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WHY DID RUSSIA'S MEDIATION IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT FAIL IN MAKING PEACE?

OHANNES GEUKJIAN AND FARAH ABOU HARB*

ABSTRACT

This article examines Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war and the role of the regional and international actors in the conflict. We argue that Russian intervention aimed to prevent regime change, mediate the Syrian conflict and protect Moscow's national and geostrategic interests. We also argue that using military leverage is not a sufficient condition to resolve the conflict, mainly because the interests of the external actors, the US, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others, need to be considered. Thus, it is important to pinpoint the regional and geostrategic dimensions of the conflict. In addition, we explain that systemic and regional power balances have been major constraints that hindered conflict settlement. The Geneva and Astana peace processes succeeded in de-escalating violence but failed to resolve the conflict. We conclude that leverage as such is not sufficient for successful mediation, and that a multilateral approach to peace might be a better approach to conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

A lack of great power cooperation was one of the major reasons why Russia's mediation efforts failed to bring peace in Syria after the Syrian civil war started in the autumn and winter of 2011–2012. The subsequent series of peace plans put forward by various mediators, such as the Arab League plan of winter 2011/2012 that called for a Syrian-led political transition, the diplomacy of Kofi Annan, the joint Arab League–UN envoy, in March 2012, and the June 2012 UN Action Group for Syria's Geneva Communiqué which called for a negotiated solution, had coincided with an internationalisation of the Syrian conflict.¹ These serious attempts at early mediation were rejected by the warring parties and undermined by Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, who continued to provide arms and logistical support for the regime and the rebels, thus discouraging either side from taking the proposed ceasefires seriously. On 4 October 2011, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that condemned the Syrian regime for using excessive force. Russia contended that it had little leverage over Assad to stop violence.² In the early years of the civil war Moscow clearly had some leverage over President Bashar Assad, persuading him to at least play along with the proposed peace processes like the

* The American University of Beirut

¹ The Action Group for Syria in Geneva was composed of the secretaries general of the UN and the Arab League, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and the foreign ministers of the US, UK, France, China, Russia, Turkey, Kuwait, Iraq and Qatar. It is important to note that neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran nor any Syrians were invited.

² Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria, International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 98.

Arab League plan but not cooperating or power sharing with the opposition who sought to overthrow him. Within this context, Christopher Phillips notes that ‘Russian diplomacy was not completely obstinate’,³ in that Moscow endorsed the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué that called for a negotiated solution because it sought to play a key role in the Syria crisis and interact with non-Western players like Turkey and Iran to drag the Middle East (ME) into Russia’s sphere of influence. However, at the heart of Russia’s strategy was an opposition to any attempt that would weaken the Assad regime and lead to Western military intervention in Syria. President Vladimir Putin believed that Moscow had been betrayed in 2011 when NATO interpreted UN Resolution 1973 as a mandate to pursue regime change in Libya. Putin would not allow the “Libyan scenario” to be reproduced in Syria.⁴ Furthermore, after Russia’s military intervention in Syria in September 2015 that country had subsequently presented itself as peace broker striking back at the West following its campaign in Libya against Muammar Gadhafi. Gadhafi’s fall cost Russia billions of dollars in arms sales and jeopardised oil and infrastructure deals. According to Maria Zakharova, Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, another regime change in the ME could be a catastrophe that ‘could simply turn the whole region into a black hole’.⁵

Jacob Bercovitch defines mediation ‘as an instrument of diplomacy and foreign policy instrument’.⁶ The mediator is a player in the web of relations surrounding a conflict, who brings to the mediation situation his own interests, perceptions and resources. Mediation by great powers, such as Russia, is assumed to be well suited for the Syrian mediator role because it possesses leverage *vis-à-vis* the parties in the conflict. However, Russia is regarded by the opposition with suspicion as an ally of the Syrian regime. Although this makes Russia’s job more difficult, William I. Zartman and Saadia Touval note that ‘suspicion is good because it keeps the mediator honest and aware of the disputants’ concerns’.⁷ Zartman and Touval argue that leverage entails the mediator’s ability to become a significant player in the conflict as well as to influence and protect the interests of the conflicting parties and to put pressure on them to accept a proposed settlement.⁸ Thus, to exercise influence, mediators need leverage or resources to search for information and separate the parties from their rigid positions. This assumes that the mediator’s resources (for example military, economic, political) can be brought to bear on the parties.

³ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 92.

⁴ Martin S. Indyk, ‘The End of the US Dominated Order in the Middle East’, Brookings Institution, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2016/03/15-end-of-us-dominant-order-in-the-middle-east>, accessed 18 March 2016.

⁵ Quoted in ‘Russia, Iran Diverge on Assad Stance’, *The Daily Star*, 4 November 2015, p. 1.

⁶ Jacob Bercovitch, ‘Mediation and Conflict Resolution’, in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk and William I. Zartman (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (London and New Delhi: SAGE, 2009), p. 345.

⁷ William I. Zartman and Saadia Touval, ‘International Mediation’, in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall (ed.), *Leashing the Dogs of War, Conflict Management in a Divided World* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2007), p. 447.

⁸ See Saadia Touval and William I. Zartman, ‘Mediation in Theory’, in Touval and Zartman (eds), *International Mediation in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985). Also, see Saadia Touval, ‘The Context of Mediation’, *Negotiation Journal*, No. 1, pp. 373–78.

According to Bercovitch and Houston, 'Leverage or resources buttress the mediator's ability to facilitate a successful outcome through the balancing of power discrepancies and enhancing of cooperative behavior'.⁹ The key is therefore knowing which resources are crucial for gaining and exploiting leverage. It is important that the mediator would exercise any form of mediation with muscle. If the mediator is involved in an intense conflict he would use sticks (negative sanctions) and carrots (positive sanctions)¹⁰ to nudge the parties toward a zone of agreement. Thomas Princen notes that the mediator would also distinguish between material (e.g. withholding or supplying economic aid) and immaterial (using moral or psychological pressure) dimensions of leverage.¹¹ Nevertheless, leverage does not depend on resources alone, but also on the willingness of the mediator to utilise them, and the skill with which it is conducted.

Shifting power balances in the Middle East have thwarted successful Russian mediation. According to Michael Smith, 'regionalism if used as a vehicle of influence in the international arena, may be promoted as a means of extending and consolidating influence'.¹² This has been made evident through states such as Turkey and Iran, which supported their proxies in Syria in order to gain more territory and power. Turkey's continuous military support to the opposition in Idlib and elsewhere served several purposes, most notably Ankara's policy to prevent the Syrian Kurds from gaining territory and establishing autonomy. Iran, on the other hand, deployed its elite military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Shiite militias from Iraq into Syria. Its long-term plan was to create a land corridor that extended from Tehran all the way through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon in order to use its leverage in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Therefore, the expansion of the zones of influence significantly shifted the power balances in the Middle East, problematising Russia's peacemaking efforts.

In 1978, Zartman formally introduced the Theory of Ripeness. According to Zartman, parties are likely to consider outside intervention only after they find themselves at a costly deadlock from which they see no possible exit.¹³ This situation, better understood as the 'mutually hurting stalemate' (MHS), is a necessary component for ripeness. The theory states that 'if parties to a conflict (a) perceive themselves to be in a MHS and (b) perceive the possibility of a negotiated solution (a way out), the conflict is ripe for resolution (i.e., for negotiations toward resolution to begin)'. However, it should be noted that

⁹ Jacob Bercovitch and Allison Houston, 'The Study of International Mediation: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidence', in Jacob Bercovitch (ed.), *Resolving International Conflicts, The Theory and Practice of Mediation* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), p. 26.

¹⁰ Touval and Zartman, 'Introduction: Mediation in Theory', p. 13.

¹¹ Thomas Princen, 'Mediation by a Transnational Organization: The Case of the Vatican', in Jacob Bercovitch and J. Z. Rubin (eds), *Mediation in International Relations: Multiple Approaches to Conflict Management* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 167.

¹² Michael Smith, 'Regions and Regionalism', in Brian White, Richard Little and Michael Smith (eds), *Issues in World Politics* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 70.

¹³ William Zartman, 'Ripeness: the Hurting Stalemate and Beyond', in Paul C. Sterna and Daniel Druckman (eds), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 2000), p. 225.

‘ripeness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the initiation of negotiations [bilateral or mediated]’.¹⁴ We argue that in the Syrian case, in addition to the absence of ripeness, shifting power balances in the ME and what Edward Azar called ‘international linkages’ – i.e. the network of political-military linkages that constituted regional and global patterns of clientage and cross-border interests – hampered successful mediation.¹⁵

We also argue that although leverage is necessary for a party to become involved as mediator in the Syrian conflict, where the conflicting parties are determined to dominate one another, it is not a sufficient condition for achieving successful outcomes. It would be more correct to stress that the role of power in mediation is contingent on many other variables in play that have prevented Russia from effectively employing its potential leverage. For example, contextual variables such as the role of the state and the conflicting parties’ power have made successful mediation less likely. There are also important constraints at work that prevented Russia from effectively employing its potential leverage. These constraints include – but are not limited to – systemic and regional power balances; what Barry Buzan called ‘regional security complexes’ internal or sub-regional factors and the role of ripeness.¹⁶ Some authors focus primarily on the internal dynamics of the conflict, mainly the brutality of the regime and the incompetence and disunity of the opposition, rather than focusing on the role of international and regional factors in fuelling and extending the civil war.¹⁷ Certainly, the Syrian conflict is complex and multidimensional as it portrays an evident interaction between internal and external actors. This article offers a different interpretation and analysis of the conflict by giving international and regional factors a more central role in the failure of mediation and conflict resolution. The argument will be further illustrated with a case study of Russia’s military intervention and mediation efforts in the Syrian conflict. The following sections will examine the beginning of the Syrian civil war and Russia’s military intervention; international and regional constraints and using leverage to de-escalate violence.

UNREST, CIVIL WAR AND INTERVENTION

In March 2011 tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in the southern Syrian town of Deraa and elsewhere, inspired by the demonstrations that had toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, started calling for reform (rather than regime change).¹⁸ The events in Syria could not be dealt with in isolation, but rather as a further development in what appeared to be a sudden

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Edward Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases* (Aldershot and Hampshire: Dartmouth Publication, 1990), p.11

¹⁶ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (2nd ed.), (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), Chapter 5.

¹⁷ See for example, Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge, 2013); David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (London: Yale University Press, 2013); and Nikolas Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation, The Civil War in Syria* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

¹⁸ Nikolas Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation, The Civil War in Syria* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 69–70.

and complex regional transformation. The regime's security forces – military, Mukhabarat and Shabiha – were given free rein to attack the rebels. Consequently, the peaceful insurgency took on a sectarian nature between the Alawites and Sunni Muslims. The conflict between the opposition groups and the brutal regime escalated destructively and in 2011 Syria plunged into a ferocious civil war that threatened the state.

The beginning of the civil war coincided with the internationalisation of the crisis. In August 2011, US President Barack Obama called for Assad to step aside, but without the intent of enforcing his removal. Joost Hiltermann rightly notes that 'at the core of the Syrian war's inexorable internationalization stands the fundamental disagreement between the US and Russia over the fate of the regime'.¹⁹ Although Obama had little intention of following up words with military action, Russia and Iran saw the US weighing in against their ally and stated their determination to support the regime. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who were hostile to the regime, would proceed to take action in Syria on the assumption that the US would eventually intervene and enforce regime change. This positioning of the external actors not only reflected the regional dimension of the war but also served to escalate the sectarian divisions within Syria.

