines of a regional economic cooperation conference in Sochi. Both Lavrov and Cavusoglu agreed to restart 'a working group on fighting terrorism' and discuss 'even the most difficult issues' including 'the task of not allowing Turkish territory to support terrorist organizations in Syria'.⁴³

Russia and Turkey reached a common understanding in Ankara when Lavrov and Cavusoglu recognised ISIS and the Nusra Front as terrorist organisations that should be fought. This understanding was in line with Russia's foreign policy concept of 2016 that called for the creation of a broad anti-terror coalition amid a global threat posed by ISIS.⁴⁴ Both countries also agreed that opposition groups should withdraw from the territories controlled by the terrorists to escape Russian and Syrian airstrikes. According to Lavrov, 'Turkey accepted the new rules of the game in Syria', which could turn the tide of the Syrian war in favour of the regime. Further, Aaron Stein noted that Turkey was aiming for a 'narrowing of its goals in Syria' and that 'its priority would be subduing Kurdish rivals and weakening ISIS, aims for which it could expect Russian support for Ankara dropping its demand for regime change in Syria'.⁴⁵

Turkey was concerned with the alliance of the US and Syrian Kurds, which resulted in uncontrollable arms smuggling from northern Syria to both the pro-Turkey moderate opposition and the PKK, which was considered a terrorist organisation by Ankara. Turkey also considered the US-backed YPG an extension of the PKK. Unlike the EU and the US, the Kremlin was quick to express solidarity with Erdogan immediately after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Ahead of his meeting with Putin and in an interview with *Tass* on 7 August, Erdogan said: 'I recalled his [Putin's] high-principled position with

⁴¹ Galip Dalay, 'Turkey and Russia are Bitter Frenemies', *foreignpolicy.com*, 28 May 2019.

⁴² Simon Tisdall, 'Erdogan's Overtures to Russia Part of Wider Diplomatic Bridge-Building', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2016.

⁴³ See, 'Lavrov and Cavusoglu Meet to Repair Ties', *The Daily Star*, 2 July 2016, p. 9.

⁴⁴ See, 'Russia's New Foreign Policy Concept Calls for Broader Anti-Terror Coalition', *sputniknews.com*, 1 December 2016.

⁴⁵ See, 'Russia, Turkey Reach Breakthrough Agreement on Fighting Terrorists in Syria', *sputniknews.com*, 2 July 2016.

gratitude and I thank him on behalf of myself and the Turkish people'.⁴⁶ As mentioned above, Erdogan's letter to Putin was a signal that Turkey was ready to change its policy in Syria. Indeed, Ankara began to abandon its previous policy to topple al-Assad and its support for radical opposition groups. For its part, Russia in August 2016 approved Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation against ISIS in northern Syria and assured Ankara that Kurdish militias would not gain more territory in Syria. In February 2017, Turkish troops backed by Syrian rebel fighters entered the centre of ISIS's bastion of Al-Bab city to set up a free zone inside Syria and trample Kurdish aspirations of establishing autonomy. For Ankara, that would mean a long-term Turkish presence in Syria.

On 9 August 2016, in his first foreign trip after the failed coup, Erdogan met Putin in St Petersburg. Although the summit between the two leaders aimed to normalise relations following Ankara's apology for shooting down the Russian SU-24 jet in Syria, it raised concerns about whether Turkey might be turning its back on the West. Both Russia and Turkey reinstated their annual bilateral trade target of \$100 billion, which had been abandoned after Russia imposed sanctions.⁴⁷ The summit took on a broader geopolitical significance mainly because the tension between Turkey and its NATO allies was beneficial to Russia. Erdogan would try to leverage his rapprochement with Putin in his relations with the West. Moscow and Ankara would move on to restore their defence cooperation because Turkey did not receive the expected support from its NATO allies following the failed coup. Both leaders also tried to find common ground on Syria and agreed to revive the Turkish Stream gas pipeline that would bolster Russia's position in the European energy market. The project, which aimed at delivering Russia's gas to Turkey and parts of Europe bypassing Ukraine, was announced in late 2014.⁴⁸ Concurrently, during a meeting between the Turkish and Iranian Foreign Ministers in Ankara on 11 August, Cavusoglu said that Turkey and Iran agreed on maintaining Syria's territorial integrity.

After the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) took full control of the city of Manbij, which was a transit point along ISIS's supply route all the way from the Turkish border to Raqqa province, on 24 August, Turkish troops with Syrian rebels launched operation Euphrates Shield with the approval of Russia, and achieved two interconnected goals: They seized Jarablus and drove ISIS fighters and the US-backed SDF out of the border area, and prevented the Syrian Kurdish forces from seizing more territory to link other Kurdish areas in Afrin, in Syria's northwestern corner.⁴⁹ Ankara was categorically against the

⁴⁶ See, 'Erdogan Exclusive: New Page in Russia-Turkey Relations', tass.com, 9 August 2016.

⁴⁷ Olesya Astakhova and Nick Tattersall, 'Putin and Erdogan Move toward Repairing Ties Amid Tension with West', reuters.com, 9 August 2016.

⁴⁸ See, 'Turkish Stream Pipe-Laying to Start in 2017, End in Late 2019', sputniknews.com, 12 October 2016.

⁴⁹ See 'Turkish Army and Allies Thrust Deeper into Syria', *The Daily Star*, 29 August 2016, p. 1.

establishment of an autonomous Kurdish area near its border with Syria, because that would pose an internal security threat to Turkey. Meanwhile the US Vice President, Joe Biden, who was visiting Ankara, failed to mend fences with Erdogan so that Turkey would refrain from attacking the SDF. Both Turkey and the US ordered the YPG to withdraw to the east bank of the Euphrates River to avoid further escalation. Turkey's incursion strengthened Erdogan's stance of raising the issue of a 35 km safe zone with Obama and Putin at the G20 summit in Hangzhou, China, on 6 September 2016.

Meanwhile, in March 2017, the seizure of Al-Bab from ISIS by the Syrian rebel forces was accompanied by a deployment of Turkish troops, tanks and artillery inside Syrian territory to oust the US-backed SDF from the city of Manbij. Turkey's aim was to stop the YPG from crossing the Euphrates westward and linking three mainly Kurdish cantons it held in northern Syria, thus preventing it from establishing self-government analogous to Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. It is important to note that the US had about 500 Special Operation Forces (SOF) in Syria helping to organise, advise and assist the SDF and the YPG.⁵⁰ In March 2017, the US, which had no frontline role, deployed an additional 400 Marines and Army Rangers forces in and around Manbij as part of a new role to ensure that the different parties in the area did not attack each other but instead focused on fighting ISIS.⁵¹ The US role was to establish a buffer between the SDF and the Turks. Turkey had been pressing Washington for a role in the final assault on Raqqa to liberate it from ISIS. Turkey's Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, stated that 'his country would respond if an offensive by the SDF in Raqqa posed a security threat to Turkey'.⁵²

Once again, on 10 March, the Erdogan–Putin meeting in Moscow had geopolitical significance. Putin hailed 'efficient and close contacts' between the two countries and intelligence agencies around Syria. Both leaders insisted that preserving the territorial integrity of Syria was a 'necessary condition for the full-scale peace settlement in the country'.⁵³ Moscow had formed an unlikely alliance with Ankara since 2016, envisioning Turkey as part of a solution to the Syrian conflict. Erdogan's direct contact with Putin stemmed from the lack of commitment of the US and NATO in helping Turkey fight terrorism to defend itself and create its own missile defence system. Besides, a weakened Turkey was unable to help NATO project power. Turkey was also interested in

⁵⁰ Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, 'US May Deepen Involvement in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 28 February 2017, p. 8.

⁵¹ See 'US Enters Manbij to Keep Feuding Parties Apart', *The Daily Star*, 7 March 2017, p. 1.

⁵² See 'US Arms Supplies to Syrian Kurds is Geopolitical Project, Part of a Larger Plan', *sputniknews.com*, 14 May 2017.

⁵³ See 'Turkey Seeks Alliance with Russia in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 11 March 2017, p. 8. Also, see 'Putin, Erdogan Pledge Cooperation to Help Bring End to Syrian Conflict', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 10 March 2017.

purchasing the Russian-manufactured S-400 missile system capable of intercepting all types of modern air weaponry. Turkey, which was at odds over the US backing of the SDF in Syria, agreed to pay \$2.5 billion for Russia's S-400 air defence system. Despite threats by the US to impose sanctions on Ankara for buying Russian military hardware that was not compatible with NATO systems and fears that the acquisition might lead to Turkey's expulsion from an F-35 fighter jet programme, Turkey received the first parts of the S-400 defence system on 12 July 2019. For Turkey, 'the system was a strategic defense requirement, particularly to secure its southern borders with Syria and Iraq'.⁵⁴