Charles King notes that 'no civil war is ever wholly internal'.²⁰ Civil wars and external interventions are almost inextricable. Figure 1 shows that out of the 150 civil wars that erupted between 1945 and 1999, 101 saw external intervention by foreign countries or international organisations (IOs).²¹ External interveners' motives differ, and range from humanitarian concerns to mediate a peace-building process to self-interest in the form of strategic gains. However, intervention can be justified when parties at war intentionally call for external support 'to strengthen their position vis-à-vis their adversary'.²² Zartman and Touval argue that the 'intervention [of states] as mediators is legitimized by the goal of conflict reduction'.²³ In the Syrian case, Russia saw an opportunity to restructure the regional balance of power to its advantage.

¹⁹ Joost Hiltermann, 'Russia a Reluctant Driver in the Syrian War', *International Crisis Group*, 26 February 2018, p. 1.

²⁰ Charles King, *Ending Civil Wars* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 17.

²¹ Sang Ki Kim, 'Third-party Intervention in Civil Wars: Motivation, War Outcomes, and Post-war Development' PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 2012.

²² Hasan Askari Rivzi, 'External Intervention', *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1981), pp. 59–65.

²³ William Zartman and Saadia Touval, 'International Mediation', in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall (eds), *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2013), p. 437.

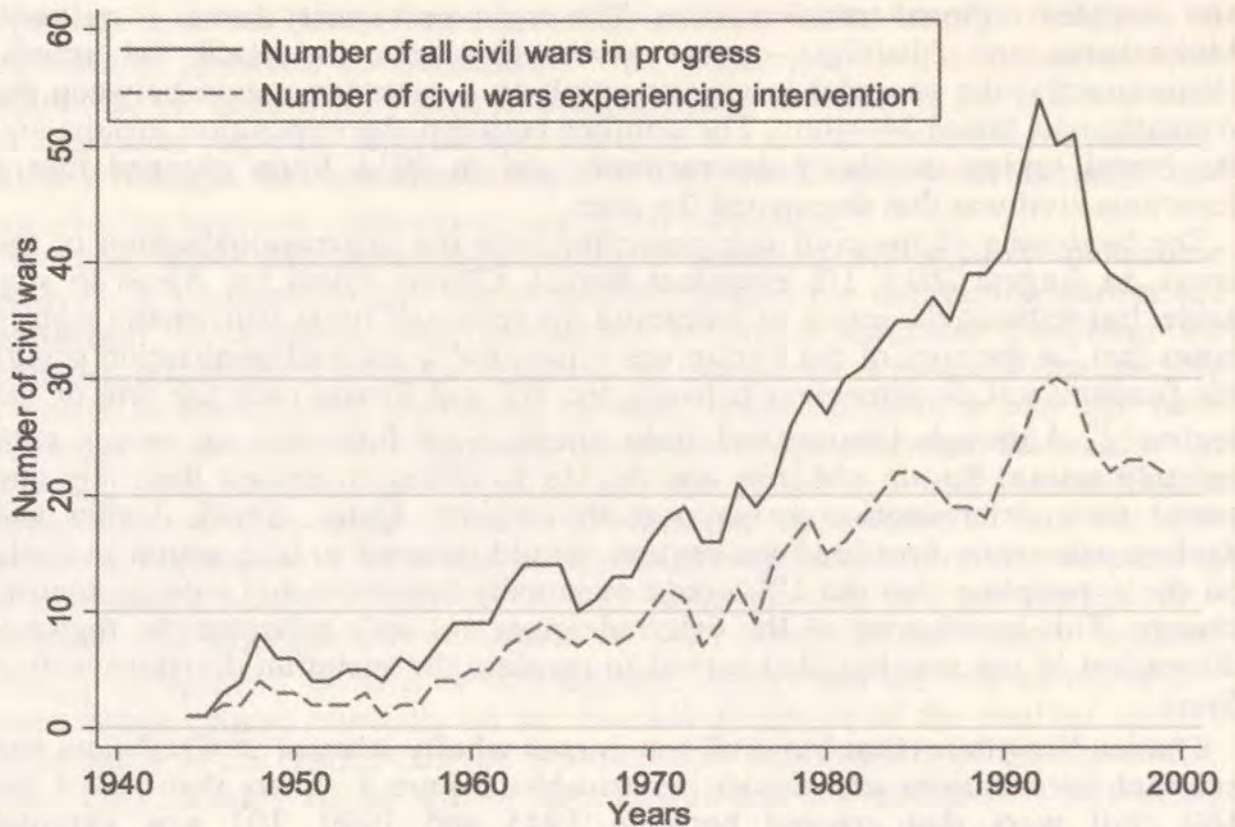


Figure 1: Ongoing civil wars and third party intervention 1944–99²¹

In addition to the regime and the opposition, there are six main international and regional actors whose independent and often conflicting agendas have helped the destructive escalation and have hindered a negotiated solution to the civil war: the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Other external actors have also played a critical role, most notably the UK, France, China, UAE, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, but none has had sufficient leverage detached from one of the main actors to impact the conflict independently. Moreover, the war was notably influenced by several non-state external actors which include the Lebanese Hizbullah, the Kurdish militia, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Nusra Front or Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Nusra and ISIS are here labeled jihadists for their pursuit of global jihad beyond Syria and association with al-Qaeda).²⁴ In March 2013, Nusra in alliance with the radical Islamist Ahrar al-Sham captured the eastern city of Raqqa. The US, along with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, supported the rebels battling to topple Assad, whose external military backing had so far come from Russia, Iran and the latter state's Lebanese ally Hizbullah.²⁵

Moscow was suspicious of the 'colour revolutions' and the events of the Arab Spring, believing them to be partly the result of a US and EU plot to destabilise the current international system by imposing Western democratic values. Its

²⁴ See Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), p. 58.

²⁵ See Ohannes Geukjian, 'The Objectives of Russia's Military Intervention in Syria', *The Maghreb Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2017), p. 279.

only choice was therefore to become more deeply involved in Syria in order to balance the destabilisation of the political situation in the ME, and more globally in Eurasia.²⁶ For Putin, Russian national interests would be protected by supporting Damascus, establishing close relations with Tehran and rapprochement with Egypt. The Kremlin thus sought to demonstrate to the US and the EU that Moscow's mediation in the conflicts in the ME would play a crucial role in the settlement of existing international issues.

For Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, intervention in Syria was part of their strategic ambitions and perceived interests. As for Russia, its aim was to prevent the establishment of an Islamist state on its southern flank in order to prevent any unrest among its Muslim population and to protect its security and domestic stability. Diplomacy had so far failed to find a solution to the Syrian crisis in its fourth year. The second international conference, Geneva II, which took place in January and February 2014, had failed to persuade both sides to stop the war and embark on a negotiated solution. The Geneva II talks were held on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué (also known as Geneva I) in June 2012, which presented a road map for Syria's political transition. This plan was intended to lead to the establishment of a transitional governing body that would exercise full executive powers.²⁷ The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) leader Ahmad Jarba, who led the opposition delegation, called on the Syrian government to immediately transfer power to a transitional governing body with full executive powers. However, Walid al-Muallim, Syria's Foreign Minister, stated that Assad's position as president was non-negotiable. The Geneva II talks were undermined by two basic factors: Firstly, there was no agreement over which groups should be included in the opposition. Turkey rejected the Kurds' participation because it allegedly considered them part of the PKK, which Turkey has fought against for decades and considers a terrorist organisation. The opposition, represented by exile groups, had little influence over the events taking place on the ground. Secondly, the regime had little reason to engage in dialogue, given the US policy that Assad should be removed from power.²⁸ In the fall of 2014, the US increased its support to the rebels and put together a coalition of states to fight ISIS. In May 2014, Lakhdar Brahimi, who succeeded Kofi Annan as UN Special Envoy for Syria, resigned for being unable to achieve progress in the negotiations. In July 2014, Brahimi was succeeded by Staffan de Mistura, a diplomat and UN mediator with wide experience.

Within this context, on 26–29 January and 6–9 April 2015, Russia used its leverage and hosted two meetings in Moscow between the Syrian opposition members and representatives of the Syrian regime.²⁹ Russia, as mediator, tried to promote the idea that a settlement could be achieved through dialogue

²⁶ Alexander Sergunin, *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior, Theory and Practice* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2016), p. 99.

²⁷ For further details of the Geneva Communiqué, see BBC, 'What is the Geneva II conference on Syria?', 22 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24628442>, accessed 8 February 2017.

²⁸ See [Globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org), 'High Negotiations Committee', n.d., available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hnc.htm>, accessed on 19 March 2018.

²⁹ Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict, Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* (Britain and Germany: Gerlach Press, 2016), p. 43.

between the non-radical groups and the regime. Although the outcomes of both meetings were modest, Russia considered them an important achievement. Apart from acknowledging Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the struggle against terrorist groups the Moscow meetings did not offer a practical and workable road map to settle the Syrian conflict. The notion of success in conflict resolution, as Christopher Mitchell notes, is inherently relative because 'some processes never manage to get the parties into dialogue, let alone to agree to a cessation of fighting. Others reach dialogue but fail to find a possible agreement. Still others break down at the implementation stage and the process ends in recrimination and accusation of bad faith.'³⁰

A number of constraints hindered Russia's mediation. First, Russia's leverage to influence Damascus was limited because Assad demonstrated a lack of flexibility to search for a compromise through cooperative means. Second, the most important groups that were part of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces were excluded from the talks. Third, the representatives of the regime and the opposition which participated in the talks failed to work out confidence-building measures (CBMs) that would allow them to implement the terms of an agreement. Fourth, both the regime and the opposition still believed that a military solution in Syria was the only solution. Fifth, Russia was unable to launch a national dialogue on its own, but could be an effective player in an international team of players to solve the conflict.

Moscow staunchly backed Assad and supplied the Syrian army with military equipment and humanitarian aid. In the summer of 2015 Russia initiated a peace plan for Syria that envisioned cooperation between the governments of Syria and Iran in the anti-ISIS coalition. A few rounds of negotiations with the US and Saudi Arabia brought no visible results. Still, Russia contemplated the possibility of joining the US-led anti-ISIS coalition to eradicate ISIS and to achieve rapprochement with the West, but Washington was 'reluctant to accept proposals from Putin whom it wanted to contain'.³¹ Further, Washington's reluctance to cooperate with Moscow stemmed from the fear that Russia could harness coalition forces into eradicating all rivals to the Assad regime, which 'would then become Moscow's dedicated clients in the ME'.³² When the few rounds of negotiations with the US and Saudi Arabia brought no visible results Moscow decided to beef up its military presence in Syria in order to play an active role in world politics.

In the second half of September 2015, Russia had deployed 28 combat planes at the Hmeymim air base, near the Syrian coastal city of Latakia, as well as ammunition and other military equipment in quantities for the first time since the end of the Cold War in 1991.³³ The rebels were fighting in Idlib in the north and in Deraa in the south. ISIS too had captured and ransacked the city of Palmyra, provoking real fears of Assad's collapse in Moscow and Tehran. The

³⁰ Christopher R. Mitchell, 'Conflict Resolution and Civil Wars: Reflections on the Sudanese Settlement of 1972', working paper No. 3, Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, August 1989, p. 32.

³¹ Vladimir Isachenkov, 'Putin Jockeying for Deal with US on Syria', *The Daily Star*, 9 September 2015, p. 9.