By receiving the parts, Turkey violated the US sanctions on Russia. Moscow would transfer some of the technology to Turkey, which was one of Ankara's consistent requirements. Turkey wanted to show NATO that it had a strategic choice in its relationships. Turkey also signed a cooperation agreement with Italian–French consortium Eurosam to produce missile defence systems.⁵⁵ In Syria, Russia and Turkey needed to cooperate with each other to achieve their security interests. Turkey also leaked the location of 10 US bases in northern Syria.⁵⁶ Still, Ankara refused to allow a German delegation to visit German troops in Turkey's important NATO base, Incirlik. The Turkish moves were an indication of the strained relations between Turkey and the West. Geopolitically, 'Turkey used its relationship with Russia as leverage vis-à-vis European and NATO partners; whereas Putin saw Turkey as a wedge he could drive into NATO and transatlantic solidarity'.⁵⁷

Multiple regional interests posed an obstacle to ending the Syrian civil war. Indeed, as a result of a deal between Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Astana talks held on 15 September 2017 to jointly police the fourth de-escalation zone in Idlib, Turkey's military on 13 October began setting up observation posts in Idlib, which was largely controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The western powers, Iran and Russia considered HTS a terrorist organisation that must be destroyed. Turkey's deployment of about 30 military vehicles into Idlib through the Bab al-Hawa crossing was facilitated by an understanding between Ankara and HTS to stop the YPG from linking the Afrin Kurdish enclave with a larger area that it controlled in northwestern Syria.⁵⁸ The deployment allowed

⁵⁴ See 'In Challenge to US, NATO, Turkey Starts Getting S-400s', *The Daily Star*, 13 July 2019, p. 7. Also, See 'No Backtracking on Turkey's S-400 Deal with Russia, Erdogan Says', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 4 June 2019.

⁵⁵ See 'Turkey: We're Buying Both Russian and European Air Defense', *eurasianet*, 17 July 2017.

⁵⁶ Ellen Mitchell, 'Turkey Reveals Secret US Military Locations in Syria', *The Hill*, 19 July 2017.

⁵⁷ Torrey Taussig, 'The Serpentine Trajectory of Turkish-Russian Relations', *Brookings*, 4 October 2017.

⁵⁸ See 'Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province', *International Crisis Group*, Middle East

the Turkish military to surround the YPG-held territory from all sides, enabling Ankara to besiege the area.

Within this context, in January 2018, Russia, Syria and Turkey strongly criticised a US plan to create a Kurdish-led border security force of 30,000 personnel in the Afrin area, in northern Syria, 'to defend and preserve' part of northern Syria that was controlled by the US-backed SDF and prevent any ISIS resurgence there.⁵⁹ The SDF alliance, of which the YPG was the strongest member, controlled roughly 25 per cent of Syrian territory in the north and east of the country. President Donald Trump maintained and implemented an Obama-era policy to arm the YPG for the assault on Raqqa. With the battle in Raqqa against ISIS and the non-jihadi opposition elsewhere over in 2017, Trump told Erdogan that the US would stop supplying weapons to the YPG. Yet, in practice, the US engagement continued, though now it was apparently aimed more at weakening al-Assad than overthrowing him. While Ankara sought to prevent the potential legitimisation that a border force would bring to the YPG, Damascus considered the plan a breach of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Although Syria opposed Turkey's intervention, on 20 January 2018 an infuriated Turkey launched 'Operation Olive Branch' to expel the YPG from Afrin and prevent the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous enclave. The US, whose geopolitical objectives were largely incompatible with Turkey's goals, urged Ankara to exercise restraint and ensure that the offensive was 'limited in scope and duration'.⁶⁰ Russia, which accepted Turkey's security concerns, blamed the crisis on US unilateral action and acknowledged the role of the Kurds in the peace process. Turkey, in return for Moscow's forbearance, would turn a blind eye to Russian and Syrian attacks on the rebels in Idlib, who were nominally allied with Turkey against the regime. On 27 August 2019, Erdogan and Putin reached an agreement in Moscow to take necessary measures to prevent a 'new migrant wave to Turkey' from Idlib as a result of the Syrian offensive.⁶¹ From a Turkish perspective, the Syrian offensive was harming the efforts for a resolution of the conflict and posing a 'serious threat' to Turkey's security.⁶² The discord between the US and its NATO ally, Turkey, would rehabilitate Russia's relationship with Turkey and extend its diplomatic influence in the region. Concurrently, Turkey's alliance with Russia would ensure that Ankara would play a significant role in deciding the future of the Syrian state.

Briefing No. 56, 9 February 2018, p. 2.

⁵⁹ See 'Russia, Turkey Slam Plan for Kurdish-Led Syrian Border Guard', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 16 January 2018.

⁶⁰ See *Aljournhouria*, 22 January 2018, p. 5.

⁶¹ See 'Russia, Turkey Agree Steps to tackle Militants in Idlib', *The Daily Star*, 28 August 2019, p. 10.

⁶² See 'Syria Retakes Territory Held by Rebels Since 2012', *The Daily Star*, 24 August 2019, p. 1.