³² Mikhail Troitskiy, 'The Need to Massage Egos, Status Politics as a Crucial Element of US-Russia relations', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 445 (October 2016), p. 1.

³³ See 'Russia Deploys 28 Combat Aircraft in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 22 September 2015, p. 1.

FSA (a loose alliance of insurgent groups) supported by the US, Saudi Arabia and Jordan via the Military Operations Centre (MOC) in Jordan, and by the Joint Operations Centre (MOM) in Turkey, posed additional threats to the regime.³⁴ Clearly, the regional actors were fighting in Syria by proxy. It is worth noting that the MOC and MOM were a CIA covert assistance programme, established in 2013, that 'pumped many hundreds of millions of dollars to many dozens of militia groups'. Yet, the programme was 'too late, too limited and too dependent on dubious partners, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia'.³⁵

On 30 September 2015, when the Assad regime was threatened, Russia began launching airstrikes against the rebels who were fighting the government forces in and around the cities of Homs and Hama. By equating terrorist and non-terrorist opposition, Moscow signalled that any sustainable settlement would require the defeat of all parts of the opposition. Not since the end of the Cold War had Russia been so assertive and interventionist outside its borders. After Ukraine, Russia decided that the next place to put down the 'iron fist' would be Syria.³⁶ The Syrian intervention was aimed not only at strengthening Assad's position but also at changing the political outcome in a region that had been out of Moscow's sphere of influence for decades. 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.

USING LEVERAGE: INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Russian intervention in Syria stemmed from Syria's geostrategic location in the ME. In addition, 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. However, in order to achieve successful mediation, Russia would use its leverage to balance the interests of the regional actors in Syria.

According to Zartman and Touval, 'Leverage is the ticket to mediation'. Leverage can be understood as 'the ability to influence peace processes and shape the incentives of disputants'³⁷ or as government's vulnerability to external pressure.³⁸ Russia used 'capability leverage' through mobilising its military forces in order to coerce a short-term success rather than adopting 'credibility' leverage that aims towards long-term settlements. Lindsay Reid introduces the notion of 'context-dependent leverage' by examining the effects

³⁴ Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 98.

³⁵ David Ignatius, 'The Star-Crossed History of CIA Paramilitary Action', *The Daily Star*, 22 July 2017, p. 7.

³⁶ Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Putin's Foreign Policy, the Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May/June 2016), p. 35.

³⁷ Lindsay Reid, 'Finding a Peace that Lasts: Mediator Leverage and the Durable Resolution of Civil Wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, No. 7 (2017)

³⁸ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, 'Linkage versus Leverage: Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2006), pp. 379-400.

of capability and credibility leverage on mediation success.³⁹ According to Reid, 'credibility leverage' is the mediator's use of immaterial strength to coerce a settlement, whereas 'capability leverage' is the use of economic or material information to pressure the disputants. A critical component of credibility leverage is that it 'derives influence from historical and cultural ties' (Reid). Russia and Syria have been allies for decades. Still, Syria was the Soviet Union's Middle Eastern backbone throughout the Cold War period. Unfortunately though, Russia's choice of mediation based on material coercion rather than historical and cultural ties had a negative impact on Moscow's peacemaking efforts.

International cooperation was a necessary ingredient for successful mediation and negotiation in the Syrian conflict. Throughout the conflict, the US disagreed with Russia on Assad's role in the transitional governing body with full executive powers. Russia's unilateral use of force since September 2015 to weaken the opposition and bring it to the negotiating table did not yield tangible results, mainly because the US and the regional actors continued to support the rebels. Such a unilateral action, as Stephen M. Saideman notes, increased the costs of intervention and decreased the chances of success.⁴⁰ From Moscow's perspective, the Syrian army was the most effective force that could stand up to the terror threat on the ground.⁴¹ Still, the removal of Assad by the externally backed and financed opposition could not be a prerequisite for any deal to end the civil war. The US was using Syrian airspace to lead a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS. US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said: 'We were not able to associate ourselves more broadly with Russia's approach in Syria because it was wrongheaded and strategically shortsighted. It attempted to fight extremism while not also at the same time working to promote the political transition away from Assad.'⁴² The Russian military intervention in the war gave the regime a decisive edge over the opposition. The US-led anti-ISIS coalition and the Russian intervention increased the stakes for the regional actors and deepened their relationships with opposing sides in the civil war. Russia wanted the Syrian government and the opposition to agree on launching a constitutional reform process lasting up to 18 months, followed by early presidential polls. According to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Moscow had come up with 'different ideas and proposals' that did not constitute a solid plan.⁴³ The eight-point potential plan drawn up by Moscow before international talks on Syria in November 2015 included:

1. UN Security Council to list ISIS as a terrorist organisation.
2. Agree on the additional list of terrorist groups.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 1401–1431.

⁴⁰ Stephen M. Saideman, 'Overlooking the Obvious: Bringing International Politics Back into Ethnic Conflict Management', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), p. 72.

⁴¹ 'ISIS Squeezes Assad as Russia Defends Military Aid', *The Daily Star*, 11 September 2015, p. 1.

⁴² Quoted in Michael Totten, 'Moscow on the Tigris: Russia Joins the Terror Nexus', available at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org>, accessed 20 November 2016.

⁴³ See 'Russia to Pitch 18-Month Syria Reform Process', *The Daily Star*, 11 November 2015, p. 8.

3. Adopt a UN Security Council resolution in support of the efforts against ISIS and other terrorist groups, providing legal framework for cooperation of all participants of counter-terrorist actions among themselves and with respective governments.
4. Block channels of supply of ISIS and other terrorist groups; stop illegal trade in oil by ISIS in accordance with UNSCR 2199; prevent control of oil fields by terrorists.
5. When considering the issue of ceasefire in Syria, operations against ISIS and other terrorist groups must be excluded.
6. Launch under the auspices of the UN special envoy political process on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, between the Syrian government and a united delegation of the opposition groups. The composition of the opposition delegation has to be agreed beforehand, including on the basis of readiness of respective groups to share the goals of preventing terrorists from coming to power in Syria and of ensuring sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Syria, as well as secular and democratic character of the state.
7. The Syrian parties at the proposed conference are invited to agree on the following steps: Launch a constitutional reform up to 18 months; for that purpose, to form a constitutional commission to embrace the entire spectrum of the Syrian society; draft constitution will be submitted to a popular referendum; parliamentary elections planned to take place in the spring of 2016; Syrian government will be formed on the basis of party/electoral block which receives a majority of the popular vote and will possess full executive authority; popularly elected president of Syria will have the functions of commander in chief of the armed forces, control of special services and foreign policy.
8. Convene a Syria Support Group to help prepare the conference and assist Syrian parties during its work in reaching mutual consent. The SSD could include members of P-5, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, UAE, Iraq, Lebanon, Germany, Italy, UN Special Envoy, Arab League and OIC, EU.⁴⁴

Russia wanted to dissuade the regional powers from supporting the rebels and the radical extremist groups who were battling the regime. Given the large number of tasks associated with the peacemaking and peace-building process, it is unreasonable to assume that Russia would perform them on its own or could shoulder the full responsibility of guaranteeing that the plan would succeed. For third parties with limited leverage, 'the costs and risks of intervention would usually outweigh the foreign policy benefits to be gained by involvement. This argues for a multilateral approach to conflict resolution, whereby the costs and risks of intervention could be shared within a larger group'.⁴⁵

On 14 November 2015, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), consisting of 20 states and organisations including Iran, met in Vienna and

⁴⁴ See 'Text of Russia's Draft Proposals on Syrian Crisis', *The Daily Star*, 12 November 2015, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Fen Osler Hampson, *Nurturing Peace, Why Peace Settlements Succeed or Fail* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 1996), p. 24.

'expressed [a] unanimous sense of urgency to end the suffering of the Syrian people, the physical destruction of Syria, the destabilization of the region, and the resulting increase in terrorists drawn to the fighting in Syria'.⁴⁶ In addition to Saudi Arabia, Iran also participated in the meeting as Tehran had professed its willingness to play a role in a political process. The ISSG acknowledged the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. Yet the foreign players failed to reach agreement on Assad's departure and the transitional period sought by Western states. Nonetheless, the talks set out a blueprint for moving the peace process that included a framework for a transitional government, a new constitution and elections. Assad was elected president in June 2014 by an overwhelming majority of Syrians as there was no alternative to him as leader. However, Assad's Syrian and foreign opponents dismissed the 2014 election as a sham. At Vienna, Russia insisted that only the Syrian people should decide whether Assad would step down or not. For Russia, the West should drop its demand for the political exit of Assad if it wanted a genuinely international coalition against ISIS. The participants at the Vienna talks agreed to ask the UN to broker a peace deal between the regime and the opposition, to clear the way for a new constitution and UN-supervised elections. This was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2254 on 18 December 2015. Pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, Resolution 2254 called for a start of negotiations between the opposition and government, and elections within six months for a unity government.⁴⁷

On 15 November 2015 at the G20 meeting in Antalya in Turkey, Obama urged Putin to focus on combating the militant group in Syria.⁴⁸ Yet, from Russia's perspective the West should join Moscow in an unequivocal battle against terrorism and should conduct anti-terrorist operations anywhere in the world that they deemed necessary. The short informal meeting between Obama and Putin did not narrow the rift between Syria and Ukraine.⁴⁹ The dilemma that remained for Obama was figuring out how to rally the international coalition against ISIS without drawing the US deeper into Syria's civil war. But, according to Fen Osler Hampson, 'the prospects for conflict resolution thus depend significantly on the ability of great powers to accommodate their divergent preferences or one great power's ability to prevail over the other'.⁵⁰ So far, neither Russia nor the US was able to overcome their divergent preferences over the prospects of ending the war in Syria.

On 20 December 2016, Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey met in Moscow and adopted a document called the 'Moscow Declaration' which set out principles they thought any Syrian peace agreement should adhere to. They

⁴⁶ See '14 November 2015, Statement of the International Syria Support Group Vienna', available at <http://www.un.org/undpa/en/Speeches-statements/14112015/syria>, accessed 4 February 2017.

⁴⁷ See Security Council Resolution 2254, available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>, accessed on 20 March 2018.

⁴⁸ See 'Obama Urges Russia to Join Renewed ISIS Fight', *The Daily Star*, 16 November 2015, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Russia wanted to deal with the Syrian conflict separately from Ukraine because the characteristics, the issues, and the environment of these conflicts are different.

⁵⁰ Hampson, *Nurturing Peace*, p. 17.

also supported a new ceasefire across Syria, free movement of humanitarian aid, and the movement of civilians on Syrian territory.⁵¹ Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, announced that a new series of peace talks (parallel to Geneva) were set to take place in January 2017 in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan, and that the priority in Syria was to fight terrorism and not to remove Assad from power. The three nations expressed their readiness to act as guarantors of a future settlement between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

After the Moscow meeting, on 30 December 2016, talks between Turkish and Russian officials and rebel representatives in Ankara called for a new ceasefire across Syria. Both agreements highlighted Russia's leverage as the main international player in Syria. After a major victory in Aleppo, Moscow was pushing from a position of strength for the expected Astana talks. Russia was positioning itself as a mediator between the internal actors in Syria and the external ones.

Notwithstanding the great powers' rivalry, the Geneva peace talks (known as Geneva III) started on 1 February 2016, but were quickly suspended due to Russian- and Iranian-backed government offensives against rebel-held territory around Aleppo. US Secretary of State John Kerry urged both sides to seize the opportunity to make progress and reiterated that 'while battlefield dynamics can affect negotiating leverage, in the end there is no military solution to this conflict. Without negotiations, the bloodshed will drag on until the last city is reduced to rubble.'⁵² Representatives of the Saudi-backed Higher Negotiation Committee (HNC), which included political and militant opponents of Assad, headed by Riyad Hijab, met the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura whose attempts to convene the first peace negotiations in two years were planned to start as 'proximity talks' with government and opposition delegations in separate rooms.⁵³ The HNC did not want the PYD to join the negotiations because it was considered an ally of the regime. In addition, the HNC insisted that the Syrian regime should first comply with UNSC Resolution 2254.⁵⁴ Turkey, which was supporting the rebels and providing assistance to the refugees, also rejected the PYD's participation in the talks and criticised the US for supporting the PYD and not recognising it as a terrorist organisation.⁵⁵ It is important to stress that the PYD was a key ally to the US in its fighting against ISIS. The Syrian government's delegation head, Bashar al-Jaafari, said that Damascus was considering options such as ceasefires, humanitarian corridors and prisoner releases, but pending the result of the talks – not as a condition for negotiations to begin.⁵⁶ The government's delegation completely ignored the discussion of a political transition and of UNSC Resolution 2254 because from its perspective they had little value for the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva. Although Kerry urged the opposition to drop their preconditions, the HNC walked away from the talks

⁵¹ See 'Russia, Iran, and Turkey Agree to Work Toward Syria Accord, Serve as Guarantors', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Russia Report (hereafter RFE/RL)*, 20 December 2016, p. 1.

⁵² Quoted in 'Syria Peace Negotiations Hit Trouble', *The Daily Star*, 1 February 2016, p. 1.

⁵³ See 'Syria Talks Run Parallel to Regime Offensive', *The Daily Star*, 2 February 2016, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 151.

⁵⁵ See 'Erdogan Chastises US Over Support for Kurds', *The Daily Star*, 11 February 2016, p. 8.

⁵⁶ See 'Syria Talks Run', p. 2.

because it felt 'betrayed and abandoned [by its] Western supporters'.⁵⁷

With Putin associating all Sunni rebel groups with ISIS, the conflict in Syria took on an extra dimension as a proxy war between Russia and the US. Russia saw mediation as a way of extending and enhancing its own influence by becoming indispensable to the parties in conflict. Frederic C. Hof wrote that 'the State Department spokesman insisted on the relevance of Russian commitments to ceasefires, humanitarian access, peaceful negotiations and the like, but proved unable to make a very simple and truthful statement' that 'Russia was fully to blame for the suspension of the Geneva talks'.⁵⁸

Russia was using its military resources in Syria to dictate peace. It also played the role of mediator to seek a resolution and restore stability in the extremely volatile ME. Therefore, Russia was to adjust its strategy to facilitate local ceasefires in rebel-held areas around Damascus, with the aim of creating a secure buffer zone around the capital. 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 restore the insurgent strongholds in Idlib and Raqqa (de facto capital of ISIS).⁵⁹

On 27 February 2016, Obama, who was reluctant to engage in military-to-military cooperation with Russia, did negotiate a cessation of hostilities with Putin. The Russian-US-brokered ceasefire allowed Putin to achieve a primary foreign policy goal by raising Russia's global profile to appear as an equal to the US in mediating the – now internationalised – Syrian conflict. The agreement highlighted Russia's status as a main international player because Moscow compelled the US to talk to it while keeping the Ukraine issue, temporarily, off the agenda. Obama considered the cessation of hostilities 'a potential step in bringing about an end to the chaos' and facilitate humanitarian assistance.⁶⁰ But 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 Assad. The ceasefire was woefully dependent on the goodwill of the regional and international players.⁶¹

The US's campaign against ISIS continued, but it had no appetite for deeper military intervention. Obama was known to be reluctant to risk a new confrontation, 'limiting Washington's ability to credibly put pressure on Putin or even Assad'.⁶² The US needed more leverage to match Russia and establish a credible political and military balance to consolidate the ceasefire. Cooperation between both regional players, Iran and Turkey, was crucial in order to end the

⁵⁷ Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 154.

⁵⁸ Fredric C. Hof, 'What's Next after Geneva's Failure?', *The Daily Star*, 9 February 2016, p. 7.

⁵⁹ See 'Russian Strategists Play Big Role in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 16 February 2016, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Dave Clark and Karim Talbi, 'Make-or-Break Syria Cessation of Hostilities Tests Russia-US Cooperation', *The Daily Star*, 27 February 2016, p. 8.

⁶¹ The battlefield around Aleppo was the most complicated that the world has seen for decades. Different combatants and foreign forces were fighting: the Syrian regime forces backed by Russia, Iran and Hizbullah; Kurdish rebel forces backed by the US; Turkish forces that were shelling the US-backed Kurds; Arab rebel fighters supported by the CIA and Saudi intelligence; Nusra Front fighters allied with the Al-Qaeda; and ISIS fighters who were fighting against all.

⁶² See Clark and Talbi, 'Make-or-Break Syria', p. 8.

civil war in Syria. The Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who met Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, in Tehran on 6 March 2016 stressed the importance of both countries to develop a 'common perspective' to end the 'region's fight among brothers, and stop the ethnic and sectarian conflicts'.⁶³ The talks between Davutoglu and Rouhani 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.

Reorienting toward the political path and after having derailed the first peace attempt at the Geneva III talks, Moscow paved the way for a second attempt that started on 14 March 2016. On the same day Putin ordered the Russian military to withdraw the main part of its aerospace forces from Syria. The surprise pullout announcement was to make clear to Assad that it was time to negotiate seriously. Putin said that the objectives of the military operation had been 'generally accomplished' and the main task now was 'to comprehensively assist a peace settlement'.⁶⁴ Unlike the previous round, the talks had run for a week without any hint of collapse and al-Jaafari acknowledged that he had given de Mistura a document entitled 'Fundamental Principles for a Political Solution' in Syria.⁶⁵ The document listed familiar goals such as maintaining a secular state, Syria's territorial integrity and the importance of fighting terrorism. In addition to serving as communicator, de Mistura entered into the substance of the negotiation, dragging both delegations in with his queries on the substantive issue of the political transition rather than allowing them to talk about what they wanted. The authoritarian regime was not used to having to compromise and was not prepared for the idea that it had to engage with the opposition. The regime also viewed any meaningful political transition as an existential threat, and would do whatever it could to prevent this happening. Meanwhile, in western Syria, the Russian-backed Syrian army's victory in Palmyra, which was lost to ISIS in 2014, was used by the regime to bolster its negotiating position at the peace talks. In eastern Syria, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, which was dominated by the Kurdish YPG militia, was waging a campaign aimed at attacking Raqqa. Both the US and Russia were fighting ISIS yet were in disagreement regarding the political solution in Syria. Russia was not planning on abandoning Assad but was offering him a chance to win the civil war.

In addition to the UN-sponsored negotiations, on 23–24 January 2017, representatives from the Assad regime and the multiple opposition armed factions seeking its overthrow met face-to-face in Astana in Kazakhstan in an attempt to arrive at some understanding to de-escalate violence and help prepare an environment conducive to intra-Syrian political talks.⁶⁶ The trilateral initiative 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

⁶³ See 'Turkey, Iran Seek to Manage Differences', *The Daily Star*, 7 March 2016, p. 5.

⁶⁴ See 'Putin Orders Syrian Withdrawal, Saying Goals Achieved', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, 14 March 2016, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Tom Miles and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, 'Syria Talks Move Toward Assad Question', *The Daily Star*, 21 March 2016, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Alexander Bratersky, 'Russian Public Perception Pressuring Putin to Wrap up Syria Operation', *Syria Deeply*, 21 March 2017, p. 3. It is important to stress that most of the armed factions that attended the talks had suffered major battlefield losses.

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'.⁶⁷ Yet, the question was: would Russia go further than it had done to date in pressing for a sustainable ceasefire supported by Turkey, accepted by Iran and adhered to by the regime and the non-jihadist rebels? Saudi Arabia would like to end its military intervention in Yemen, and Turkey was seeking an outcome to the Syrian conflict that would align with its own policy towards the Kurds. After two days of indirect talks in Astana, the participants agreed in a final communiqué 'to observe and ensure full compliance with the 30 December ceasefire, prevent any provocations and determine all modalities of the ceasefire'.⁶⁸ The final communiqué also mentioned reviving the political talks in Geneva under UN Resolution 2254, and that the three countries agreed to continue fighting the jihadist groups. Although the results were modest, the Astana talks represented a success for Moscow, whose role had been evolving into the main power broker since its military intervention in 2015. Yet, it should be stressed that Russia, Turkey and Iran, as Syria's conflict brokers, in their different ways, had credibility problems with the internal conflicting parties.

The Astana talks exposed the limits of what Russia, Turkey and Iran could achieve in their efforts to resolve the conflict without the full involvement of the US and the Gulf States. While Moscow would welcome Washington joining the process, Tehran would not accept such a proposal. Thus, the third parties, as Charles King notes, 'had in many instances been unable to translate cooperation at the strategic level into conflict resolution on the ground'.⁶⁹

In line with our argument, resolving the Syrian conflict required international cooperation. According to Bruce Jentleson, successful conflict prevention necessitated developing 'a fair-but firm strategy' and getting the external powers to act.⁷⁰ He argues that third party interveners must deliver on their promises and their threats. But, as Saideman notes, the problem was that the external powers 'might not want to hurt the side that they preferred but punish the side they disliked'.⁷¹ For example, all external powers advocated harsher measures against ISIS but disagreed with each other due to conflicting preferences. Jasmine El-Gamal, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, states that although Russia and the US's interest in Syria was to defeat ISIS, 'Russia's foremost interest was to exert strategic and tactical dominance over the US in Syria'.⁷²

The regional dimension of the Syrian conflict was a key source of difficulty in reaching a political settlement. Russia would not be dragged into a potential

⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁸ See 'Assad Allies, Turkey Agree to Oversee Truce deal', *The Daily Star*, 25 January 2017, p. 1.

⁶⁹ King, *Ending Civil Wars*, p. 57.

⁷⁰ Bruce Jentleson, 'Preventive Diplomacy and Ethnic Conflict: Possible, Difficult, Necessary', in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (eds), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, Escalation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 303.

⁷¹ Saideman, 'Overlooking the Obvious', p. 70.