As Turkey threatened to expand the operation eastward to Manbij, where the US had deployed troops after Kurdish forces took control of the town in 2016, Washington acknowledged the 'legitimate concerns' of Turkey and discussed with Ankara the creation of a 30 km security zone to ensure Turkey's border security.⁶³ Manbij was disputed territory between the US and Turkey. After the US-backed SDF seized it from ISIS in 2016, Washington assured Turkey that the YPG would withdraw from the city and adjacent areas west of the Euphrates River. However, the YPG obtained control of the area. For Turkey, Manbij was a bastion of terrorists and it demanded that Kurdish and US forces withdraw to the east of the Euphrates River.⁶⁴ Turkey's war on the YPG in Afrin to reshape military alignments in northern Syria and around Manbij highlighted the true complexity of the Syrian crisis. Turkey and the US, both members of NATO, now faced a real risk of an escalation that could lead to direct confrontation between their armed forces. The dilemma for the US was to find a way to reassure Turkey, without abandoning the Kurds. After all, as Christopher R. Hill noted, 'Western countries would need Turkey to counterbalance Russia, whose broader strategic agenda went beyond the ME'.⁶⁵

On 7 August 2019, after difficult negotiations, Turkey reached a deal with Washington to establish a safe zone in northeastern Syria and develop a peace corridor from the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border to facilitate the return of 3.6 million displaced Syrians currently living in Turkey to their country and provide security for Turkish border settlements and military outposts. The conflict had unleashed a global migrant crisis that continued to affect Europe and the neighbouring countries that opened their borders to millions who sought refuge. Turkey and the US also agreed to form a joint Operations Center to provide joint management at a time when the Trump administration was reducing the number of US troops in Syria.⁶⁶ There were deep differences between Ankara and Washington over the scope and command of the safe zone, which raised the prospect of Turkish military action. Although the first phase to establish a safe zone in northern Syria was launched together with the US on 23 August, Erdogan still reiterated that Turkey would not accept delays in the plan, comparing it to an earlier deal with Washington to remove YPG/PKK fighters from Manbij.⁶⁷ However, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper reiterated that any Turkish operation into north Syria would be unacceptable, and the US would prevent unilateral incursions. In early September 2019, although the first joint

⁶³ Amanda Sloat, 'Turkey Wants to Crush US Allies in Syria. That Shouldn't Surprise Anybody', *foreignpolicy.com*, 23 January 2018.

⁶⁴ See 'Turkey Warns US Troops Over Syria Clash Risk', *The Daily Star*, 5 February 2018, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Christopher R. Hill, 'What is the Endgame for the US in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 21 February 2018, p. 7.

⁶⁶ See 'Turkey Readies for Action as US Talks on Syria Falter', *The Daily Star*, 7 August 2019, p. 1.

⁶⁷ See 'Syria Kurds Pull-Out Must be Confirmed: Turkey', *The Daily Star*, 31 August 2019, p. 7.

ground patrol with US counterparts began near the Turkish border town of Tal Abyad, the US still failed one crucial condition for Turkey: cutting its ties with the YPG, a component of the SDF, and a crucial partner in the US-led coalition that defeated ISIS in Syria. The Trump administration's policy of 'strategic patience' depended on the maintenance of American presence in Syria's northeast, which required strong ties to the SDF.⁶⁸ The impact of escalated tensions with the US could harm Turkey's relations with its transatlantic partners. We conclude by highlighting that the geopolitical consequence of current tensions with the US and 'the frenzy of anti-Americanism' could lead Turkey to break away or be pushed out of NATO.⁶⁹

From Turkey's perspective, the US–Turkey agreement to create a safe zone 440 km long and 30 to 32 km deep in northern Syria to send back the 3.6 million refugees to their homes did not achieve the desired results. Frustrated, Turkey also sought the withdrawal of the SDF from the Syrian side of the border to prevent a threat to its national security. On 7 October 2019, a White House statement following a phone call between Trump and Erdogan surprised everyone. Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw US troops in a chaotic and dangerous manner from northeastern Syria gave the green light to a Turkish invasion on 9 October. Amidst international condemnation of the Turkish assault, and strong opposition from the Pentagon and Republican and Democratic lawmakers, Trump appeared to reverse his position by announcing that should Ankara do anything that 'I, in my great and unmatched wisdom consider to be off limits, I will destroy and obliterate the economy of Turkey'.⁷⁰ Trump's green light to Turkey for the assault was seen as a betrayal of Washington's erstwhile Kurdish allies. The impact of the assault lay not only in the revival of ISIS, but also the escape of about 11,000 ISIS fighters who were detained by the SDF. Turkish-backed Syrian rebels participated in the offensive dubbed Operation Peace Spring to enforce the safe zone. After launching the assault with airstrikes and intense artillery fire, Turkish troops crossed the border into Kurdish-controlled towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain. Russia urged dialogue between Damascus and Syria's Kurds.