⁷² Jasmine El-Gamal, in Alessandria Masi and Kim Bode, 'Expert Views: Does a United Syria Contradict De-Escalation Zones?', 18 August 2017, available at <https://www.newsdeeply.com>, accessed 22 August 2017.

conflict with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, the landmark visit to Moscow in October 2017 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 oil prices and Western sanctions, was an indication of rapprochement between Moscow and Riyadh.⁷³ Pavel Baev notes that 'establishing political and military cooperation with Iran and Turkey was a major breakthrough for Russia's Syrian policy in 2017'.⁷⁴ 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 in situation in Syria. On 26 November 2017 the trilateral Putin-Erdogan-Rouhani summit in the Russian resort of Sochi was the culmination of that effort.⁷⁵ There seemed to be convergence between Turkey, Russia and Iran's 'Syria policy', as Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, seemed ready to forge strong strategic ties with Moscow rooted in energy exports. 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. Henri J. Barkey argues that 'Ankara's rapprochement with Russia occurred amid increasing tensions with the US' over accepting the YPG as a legitimate actor in Syria.⁷⁶ Erdogan wanted to see a clear US policy that refrained from sending more weapons to the YPG as they 'would end up in the hands of the PKK and would be used against Turkey'.⁷⁷ But, at the same time, Ankara and Washington shared an interest in countering Russia and Iran's influence in Syria because Iran posed a security threat to Israel. In his turn, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, during his visit to Moscow on 9 March 2017, made it clear to Putin that Israel was opposed to any agreement on Syria that would allow 'Iran and its proxies [to have a] military presence in Syria'.⁷⁸ On 17 March, Israeli warplanes attacked a weapons convoy destined for Hizbullah in Lebanon, but Israel did not wish 'to intervene in the Syrian civil war or provoke a confrontation with the Russians'.⁷⁹

On 23 February 2017, Syria peace talks restarted in Geneva (known as Geneva IV) after ten months of freeze, but familiar disagreements were likely to surface.⁸⁰ Obviously, the opposition would press for prisoner releases, the lifting of government sieges, and above all for a political transition leading to

⁷³ See 'Saudi King, Putin Agree Deals on Historic Russia Trip', *Aljazeera*, 6 October 2017, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/>, accessed 23 March 2018.

⁷⁴ Pavel K. Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the fog of Syrian War', Brookings, 21 February 2018, p. 2. Available at <http://www.brookings.edu>, accessed 28 February 2018.

⁷⁵ Dave Clark, 'Turkey Support Key as US Seeks to Hold on in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 27 November 2017, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Henri J. Barkey, 'Putin and Erdogan's Marriage of Convenience', 11 January 2017, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org>, accessed 16 January 2017.

⁷⁷ See 'Message to Turkey: What is Behind US Decision to Supply Arms to Kurds', *Sputnik*, 11 May 2017, available at <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201705111053510031-us-turkey-essage/>, accessed 26 June 2017.

⁷⁸ See 'Netanyahu: No Syrian Peace if Iran Present', *The Daily Star*, 10 March 2017, p. 1.

⁷⁹ See 'Israel Threatens to Destroy Syrian Air Defense Systems', *The Daily Star*, 20 March 2017, p. 1.

⁸⁰ See 'Short on Substance, UN Resumes Syria Talks', *The Daily Star*, 24 February 2017, p. 1.

the removal of Assad. However, the future of Assad depended on the agreement between Russia, Iran and the US. For Russia, the fight in Syria was primarily against the forces of extremism and terrorism and not a fight for representative democracy. In his turn, de Mistura was determined to focus on reforming the governance of Syria, introducing a new constitution, and holding elections under UN supervision. Diplomats from the ISSG, which united regional and world powers and was led by the US and Russia, attended the talks. President Trump signalled that he was more concerned with fighting ISIS than with removing Assad. Trump's statement revealed a change in the US stance on Syria and the ME. Trump appeared to have withdrawn from the US-Russian co-leadership that drove Syrian diplomacy under the Obama administration. Putin, in his turn, as the most potent international power broker in Syria's conflict, expressed hope for the success of a political settlement that would help in defeating international terrorism.⁸¹ To quote Stephen Saideman, these statements also demonstrated 'the crucial role of international political dynamics in managing conflict'.⁸²

The Geneva IV talks that centred on UNSC Resolution 2254 did not achieve a tangible breakthrough. Yet, the question of political transition was seriously addressed for the first time and the issue of counter-terrorism, which was pushed by the regime's delegation, was added to the agenda. De Mistura handed both delegations a working paper on procedural issues that could help to begin the political process. He reiterated that the issue of fighting terrorism and the ceasefire should be handled in the parallel talks in Astana.

Notwithstanding the obstacles to making peace, on 23 March 2017, the fifth round of talks resumed in Geneva (Geneva V) amid much scepticism as the regime forces launched an offensive around Hama and the Damascus neighbourhood of Jobar. SDF fighters supported by the US were also on the offensive in the ISIS-held town of Tabqa in the Raqqa province. De Mistura urged Russia, Turkey and Iran to 'retake the situation in hand' amid a recent escalation of fighting on the ground.⁸³ The regime delegation submitted a paper on basic principles to launch any dialogue about the constitutional process, but the discussions centred on ceasefire violations. Meanwhile Turkey announced the end of the Euphrates Shield offensive in northern Syria. The talks in Geneva descended into bureaucratic wrangling and de Mistura acknowledged that no peace deal was foreseeable in the near future. As noted by David Lake and Donald Rothchild, the external powers did not exert enough pressure on both sides 'to moderate their demands'. That was why 'intervention by itself would not necessarily enhance the prospects for agreement'.⁸⁴ Still, the weak commitments of the external powers produced ambiguous policies that exacerbated rather than ended the war. Ambiguity and vacillation, apparently, persuaded Assad that 'the external powers did not possess sufficient stamina'

⁸¹ See 'Short on substance, UN Resumes Syria Talks', *The Daily Star*, 24 February 2017, p. 1.

⁸² Saideman, 'Overlooking the Obvious', p. 66.

⁸³ See 'Syrian Fighters Reach Daesh-Held Dam', *The Daily Star*, 25 March 2017, p. 10.

⁸⁴ David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, 'Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict', in Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (eds), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996–97), p. 123.

and that the regime too 'might improve its position by continuing to fight'.⁸⁵ This ambivalent commitment was the true tragedy of the external power's policies in Syria.

USING LEVERAGE: DE-ESCALATING VIOLENCE

On 4 May 2017, once again Russia proved that it was the major player in the ME when in the fourth round of the Astana talks Russia, Iran and Turkey signed a memorandum on establishing four 'de-escalation' or 'safe' zones in rebel-held territory in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, in the north of central 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.⁸⁶ The de-escalation zones were about military tactics and not about a political settlement. The US sent a senior State Department official to the talks for the first time after Trump and Putin had signalled greater cooperation to end the violence in Syria. Relations between the two great powers had been strained since US cruise missile airstrikes in April 2017 on the Shayrat airbase, southeast of Homs, to punish Assad for carrying out a chemical attack in Idlib.⁸⁷ Once again, Russia was moving from a military posture to that of a mediator trying to reach a solution. Putin's proposal might be an effort to fill the vacuum of any clear US strategy for Syria.

The deal called for 'rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access' in the four areas as well as measures to restore basic infrastructure and allow the 'safe and voluntary return' of the displaced people and refugees.⁸⁸ But Russia's peacemaking efforts would face the same obstacles as past efforts to reduce the violence in Syria because Assad was entrenched, Iran and its proxy Hizbullah were resisting any compromise to reduce their role, and the Syrian opposition was divided and influenced by the terrorist and extremist groups which resisted a peace deal that did not achieve their war aim, i.e. deposing Assad. It is important to note that in June 2017, the Russian and US special envoys Alexander Lavrentiev and Michael Ratney met a number of times in Jordan to stike 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, Jordan and Israel.⁸⁹ Now, it appeared that the US wanted to work more closely with Russia because a plan that targeted Russia's allies was fruitless. 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

⁸⁵ Lake and Rothchild, 'Containing Fear', p. 125.

⁸⁶ See 'Expainer: The Very Bad History of Safe Zones', *Radio Free Eurpe Radio Liberty*, 5 May 2017, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-safe-zone-explainer-srebrenica/28468420.html>, accessed 11 May 2017.

⁸⁷ Van Seymour M. Hersh, 'Trump's Red Line', 25 June 2017, available at <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article165905578/Trump-s-Red-Line.html>, accessed 29 June 2017. Also see 'Lavrov Mocks Defected Syrian General's Claims about Hidden Chemical Weapons', *Sputnik*, available at <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201704151052671030-lavrov-syrian-general-claims/>, accessed 21 April 2017.

⁸⁸ See 'Rebels Wary as De-Escalation Zones go into Effect', *The Daily Star*, 6 May 2017, p. 1.

⁸⁹ See 'Deraa de-Escalation Zone Under Review', *The Daily Star*, 10 June 2017, p. 8.

Ghouta. Russia had informed Israel of its deployment and that the nearest Russian position was 13 kilometres from the demarcation line between Israeli and Syrian troops in the Golan Heights.⁹⁰ For the time being it was unclear if Trump would keep some US troops inside the country to help stabilise Syria after the jihadists were defeated. Trump, like his predecessor Obama, expressed scepticism about permanent US wars in the ME. But pulling out US troops from bases east of the Euphrates could create a vacuum that might trigger a new wave of jihadi violence and regional proxy wars.

On 16 May 2017, a new round of peace talks opened in Geneva (Geneva VI). De Mistura suggested forming a team of technocrats that would be headed by UN experts and ‘qualified representatives from both the Syrian government and the opposition’ to lay the foundations for a new constitution. However, as in previous talks, no tangible results were achieved.⁹¹ Clearly, regional cooperation was still lacking to negotiate an end to the Syrian civil war. Meanwhile, clashes broke out in Deraa, which was one of the four de-escalation zones. On 6 June, the SDF entered the city of Raqqa supported by US Special Operations Forces (SOF).⁹² What was lacking in the peace process, as Stephen John Stedman notes, was ‘the implementation of a successful strategy that depended on the custodian’s ability to create an external coalition for peace, the resources that the coalition brought to its responsibility, and the consensus that the coalition formed about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of spoiler demands and behavior’.⁹³

It was impossible to reach a settlement in Syria without a constructive dialogue between the external powers. Russia seemed to accept that there could be no military solution to the war and that boosting ties with the US would help bring stability to Syria and the ME. On 7 July 2017, Trump discussed the Syria conflict with Putin on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Germany and reiterated that ‘now it was time to move forward in working constructively with Russia’.⁹⁴ Russia and the US reached an agreement on a ceasefire in the southwest of Syria. The deal marked ‘a new level of involvement for the US’ in trying to resolve the Syrian conflict.⁹⁵ But it was unclear whether this separate ceasefire agreement would be a model for wider Russian–US cooperation in Syria and commit the US to the multilateral Astana process. It could be argued that Washington was willing to cede territorial and strategic control of Syria to Russia. The most telling sign of this was that Russia, by using its leverage, had signed multiple bilateral agreements with Syrian opposition factions to de-escalate violence in the safe zones.

To break the stalemate, President Emmanuel Macron reversed France’s stance by saying that there was ‘no legitimate successor to Assad at this time’, because

⁹⁰ See ‘Russia Says Military Police Deployed to Monitor Syria Ceasefire’, 24 July 2017, available at <https://www.rferl.org>, accessed 27 July 2017.

⁹¹ See ‘Syrian Rivals Weigh UN Plan for New Constitution’, *The Daily Star*, 18 May 2017, p. 1.

⁹² See ‘US Troops Inside Raqqa, Official Says’, *The Daily Star*, 13 July 2017, p. 1.

⁹³ Stephen John Stedman, ‘Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes’, *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), p. 7.

⁹⁴ See ‘White House Says Trump Had Second Talk with Putin at G-20 Summit’, 19 July 2017, available at <https://www.rferl.org>, accessed 27 July 2017.

⁹⁵ See ‘US, Russia Agree Deal on Syria Ceasefire’, *The Daily Star*, 8 July 2017, p. 8.

if Assad were weakened, ISIS and the Islamists would get stronger.⁹⁶ Apparently, the French position stemmed from Macron's willingness to initiate dialogue with Russia in light of the vacuum left by the US, which had no clear policy beyond defeating ISIS. France advocated cooperation between the major powers involved in the Syrian civil war to establish a contact group that would make proposals to the warring sides in order to break the deadlock in the negotiations.

Given the change in the French, Russian and US positions and after six failed rounds of UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva, the seventh round (Geneva VII) started on 10 July 2017. De Mistura tried to reconcile the Saudi-backed HNC and the opposition groups known as the Cairo and Moscow platforms to come up with 'a more inclusive and perhaps even more pragmatic approach' to negotiations.⁹⁷ The talks coincided with talks being held in Amman between Russian, US and Jordanian experts who agreed on a memorandum to monitor the de-escalation zone in the southwest of Syria in Deraa, Quneitra and Souweida. This was the first peacemaking effort by the US government in the war. For the foreseeable future, Syria would be divided into four zones of influence awaiting a political transition process that could re-establish the legitimacy and authority of a new central government in Damascus. Preceding the Geneva VII talks, the regime and rebel delegates who met in Astana (Astana V) on 4–5 July 2017 failed to reach an agreement on the exact boundaries of the de-escalation zones. In Astana, Turkey and Iran reportedly wrangled to bolster their influence, the rebels refused to have Iran monitor the safe zone in the Homs province and Russia hinted that there could be a need to involve the US and Jordan in southern Syria.⁹⁸

Maximising Russia's leverage, on 3 August 2017, Moscow reached an agreement with the moderate opposition regarding the third de-escalation zone north of the city of Homs.⁹⁹ But beyond these de-escalatory tactics and notwithstanding the Assad regime's military momentum, a political solution still appeared distant. By taking advantage of the truce in Deraa, the Russian- and Iranian-backed regime forces were marching eastward to ISIS-held Deir al-Zor province, whose oil resources were critical to the state. The Syrian regime and its supporters would work assiduously to prevent the US-backed SDF from reaching the al-Omar oil fields.¹⁰⁰ So far negotiations failed mainly because, as Barbara Walter rightly argues, 'the outside enforcers [in this case Russia] did not guarantee the terms and the commitments to disarm, demobilize and disengage' the adversaries' military forces and prepare for peace.¹⁰¹

The regional and Western rebel patrons recognised that Assad was staying.

⁹⁶ See 'France Sees Syria Opportunity Through Dialogue with Russia', *The Daily Star*, 30 June 2017, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Philip Issa, 'Opposition Told to come to Terms with Assad Survival', *The Daily Star*, 25 August 2017, p. 8.

⁹⁸ See 'Key Powers Fail to Nail Down Syria Safe Zones Plan', *The Daily Star*, 6 July 2017, p. 1.

⁹⁹ See 'Agreement Reached on Third Syrian De-Escalation Zone North of Homs', 3 August 2017, available at <http://tass.com/defense/958881>, accessed 11 September 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Fabrice Balanche, 'The Race for Deir al-Zor Province', 17 August 2017, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>, accessed 11 September 2017.

¹⁰¹ Barbara F. Walter, 'The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement', *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 336.

Thus, in August, at a two-day meeting in Riyadh, the Saudi-backed HNC was told to bridge differences between the opposition groups and formulate 'a new vision' in light of the new political and military reality.¹⁰² However, the HNC and the Cairo and Moscow platforms were on full display. The disagreements reflected the changing priorities of the different oppositions' main backers – the US, Europe, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which were now more concerned with preserving their own narrowly conceived strategic interests than they were with toppling Assad. Saudi Arabia wanted to contain its regional archrival, Iran, as well as lessening the influence of Qatar, which was seen as a key backer to the HNC. Likewise, Turkey's top priority was to contain the US-backed Kurdish PYD in northern Syria.

No doubt, defeating ISIS was important, but the US, according to Frederic Hof, 'should focus on post-ISIS stabilization in the east of the country if it hoped to block widening Iranian control' and make peace.¹⁰³ In addition, the prospects for cooperation between the US and Russia hit a low level when Trump signed the new sanctions bill. However, the Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, reiterated that Moscow remained 'open for cooperation with the US in the spheres where it saw it useful for Russia and international security, including the settlement of regional conflicts'.¹⁰⁴

While the regime forces and the US-backed SDF alliance advanced on ISIS in separate offensives in Deir al-Zor, on 15 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 regime and opposition, the UN and observers from the US and Jordan.¹⁰⁵ Russia had so far deployed military police to patrol the boundaries of three zones agreed in the south, in Eastern Ghouta and in part of the central Homs province. Borrowing from Ronald Fisher, the question was how Russia, Turkey and Iran would coordinate to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the Astana process. The hope was that they could coordinate by 'information sharing, resource sharing, collaborative strategising and collaboration through partnership' in order to contribute to the conflict resolution effort.¹⁰⁶ It should be stressed that the agreement on creating de-escalation zones was the result of Moscow's leverage in order to 'safeguard its own interests in Syria, while giving Russia's allies and rivals the impression of also satisfying their respective agendas'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Issa, 'Opposition Told to Come', p. 8.

¹⁰³ Frederic C. Hof, 'Washington Makes Room for Rivals in Eastern Syria', 18 August 2017, available at <https://www.newsdeeply.com>, accessed 22 August 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Mike Eckel, 'Russia's Medvedev Says US Sanctions Bill Ends Hope for Better Ties', 3 August 2017, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report*, available at <https://www.rferl.org>, accessed 8 August 2017.

¹⁰⁵ See 'Russia, Iran, Turkey Strike Deal to Police Idlib Safe Zone in Syria', *The Daily Star*, 16 September 2017, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Ronald J. Fisher, 'Methods of Third Party Intervention', available at <http://www.berghof-foundation.org/nc/nr/publications/handbook/berghof-handbook-for-conflict-transformation/>, P. 175, accessed 20 July 2018.

¹⁰⁷ See 'Final de-escalation Zones Agreed on in Astana', 15 September 2017, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com>, accessed 19 March 2018.

Since its military intervention in 2015, Russia had changed the balance of power on the ground and adopted a position of dealing with the external and internal actors. After stabilising the Assad regime, Russia's strategy foresaw that 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, in order to prevent risk that would come from 'spoilers',¹⁰⁸ and to regain its global clout, Russia negotiated intra-regional divides in different parts of the ME. Russia moved from a military posture to that of a mediator and took new steps to establish bilateral agreements directly with armed opposition groups on the ground in the same areas where the Astana de-escalation agreements were announced. However, these 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.¹⁰⁹ Evidently, as Dmitry Trenin wrote, Moscow sought 'a balance in the region that would maximize its gain without losing credibility with either party'.¹¹⁰

Regional powers acquired greater potential to affect the situational dynamics of the Syrian conflict. On 5 October 2017, Putin hosted Saudi King Salman for talks at the Kremlin to cement a relationship that was crucial for stabilising world oil prices and could decide the outcome of the conflict in Syria. King Salman, who was a US ally, tried to persuade Moscow to scale down its ties with Tehran and that Iran 'must stop meddling in the internal affairs of the countries in the region and halt its activities to destabilize' the ME.¹¹¹ The US also aimed to get tough on Iran and Trump wanted to decertify the 2015 nuclear deal despite Tehran's compliance with its terms. For Trump, Iran was 'not living up to the spirit of the deal'.¹¹² But there was no indication that Russia would support the US position and sacrifice Iran and change its posture in Syria although arms sales to Iran suggested that Moscow had some leverage over its client.

Multiple regional interests posed an obstacle to ending the Syrian civil war. Indeed, on 16 October 2017, the US-backed SDF seized control of Raqqa. The SDF also focused their operations in rural Deir al-Zor and seized a major

¹⁰⁸ Stephen John Stedman, 'Negotiation and Mediation in Internal Conflicts', in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *The International dimensions of Internal Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 369–71.

¹⁰⁹ Asaad Hanna, 'Russia Muscles in on De-Escalation Zones', October 2017. Available at <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/russia-muscles-in-on-de-escalation-zones>, accessed 28 March 2018.

¹¹⁰ Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018) p. 112.

¹¹¹ See 'Riyadh, Moscow Cement Ties with King Salman's Visit', *The Daily Star*, 6 October 2017, p. 10.

¹¹² See David Ignatius, 'Trump Applies his Business Style to Iran Dealings', *The Daily Star*, 17 October 2017, p. 7.

natural gas field. In the same month, Russian-backed Syrian troops and Iranian-backed fighters took nearly all of the provincial capital of Deir al-Zor.¹¹³ The military moves of the regime and its allies reflected a convergence of military and political interests. The regime needed to retake Deir al-Zor and its natural resources to impose its vision for a solution in Syria. Iran also needed to take control of the area to protect its investment in the Syrian war. As for Russia, it wanted to preserve its position within the balance of power in Syria and exploit that balance in negotiations with the US in the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement that would protect its interests and its posture globally at a time when the US administration had no comprehensive strategy in Syria. Given the overlapping interests of the regional powers, it is reasonable to argue that the US had to lay out a broad blueprint for any future negotiations on the regional level.

From a US perspective, the ouster of ISIS from Raqqa was a milestone in the US fight against terrorism and a step toward a political transition and lasting peace in Syria. It should be noted that when the Trump administration came into office it took the view that the departure of Assad was not a prerequisite before the transitional process started. At the regional level, the president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, declared that Iran's position in the ME had never been stronger. He reiterated that 'in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, northern Africa and the Persian Gulf region no action could be taken without Iran'.¹¹⁴ As noted by Barry Buzan, most civil wars are usually embedded in the politics of a 'regional security complex' that has significant implications for both peacemaking and conflict resolution.¹¹⁵ This suggests that the success of a peace settlement in Syria was inextricably tied to the interests of neighbouring regional powers and their overall commitment to the Geneva and its parallel Astana peace processes. Renato Corbetta and Molly Melin support the notion that 'conflict management efforts ... require the presence of strategic interests'.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Melin (2014) asserts that mediators' activities are targeted towards broadening their zone of influence, resources and power. The peacebuilder thus has a role in influencing the disputed outcome and in reshaping the political environment according to its own benefits (i.e. its strategic interests). Thus, Iran and Turkey could stand in the way of the Geneva peace process if they felt that their strategic interests were threatened by a settlement.

After the defeat of ISIS in its de facto capital of Raqqa, on 30 October 2017 a new round of talks began in Astana (Astana VII). Russia's chief negotiator Alexander Lavrentiev disclosed that Russia was ready to host a Congress of National Dialogue, inviting both regime and opposition delegates to the Russian city of Sochi. This Congress could be considered a confidence building measure (CBM) between the warring parties. For the first time, the Kurds would be

¹¹³ See 'US-Allied Fighters Takes Syria's Largest Oil Field', *The Daily Star*, 23 October 2017, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ See 'Rouhani. Iran's Regional Status has Never been Stronger', *The Daily Star*, 24 October 2017, P. 8.

¹¹⁵ Barry Buzan, 'Third World Regional Security in Structural Perspective', in Brian L. Job (ed.), *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p. 37.

¹¹⁶ Renato Corbetta and Molly M. Melin, 'Exploring the threshold Between Conflict Management and Joining in Biased Interventions', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 10, 2018.

invited too in a major diplomatic push to end the war. However, objections came from Turkey which viewed the SDF as a national security threat and from two main opposition groups, the SNC and the HNC, which considered that the Congress was an attempt to circumvent the Geneva process.