As Turkey extended its military incursion against Kurdish militias further south than originally planned, the US withdrew 1,000 troops from northern Syria. Turkey ignored US sanctions. As security collapsed in northeastern Syria, hardened ISIS fighters could escape from camps and prisons that were run by the SDF and renew the terrorist threat against the US, Europe and Russia that they posed in 2014. The Turkish assault triggered international alarm over

⁶⁸ Aaron Stein, 'Turkish Policy in Syria: Divining Intent and Options for the United States', Atlantic Council, 16 November 2018.

⁶⁹ Kemal Kirisci, 'The New Geopolitics of Turkey, Syria, and the West', Brookings, 14 February 2018.

⁷⁰ See 'The Guardian View on Trump and Syria: Damage has been Done', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2019.

its large-scale displacement of civilians. To minimise its human losses and to counter the Turkish onslaught, the SDF sought a deal with Russia.

Russian-backed Syrian forces, which took advantage of the abrupt US troop withdrawal, deployed inside Kurdish-held territory and entered Manbij, west of the Euphrates River, where US troops had previously conducted joint patrols with Turkey. Syrian troops and Russian forces also entered Ain al-Arab (Kobani), a strategically important border city. The SDF invited the government forces as an emergency step to help fend off the Turkish assault. Evidently, Washington's decision to abandon a policy it had pursued since 2014 gave Turkey and Russia a free hand to shape the battlefield. The deployment of the Syrian forces near the border with Turkey, a continuous Russian demand, was a victory for al-Assad and Russia because it gave them a foothold in the biggest remaining part of the country that was outside their control. On 17 October a ceasefire was announced by the US Vice President Mike Pence, after talks in Ankara with Erdogan. Accordingly, the YPG was obliged to pull out of the safe zone that was primarily enforced by Turkey.⁷¹ Before the US–Turkish ceasefire expired, it was superseded by a Russian–Turkish ceasefire agreement, which both the YPG and Damascus accepted. As the YPG's hold on the area weakened, it sought arrangements with the al-Assad regime, through Russia, to gradually reintegrate the area into the Syrian state, and preserve as much as possible its civil and security institutions.

Iran's Geopolitical Interests

Since the spring of 2011, Iran has staunchly supported the Syrian regime of President al-Assad in its fight against a fierce anti-government uprising. In 2014, Iran bolstered the position of al-Assad by dispatching senior military figures and Hizbullah and other Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan and thereby making a significant contribution to the victory over ISIS. In 2015, when the regime was on the verge of collapse, 'the Iranians helped persuade Russia to send its air force to Syria, promising to provide the boots on the ground itself'.⁷² According to the head of Iran's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, Iran's support to the Syrian regime was 'in line with our anti-terrorism strategy. We have provided assistance – whether in arms or advisors – to Syria. The support is provided at the request of Bashar al-Assad', who belongs to the Alawite community.⁷³ Still, Iran deployed Shiite militias from Iraq into Syria and provided equipment and technical support to help the al-Assad regime suppress the rebellion. Iran also asked its Lebanese proxy, Hizbullah, to send fighters to Syria to back up the al-

⁷¹ See *Aljournhouria*, 18 October 2019, p. 13.

⁷² Itamar Rabinovich, 'How Iran's Regional Ambitions have Developed Since 1979', *Brookings*, 24 January 2019.

⁷³ See 'Iran in Context of Syrian Conflict', *Geopolitica*, 23 July 2019.

Assad regime. It is worth noting that with the military and financial support of Iran since the early 1980s, Hizbullah had become a well-equipped army with the best fighters. Syria was a conduit for the flow of weapons from Iran to Hizbullah, which acted as a bulwark against a possible Israeli land invasion to Lebanon and Syria, 'while equipping Iran with some retaliatory capability in case of an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities'.⁷⁴ It was worrying for Iran that a Sunni regime in Syria could prevent Tehran from sending arms to Hizbullah.

The partnership between Iran and Syria stretched back over four decades.⁷⁵ The reasons for this endurance stemmed largely from geopolitical factors and shared threat perceptions. The alliance between Iran and Syria had its roots in their opposition to the US-led regional security order. As a matter of fact, after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran and Syria worked to prevent the emergence of a US-dependent regime in Baghdad that could pose a threat. This alliance reflected the desire of 'middle powers' to 'defend their autonomy against intensive Western penetration of the Middle East'.⁷⁶ These mutual concerns explained how Syria and Iran were able to transcend their ideological differences and work towards shared interests.

At the regional level, Tehran vowed to fight against terrorism and not allow the resistance axis (Syria-Iran-Hizbullah) against Israel to break. This alliance of regional forces was to counter Western hegemony and ensure the survival of both the Syrian and Iranian regimes. This axis had already lost Hamas, a Palestinian Sunni Islamist group, which turned against al-Assad for his bloody repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Syria and Iran had backed radical Palestinian groups which opposed negotiations with Israel about the fate of Palestinian-occupied lands and Jerusalem. Syria had long insisted that any deal between Israel and the Palestinians must also address the issue of Israeli-occupied Syrian territory (the Golan Heights). Iran's long-term plan was to create a land corridor that extended from Tehran all the way through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon to use its leverage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If al-Assad fell, Iran would lose the balance of power in the ME. Contrary to the US position, Iran and Russia viewed al-Assad as a legitimate leader and likened the West's approach to Syria to its failure in Iraq and Libya.

During his visit to Tehran on 23 November 2015, Putin and the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, jointly announced their opposition to external attempts at regime change. Moscow coordinated its air campaign with Tehran. Russian planes began flying over Tehran and Iraq to avoid the airspace of Turkey. Putin also relaxed an export ban on nuclear equipment and

⁷⁴ See Primoz Manfreda, 'Why Iran Supports the Syrian Regime', thoughtco.com, updated 13 February 2019.

⁷⁵ Jobin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran, Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

⁷⁶ Anoushirvan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 88–91.

technology to Iran, and gave orders to start the process of supplying Tehran with an S-300 anti-aircraft system.

Within this context, in January 2015, after an Israeli attack near Quneitra, in southern Syria, pro-regime forces spearheaded by Hizbullah and Iranian fighters launched an offensive in Deraa province, which was largely under rebel and Nusra Front control. The dual aim was to secure southern Syria, which was essential for the control of Quneitra, and extend the Iranian battleground against Israel from Lebanon to Syria. By positioning of the Iranian forces in closer proximity to the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights, Tehran hoped to retain leverage in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Like Russia and Turkey, Iran wanted to increase its regional influence and secure access to the Mediterranean and carry out its proxy campaign against Israel.

Tehran's policy was predicated on keeping al-Assad in power. Iran also viewed the conflict in Syria as the extension of a sectarian power struggle with its regional rival Saudi Arabia, as well as the US-led campaign to halt its nuclear ambitions by imposing sanctions. Saudi Arabia was advocating Wahhabi Islam, which contributed to religious polarisation in the region. To counter Saudi Arabia, which backed the Syrian opposition, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government of Nuri al-Maliki followed Iran's lead by opposing calls for regime change in Syria. In 2012, after the failure of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan, Iran sought a diplomatic role and offered to host talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. However, the US ruled out Iranian mediation, because Iran was part of the problem in Syria and the broader ME.

Iran also had geo-economic interests in Syria. During a visit to Tehran on 16 January 2013, the Syrian Prime Minister, Wael Halqi, signed a \$1 billion credit facility agreement between the Commercial Bank of Syria and the Export Development Bank of Iran.⁷⁷ Tehran opened a credit line of \$3.5 billion which was increased in 2015 by a further \$1 billion.⁷⁸ Iranian companies participated in projects related to electricity and projects in the mining and oil sectors. Iran would also build a power plant, and would coordinate with Iraq to carry out the project of transmitting electricity to Syria. In addition to its political influence, Iran sought to satisfy its economic interests after the removal of sanctions. In November 2013, Iran struck a historic agreement with the P5+1, accepting constraints on its nuclear programme for the first time in a decade in exchange for partial relief from Western sanctions.⁷⁹ For Iran, the interim deal reduced the threat of war, eased punishing sanctions, and bolstered its role in the ME. Iran wanted to return to the world oil market as a key player. Within this

⁷⁷ See 'Damascus, Tehran Ink Deal on \$1 Billion Credit Facility, Electricity Projects', *The Daily Star*, 17 January 2013, p. 8.

⁷⁸ See 'Iran's Exports to Syria on the Rise', *Financial Tribune*, 27 November 2017.

⁷⁹ Julian Borger and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Iran Seals Nuclear Deal with West in Return for Sanction Relief', *Guardian*, 24 November 2013.

context, Iran wanted to establish 'black gold' supply in Europe, to build a pipeline through neighbouring Iraq and Syria.⁸⁰ Iran was also hoping to play a role in post-war reconstruction in Syria.