If at the systemic level good relationships between the great powers and the changing dynamics of their competition at the global level had a major impact on the possibilities of diplomacy and resolution of regional conflicts, at the sub-systemic level change in the behaviour of both of the regional actors Iran and Turkey was crucial for the success of the peace process in Syria. Neither Iran nor Turkey could provide arms and other kinds of support to various opposition factions that had incentives not to lay down their arms and pursue a negotiated settlement. Putin's visit to Iran on 1 November 2017 should be analysed within this context. Putin, who was accompanied by the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, hailed cooperation with Iran on the Syrian conflict mainly because both Moscow and Tehran wanted to marginalise US hegemony in the region and establish a balance of power. Putin also vocally backed the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement and called for the improvement of transport links, trade and energy cooperation between the three Caspian states.¹¹⁷

In light of the overlapping interests of the regional powers it remained unclear if Russia could win the peace in Syria. The difficulty for Moscow was to balance its military success with a political process and put an end to the war. The dilemma was that Assad wanted to control all of Syria while Russia wanted a negotiated solution with the opposition. The regime lacked respect for de-escalation zones unless they suited its agenda. After his visit to Iran, on 14 November Putin hosted his Turkish counterpart, Erdogan, in Sochi, in order to create conditions for dialogue to help resolve the Syrian conflict.¹¹⁸ Despite calling for Assad to step down, Ankara was now more compromising behind closed doors in Sochi. It was more important for Turkey to keep its say in the future political negotiations. On 21 November in Sochi, Putin also hosted Assad who seemed ready to abide by a political settlement, including constitutional reform and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections.

These meetings were followed by a trilateral summit between Putin, Erdogan and Rouhani in Sochi on 22 November 2017. Putin emphasised that the Syrian people should decide their fate and that the political process necessitated concessions from both the regime and the opposition. He also reiterated that cooperation between the three powers prevented the partitioning of Syria and the defeat of the terrorist groups.¹¹⁹ It seemed to be greater convergence between Turkey's Syria policy and Russia and Iran's Syria policy. But at the same time, Ankara and Washington shared an interest in countering Russia and Iran's influence in Syria and in shaping the country's future as the UN-backed peace talks were due in Geneva. The resolution of the Syrian conflict required a combination of regional and international strategies to deal with the communal, regional and geopolitical dimensions of the conflict. Hence, on 23 November,

¹¹⁷ See 'Putin Offers Support for Iran Nuclear Deal, Hails Cooperation on Syria', 1 November 2017. *RFE/RL Russia Report*, available at <https://www.rferl.org>. Accessed 26 December 2017.

¹¹⁸ See 'Turkey, Russia Agree to Deepen Relations', 14 November 2017. Available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com>. Accessed 29 November 2017.

¹¹⁹ Andrew Parasiliti, Kathleen Reedy and Becca Wasser, 'Preventing State Collapse in Syria', RAND corporation, 2017.

Riyadh hosted a meeting of opposition groups backed by the Gulf countries as well as Russia and Egypt in order to unify the stance of the opposition and reach common ground between the divergent views on Assad's role in the transitional period. Assad's role had always been the sticking point in previous rounds of talks. The various opposition groups chose Nasr Hariri as head of the HNC, replacing the more hardline opponent of Assad, Riyadh Hijab, to lead the opposition delegation in the coming Geneva talks. For the first time since the beginning of the conflict, the opposition called on the UN to arrange direct talks with the Syrian government.

On 28 November 2017, the eighth round of the peace talks in Geneva (Geneva VIII) got underway with an expanded opposition delegation which met de Mistura and asked him to pressure Assad to engage in order to reach a political solution within six months. Russia, which wanted to politically seal the military advances it had achieved, had conducted back-channel diplomacy among key world powers. One could argue that Russia had become the primary mediator, resulting in one-sided negotiations. De Mistura, who refused preconditions and wanted an 'inclusive process', stressed that the talks would be guided by the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which mandated a political transition for Syria that was becoming more unrealistic. In a clear indication of the international dimension of the conflict, de Mistura sought the support of the five permanent members of the Security Council to achieve progress.¹²⁰ On the agenda there were four main issues: elections, governance, drafting a constitution and fighting terrorism. To borrow from Zartman, de Mistura demonstrated the maximum degree of involvement by adopting the mode of 'manipulator' and used his power 'to bring the parties to an agreement, pushing and pulling them away from conflict and into resolution'.¹²¹ Indeed, he published a document suggesting 12 principles for future Syria and hoped that the two sides would agree, including that the country 'shall be democratic and non-sectarian'.¹²²

Meanwhile, in a surprise visit to Syria's Hmeymim air base on 10 December, 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. 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'.¹²³ 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.

The latest round of the Geneva VIII talks collapsed, with a deflated de

¹²⁰ See 'Syrian Opposition, UN Open Talks in Geneva', *The Daily Star*, 29 November 2017, pp. 1 and 10.

¹²¹ William I. Zartman, 'International Mediation', in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall (eds), *Leashing the Dogs of War, Conflict Management in a Divided World* (Washington DC: USIP Press, 2007), p. 446.

¹²² See 'Syrian Government Negotiator Quits Geneva, Says May not Return', *The Daily Star*, 2 December 2017, p. 1.

¹²³ Andrew Osborn, 'Putin, in Syria, Says Mission Accomplished, Orders Partial Russian Pull-Out', 11 December 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com>, accessed 12 December 2017.

Mistura admitting that a 'golden opportunity' had been missed. De Mistura blamed the government delegation because it refused to discuss two potential agenda items: a constitutional process and presidential elections, insisting instead that it would only discuss terrorism.¹²⁴ With a military advantage on his side and without pressure from his Russian sponsor, comfortable Assad was not interested in real negotiations. Also, there was no MHS because the regime was confident of winning the war. Apparently, Russia's leverage on Assad was limited. The collapse of the talks left the political initiative to a settlement now resting largely on Putin to convene a Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in Sochi, mainly because the balance of power undeniably favoured Russia.

At the systemic level, the release of the US National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2018, on 18 December 2017, emphasised that 'inter-state competition, not terrorism, was now the primary concern in US national security'. The NDS classified China and Russia as 'revisionist powers' who wanted 'to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model'. Rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran were destabilising regions through their pursuit of nuclear weapons or sponsorship of terrorism. The NDS acknowledged an 'increasingly complex global security environment characterised by overt challenges to the free and open international order and the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition between nations'.¹²⁵ The US National Security Advisor, General H. R. McMaster, recognised the US-led global order and criticised the 'sphere-of-influence' strategy in which the US retreated and allowed Russia and China to extend their influence. From his perspective, recognition of a Russian or Chinese sphere-of-influence would dishonour the US.¹²⁶ Such rhetoric suggests that great power military competition would not 'facilitate conflict resolution and settlement processes by bringing pressure to bear on client states and other parties to the conflict' in Syria and elsewhere.¹²⁷ The Kremlin responded to McMaster's statements by saying that his allegations 'were groundless and not backed by facts, and that Russia did not indulge in sophisticated subversion in the US'.¹²⁸ Still, the Kremlin denounced 'the imperialist' character of the document and 'its refusal to renounce a unipolar world'. China too described Trump's NDS as showing a 'cold war mentality with an imperialist character'.¹²⁹ Ironically, the NDS contrasted significantly with Trump's previous friendly face-to-face encounters with Putin. Fighting would continue unless the US would actively participate in helping create genuine negotiations and an equitable and legitimate political settlement.

The eighth round of Astana talks (Astana VIII) that started on 21 December 2017 with the participation of the opposition, along with representatives of the regime, Russia, Turkey and Iran, discussed the list of invitees to the Congress

¹²⁴ Patrick Wintour, 'Golden Opportunity Lost as Syrian Peace Talks Collapsed', 14 December 2017. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com>, accessed 3 March 2018.

¹²⁵ See summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the USA, 18 December 2017, pp. 1–2.

¹²⁶ Daniel Fried, 'McMaster Accuses Russia of Subversion', *The Daily Star*, 19 December 2017, p. 7.

¹²⁷ Hampson, *Nurturing Peace*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ Fried, 'McMaster Accuses Russia', p. 7.

¹²⁹ See 'China, Russia Slam American Cold War Mentality', *The Daily Star*, 20 December 2017, p. 10.

of National Dialogue. Being the major power broker, de Mistura and the opposition delegation asked Russia to step up its diplomatic efforts to reach a political settlement of the violent conflict. De Mistura emphasised that 'any political initiative by international actors should be assessed by its ability to contribute to and support the mandated political process under the UN in Geneva'.¹³⁰ On another matter, after having completed partial withdrawal from Syria, Russia would keep three battalions of military police and officers at the Russian Center for Reconciliation (RCR) in Syria, as well as its two bases in the country. The RCR at its air base routinely held peace talks with armed factions. Russia used 'capability leverage' that relied on material coercion to impose 'a settlement or carrots and sticks to alter disputants' bargaining range'.¹³¹ That is why Russia did not achieve long-term success.

Russia, Syria and Turkey strongly criticised a US plan to create a Kurdish-led border security force of 30,000 personnel in the Afrin region of northern Syria in order to 'defend and preserve' part of northern Syria that was controlled by the US-backed SDF and prevent any ISIS resurgence there.¹³² Tillerson argued that 'the US should keep train and assist forces in northeast Syria, to aid stabilization there'.¹³³ 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. 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. But according to Lavrov, 'that role must work on a common platform' in that 'all members of the Syrian political settlement must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria'.¹³⁴ Turkey, in return for Moscow's forbearance, would turn a blind eye to Russian and Syrian attacks on the rebels in Idlib province, who were nominally allied with Turkey against the regime. Still, 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.

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 kilometre security zone to ensure Turkey's border security.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ See 'Russia to Host Syria Talks in Sochi Next Month', *The Daily Star*, 23 December 2017, p. 1.

¹³¹ Lindsey Reid, 'Finding a Peace that Lasts: Mediator Leverage and Durable Resolution of Civil Wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 6, No. 7, 2015, pp. 1402–3.

¹³² See 'Russia, Turkey Slam Plan for Kurdish-Led Syrian Border Guards', 16 January 2018. Available at *RFE/RL Russia Report*, accessed 17 January 2018.

¹³³ See David Ignatius, 'US Learning from Past Mistakes', *The Daily Star*, 20 January 2018, p. 7.

¹³⁴ See 'Turkey Infuriated by Unilateral US Actions in Syria: Russian FM Lavrov', 22 January 2018. Available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com>, accessed 24 January 2018.

¹³⁵ Amanda Sloat, 'Turkey Wants to Crush US Allies in Syria. That Should not Surprise Anybody', 24 January 2018. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu>, accessed 26 January 2018.

The regional and international dimensions of the conflict had been the key source of difficulty in reaching a political settlement in Syria. On 26 January 2018, while the peace talks were being held in Vienna, five Western and Arab states that backed the rebellion: the US, Jordan, Britain, France and Saudi Arabia, made recommendations to de Mistura for what they called a 'practical approach' that would lead to a 'slow political process'. The five states' proposal, while not addressing Assad's fate, proposed changes to the UN-led talks focusing on reforming the constitution, on holding elections for Syrians inside and outside the country, and on creating a 'safe and neutral environment' for the vote. Further, 'all external supporters of the political process should encourage the opposition and government delegations to engage genuinely in the talks and, at least initially, set aside other issues'.¹³⁶ The document also called for the departure of all foreign militias, an apparent reference to the Iran-backed Shiite groups. The resolution of the hostilities in Syria clearly required a combination of communal and international strategies to deal with the various communal, regional and geopolitical dimensions of the conflict.