One important illustration of the new regional reality was the Astana forum that commenced in January 2017, composed of Russia, Iran and Turkey. Since 2017, the Astana process, which excluded the participation of the Arab states, had been the major arena of the efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict. The priority in Syria was to fight terrorism and not remove al-Assad from power, something that brought Iran into the idea of three-way peace push. Obviously, the first round of the Astana talks on 23–24 January 2017 were a diplomatic victory that underlined the growing ME clout of Russia, Iran and Turkey and Washington's diminished influence at a time when President Trump was still determining his foreign policy goals.

On 14 May 2018 the ninth round of the Astana talks (Astana IX) began against the background of potential confrontation between Israel and Iran as a result of Iran's attack on Israeli positions in the occupied Golan Heights, and Israel's retaliation on Iranian positions in Syria and Trump's pull-out of the US from the nuclear deal with Iran on 8 May, further complicating the regional picture.⁸¹ Israel was determined to prevent any Iranian military entrenchment in Syria. Trump's dramatic withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was justified in that his predecessor, Obama, did not address Iran's ballistic missile programme, its nuclear activities beyond 2025 and Iran's role in regional conflicts like Yemen and Syria. Trump's foreign policy move was heartily supported by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and opposed by all other governments that were part of the deal. For his part, Rouhani criticised American unilateralism in withdrawing from the deal and hailed the efforts of China and Russia to maintain the agreement. Trump, who called Iran's government a 'regime of great terror', held out the possibility that he could negotiate a tougher deal with Tehran in the future.⁸²

According to Suzanne Maloney, Trump's move 'represented an abdication of American leadership on the international stage that was unparalleled in recent history'.⁸³ The strategy behind Trump's move was probably regime change in Tehran. However, the right strategy to reverse Iran's power grab in the ME would begin with Syria and not by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and maintaining its military position to the east of the Euphrates River and other points in southern Syria. Russia, which was friendly to Israel but was fighting in

⁸⁰ See 'Iran in Context of Syrian Conflict', *Geopolitica*, 23 July 2019.

⁸¹ See, 'Syria Talks Renew in Astana as Regional Tensions Rise', *The Daily Star*, 15 May 2018, p. 8.

⁸² Josh Lederman, 'Trump's Opposite Approaches to Iran, North Korea', *The Daily Star*, 10 May 2018, p. 9.

⁸³ Suzanne Maloney, 'After Dumping the Nuclear Deal, Trump has no Strategy for Iran', *Brookings Institution*, 9 May 2018.

Syria on the same side as Iran, called on both nations to resolve their differences through diplomatic means. Russia's good relations with Iran, Hizbullah and the Syrian government made it the sole actor capable of mediating understandings to prevent an Iran–Israel escalation across Syria.⁸⁴ Stemming from its role of playing a delicate balancing act between different regional actors, Russia stressed that only the Syrian army should be deployed on the country's southern border with Jordan and Israel. It is worth noting that since August 2019, Russia faced increasing difficulties in mediating between Turkey and Syria as the Syrian army was trying to seize land in Turkish-controlled Idlib.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the Russian, Turkish and Iranian geostrategic and geo-economic interests in Syria and the ME. We argued that the Syrian conflict eventually became a proxy war pitting the US, Turkey and the Gulf countries, who supported the rebels, against Russia, Iran and Hizbullah, who fought alongside the regime. Since August 2019, a tentative ceasefire has been in place in Idlib. The Russian-backed government forces were trying to recapture the province. Concurrently, the 13th round of talks sponsored by Turkey, Russia and Iran began in Nur-Sultan (previously known as Astana) and focused on de-escalation in Idlib and the formation of the constitutional committee that would draft a new constitution for Syria.⁸⁵ For the first time representatives from Lebanon and Iraq joined the talks as observer parties.

Russia's willingness to assume responsibilities associated with its conflict management role in the ME was connected to its capabilities to both resolve the conflict and to provide order. Both capabilities had status implications. The fifth trilateral summit in Ankara between Erdogan, Putin and Rouhani on 16 September 2019, and the agreement on 23 September 2019 by the Syrian parties 'on the rules and procedures which was facilitated by the Astana guarantors in coordination' with the UN Syria envoy, Geir Pedersen, was a crucial step that would pave the way for a viable and lasting peace in Syria. For Putin and Erdogan, the situation in Idlib was of the utmost importance. While Erdogan expressed growing concern over the Syrian army's campaign in Idlib, Putin emphasised that Russia would continue its fight against the terrorist groups. As for Rouhani, his main goal at the summit was to gain Russian and Turkish support in face of the current American and Israeli potential threats in light of Iran-backed Yemen's Houthi rebel drone and missile attack on Saudi Arabia's oil industry on 14 September that shook the global energy markets. At the start

⁸⁴ See 'Israel, Hizbullah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria', International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 182, 8 February 2018, pp. 1–30.