After the Vienna talks, on 29 January 2018, Russia hosted the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in Sochi with the primary aim of establishing a mechanism for drafting a new constitution. Although it was boycotted by the SNC, 1,600 delegates and few opponents of the Syrian government, including some Kurds on an individual basis attended the Congress. Lavrov stated that the conditions were ripe to turn 'a tragic page' in Syria's history.¹³⁷ In terms of Richard N. Haass's definition of ripeness in terms of 'the prerequisites for diplomatic progress' or 'the circumstances conducive for negotiated progress',¹³⁸ Lavrov's statement could be right. Yet, 'a shared perception of the desirability of an accord', an a willingness on the part of the conflicting parties to reach a compromise was questionable.¹³⁹ Although the absence of a hurting stalemate was one possible impediment to successful talks, Russia's efforts were hampered by the US, France and Britain, who did not attend and said that talks must fall under UN auspices in order to reach a resolution. The Sochi Congress agreed to establish a 150-member committee representing most strands of Syrian society to draft a constitution.

The Sochi Congress achieved little and exposed the limits of Russia's leverage. De Mistura said that the UN would lead efforts to form the constitutional committee, without specifying how it would happen. The multilateral approach followed by Geneva seemed to be the only format possible for serious talks involving the internal and external actors. In the Russian independent analyst Vladimir Frolov's view, the Sochi talks were a 'success in propaganda terms for both Moscow and Damascus who sought to legitimize a substitute for the real talks with a fake opposition that had no followers on the ground'.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ See 'Western, Arab States Sidestep Assad Fate in Syria proposals', *The Daily Star*, 27 January 2018, p. 1.

¹³⁷ See 'Russia-Hosted Syria Conference Calls for Democratic Path', 30 January 2018. Available at *RFE/RL Russia Report*, accessed 7 February 2018.

¹³⁸ Richard N. Haass, *Conflicts Unending: The United States and Regional Disputes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 6.

¹³⁹ Haass, *Conflicts Unending*, pp. 27–28.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Ola Cichowlas, 'Russia's Syria Peace Strategy in Question', *The Daily Star*, 1 February 2018, p. 8.

Turkey's war on the YPG in Afrin in order to reshape military alignments in northern Syria and around Manbij highlighted the true complexity of the Syrian conflict, as the US was forced to choose between its NATO ally Turkey and its Kurdish partners on the ground. Turkey was demanding that the US and the Kurds should withdraw to east of the Euphrates River. After all, as Christopher R. Hill notes, 'Western countries would need Turkey to counterbalance Russia, whose broader strategic agenda went beyond the ME'.¹⁴¹ Israeli airstrikes against Syrian forces was another indication of how dangerously tensions had escalated. Further escalation could involve Turkey, the US, Israel, Iran and Russia. The focus of the US in Syria remained counterterrorism, but it also pledged not to withdraw from key strongholds in northern Syria where the SDF currently maintained control, to have any hope of maintaining influence, check Russia in the great power competition in the region, prevent Iranian hegemony from Iran to Lebanon and maintain leverage for bargaining in Geneva. In order to prevent escalation and confrontation between Israel and Iran in Syria, 'in theory, it fell to Russia, which entertained good relations with all the parties, to use its channels to help establish understanding between adversaries of each other's threat perceptions and red lines'.¹⁴²

On 16 March 2018, the conquest of Eastern Ghouta marked another milestone in Assad's effort to crush the rebellion and the terrorist threat as the war entered its eighth year. Similarly, Erdogan announced that Turkey's Operation Olive Branch had achieved its aim in Afrin and that the allied Turkish and Syrian forces could push to take over Manbij to eliminate the terrorist threat where the US had a presence.¹⁴³ The rebel-held northeastern province of Idlib, where Turkey had deployed observation posts to monitor the de-escalation zone, would be at the heart of the contest between Turkey and Russia. It was very likely that Idlib's fate would be determined by the international actors entrenched in the conflict because if Assad tried to seize the province hundreds of thousands of people would be displaced.

The conflict in Syria seemed more and more to be about the country's future as a pawn in the struggle between the regional and international actors. Within this context, on 4 April 2018, the Turkish, Iranian and Russian presidents met in Ankara for their second tripartite summit on Syria to reaffirm their commitment to Syria's territorial integrity and to continuation of local ceasefires.¹⁴⁴ The capture of Afrin increased Turkey's leverage on the ground. But Russia still remained important to manage the rivalries between Turkey and Iran and push forward the peace process. The US still lacked a coherent strategy to actually bring an end to the conflict. But so far, Russian efforts have also failed to resolve the conflict. Any agreement, as Hampson notes, 'should serve multiple regional and national interests, with substantial involvement of the region in the

¹⁴¹ Christopher R. Hill, 'What is the Endgame for the US in Syria?', *The Daily Star*, 21 February 2018, p. 7.

¹⁴² Joost Hiltermann, 'Russia a Reluctant Driver in the Syrian War', *International Crisis Group*, 26 February 2018, p. 2.

¹⁴³ See 'Turkey Will not Stop in Syria Until Terror Threat Ends: Erdogan', 21 March 2018. Available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com>, accessed 22 March 2018.

¹⁴⁴ See 'Turkey, Iran, Russia Pledge Syria Stability', *The Daily Star*, 5 April 2018, p. 1.

implementation processes'.¹⁴⁵

On 14 May 2018, the Astana talks (Astana IX) started 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 Trump's pull-out of the US from the nuclear deal with Iran, further complicating the regional picture.¹⁴⁶ Russia, which was friendly to Israel but was fighting in Syria on the same side as Iran, called on both nations to resolve their differences through diplomatic means. Trump's decision angered Washington's allies in Europe as well as China and Russia. The right strategy for Washington to reverse Iran's power grab in the ME would be not withdrawing from the nuclear deal and maintaining its military position to the east of the Euphrates River and other points in southern Syria. The broader situation in Syria was not getting any better as far as US interests were concerned. As for Russia, after meeting Assad in Sochi on 17 May, Putin vowed that 'with the start of the political process in its most active phase, foreign armed forces would withdraw from Syria', including Iran and its proxies.¹⁴⁷ But Putin declared that the Russian forces would not withdraw but would remain in place in order 'to ensure Russia's interests and its international obligations in an important region of the world'.¹⁴⁸

To avoid confrontation between two NATO members in Syria, on 4 June 2018, the US and Turkey endorsed a road map for Manbij to resolve the dispute over the town, which was controlled by US-backed Kurdish fighters. The road map envisioned joint Turkish-US patrols around Manbij after the withdrawal of the YPG, the largest part of the SDF, to the east of the Euphrates River, meeting a long-standing Turkish demand.¹⁴⁹ The Manbij plan was a political deal to keep a balance of power between Turkey and the US in northern Syria. Assad for his part kept the door open to negotiations with the SDF on the Kurdish administered region where the US operated air bases and outposts.

CONCLUSION

After seven and a half years into the Syrian conflict, the outlook seemed bleak. Russia's successful military intervention in Syria in 2015 aimed to prevent regime change and mediate the conflict in order to maintain Russian interests in the region and establish a geostrategic balance with the US. We have argued that Russia's leverage, as such, without maintaining a balance between the interests of the regional powers of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel was not a sufficient condition to resolve the conflict. We also argued that systemic and regional power balances and rivalries laid at the heart of the Syrian conflict. The waning of US influence at the international and regional level, particularly in the ME, and the emergence of Russia as the new indispensable power broker in the region brought a corresponding shift in the behaviour of the regional

¹⁴⁵ Hampson, *Nurturing Peace*, p. 66.

¹⁴⁶ See 'Syria Talks Renew in Astana as Regional Tensions Rise', *The Daily Star*, 15 May 2018, p. 8.

¹⁴⁷ See 'Assad Flies to Russia for Putin Talks: Kremlin', *The Daily Star*, 18 May 2018, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ See 'Putin: Will Stay in Syria as Long as Beneficial', *The Daily Star*, 8 June 2018, p. 1.

¹⁴⁹ See 'Turkey, US Endorse Road Map for Syrian City of Manbij', *The Daily Star*, 5 June 2018, p. 8.

actors and the power balances at the geostrategic level. The Syrian conflict, which became a proxy war, was largely driven by external factors and forces. Thus, the positions of the internal parties, the regime and the various opposition factions, were determined by great power competition and global politics. Still, the prospects for conflict resolution in Syria would depend significantly on the ability of Russia and the US to accommodate their divergent preferences, or Russia's ability to prevail over the US. The results of the 16 July 2018 Helsinki summit between Putin and Trump concerning Syria were unlikely to be immediate and would emerge only over time. Putin wanted Trump to acknowledge Moscow's influence over its former neighbours and recognise Russia as a global player whose interests must be taken into account. Trump wanted Putin to contain Iran's influence in Syria and not to threaten Israel's security. Compared to Russia, the US still lacked a clear strategy on Syria other than defeating ISIS. Russia's proposal to Washington to jointly organise the return of the Syrian refugees to their homes would foster cooperation between them.

The diplomatic process in Geneva under the auspices of the UN and in the parallel Astana talks under the auspices of Russia, Iran and Turkey achieved little mainly because the success of the peace settlement hinged on a stable regional environment and neighbours who supported the peace process. The four de-escalation zones that aimed to hold the local ceasefires and find proper conditions for fruitful negotiations were often violated. Iran dismissed Putin's request that all foreign powers must leave Syria. At the time of writing, in September 2018, Putin and Erdogan met in Sochi and agreed to avert what would become a devastating war in opposition-controlled Idlib province. According to the deal, a demilitarised zone with a depth of 15–20 kilometres would be created in Idlib by mid-October to prevent any attack by the regime. The demilitarised zone would be jointly patrolled by Russian and Turkish forces. The deal was a win for Russia because Moscow excluded Iran from the deal and effectively forced Turkey and 'by extension' the US to accept Russia's arrangement.

Russia's leverage over Iran, or even over Assad, was questionable although Russia maintained good relations with all the regional actors to reshape the political and diplomatic landscape in Syria. In order to secure its growing strategic role in Syria, Russia tacitly approved certain military operations, such as Turkey's full control of Afrin, Israeli attacks on Iranian military facilities in Syria, and the conquest of the Daraa province by the Russian-backed regime forces on 7 July 2018. However, in September, after an Il-20 Russian military aircraft had been shot down in error, by the Syrian anti-aircraft system, Russia held Israel accountable because of its 'irresponsible actions' because Israeli jets had used the Russian plane as cover against the Syrian anti-aircraft system. Yet Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, blamed Syria for the incident. The Israeli armed forces issued a statement saying that 'extensive and inaccurate anti-aircraft ... fire caused the Russian plane to be hit and downed'.¹⁵⁰ Afterwards, Russia took preventive measures by deploying S-300 anti-aircraft missile launchers to Syria to prevent further Israeli attacks on regime facilities and to protect Moscow's geostrategic interests.

¹⁵⁰ 'Moscow blames Israel after Syria shoots down Russian military plane', *The Guardian*: 18 September 2018.

It is reasonable to conclude that great power leverage, although crucial, did not always elicit a desired outcome. Successful interventions are those that respond appropriately to the context of the conflict. The experience in Syria underscored that 'ripeness' might have played a role in successful negotiations, but 'a combination of international and regional intervention strategies was the prerequisite for conflict termination, and that the success of a peace settlement was inextricably tied to the interest of neighboring regional powers and their overall commitment to the peace process. Where such a commitment was lacking, the risk of failure was higher.'¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Hampson, *Nurturing Peace*, p. 217.