⁸⁵ Marina Belenkaya, 'Astana Talks Show Russia to keep Plugging Away at Idlib', *Al-Monitor*, 5 August 2019.

of the summit, Rouhani emphasised that the 'American forces should leave Syria at once' because their presence in the country 'endangered Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty'.⁸⁶ Notwithstanding their different geostrategic and geo-economic priorities, the three guarantors of the Astana format emphasised that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria should be respected by all sides. Putin seldom missed an opportunity to expose any perceived US weakness. Putin wanted to underscore Russia's growing confidence in projecting influence in the region, building on the role Moscow played in shoring up al-Assad in Syria, managing to deal with Israel and Iran, and selling the S-400 missiles to NATO member Turkey despite US objections.

Ambitious Russia proved that it was an indispensable actor able to keep a balance of power in the ME. Buoyed by military gains in Syria, Putin, on his first visit to Saudi Arabia on 12 October 2019, signalled Moscow's growing ME clout. After the two sides signed more than a dozen memoranda of understanding in the fields of energy and petrochemicals, and after discussing the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, Putin promised King Salman that he would provide the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system to the Kingdom after the 14 September attacks to protect its oil facilities.⁸⁷ Geopolitically, Putin could also play a positive role in easing tensions with Tehran, given Russia's good relations with both sides.

Once again, Russia filled the vacuum after the pullback of the US troops. On 22 October 2019, Erdogan and Putin agreed to push back the YPG/PKK fighters to a line 32 km deep along the entire length of the Turkish–Syrian border after marathon talks in Sochi. Turkey was granted the right to remain fully deployed in an Arab majority area it had dubbed a safe zone that was the main objective of the offensive.⁸⁸ The agreement entrusted Russian military police and Syrian regime border guards, which had already started returning to the north, with the task of removing YPG fighters and their weapons from a zone extending 30 km south from the Turkish–Syrian border. The Sochi agreement also authorised joint Turkish–Russian patrols along the entire border, to a depth of 10 km inside Syria, with the exception of the border city Qamishli, the *de facto* capital of the defunct Kurdish autonomous region. In November 2019, Russia set up a helicopter base at an airport in northern Syria that had been vacated by the US forces, to increase Moscow's control over events on the ground.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ See 'Erdogan Hosts Putin, Rouhani for Syria Talks', *The Daily Star*, 17 September 2019, p. 5.

⁸⁷ See 'Russia, Saudi Arabia Seal Billions in Deals During Putin's Visit', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 14 October 2019.

⁸⁸ See 'Full Text of Turkey, Russia Agreement on Northeast Syria', *Aljazeera.com*, 22 October 2019.

⁸⁹ See 'Russia Lands Forces at Syria ex-U.S. air base', *The Daily Star*, 16 November 2019, p. 5.

At the time of writing, Russia 'is walking its own tightrope between two partners that are viscerally hostile toward one another: a regime with which it is closely allied and a country with which it wishes to strengthen relations for a range of geopolitical reasons'.⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that in early November 2019, US troops began repositioning to the Deir al-Zour province with their SDF fighters 'to increase security and continue their mission to defeat ISIS remnants', and to prevent oil fields from being taken over by ISIS militant groups. The embattled remnants of ISIS might seek revenge for their fallen leader, Abu Baker Baghdadi, who was killed in a raid by US Special Forces in northwestern Syria on 27 October. Trump reiterated that a small number of US troops would remain in Syria 'where they have the oil'.⁹¹ The three influential actors in Syria: Iran, Russia and Turkey, criticised the US decision to maintain a presence near Syrian oil fields. However, the US needed to get back to reduce, if not eliminate, Iran's influence in Syria. Iran could stir up trouble not only in Syria, but also in Iraq and Lebanon, and pose a security threat to Israel.

At the global level, Putin reminded the European powers and the US that Russia retained geopolitical reach and a readiness to act to protect its national interests in the former Soviet republics and elsewhere. Russia made headway by expanding trade and investment ties with China and by making its influence felt in the ME. However, Anna Borshchevskaya, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute, wrote that 'Russia often made gains simply because the US was too risk-averse to challenge it'.⁹²

⁹⁰ 'Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East', International Crisis Group, Middle East Briefing No. 72 (27 November 2019), p. 12.

⁹¹ See, 'US Forces Seen Patrolling in Syria Near Turkish Border', *The Daily Star*, 1 November 2019, p. 5.

⁹² Quoted in Luke Baker, 'Russia Makes Presence Felt after Saudi Attacks', *The Daily Star*, 1 October 2019, p. 5.