

# SWP Comment

NO. 32 APRIL 2022

## The War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Syria

**Humanitarian Deterioration and Risks of Disrupting a Volatile Status Quo**

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In Syria, the immediate effects of the war in Ukraine have made an already difficult humanitarian situation even worse. Protracted violence in Ukraine or an expansion of the Ukraine war into a larger NATO-Russia confrontation would endanger multilateral cooperation on conflict management, conflict resolution and humanitarian issues in Syria. Protracted conflict in Ukraine could also disrupt the volatile status quo in Syria, potentially endangering ceasefire agreements, tilting the power balance in favour of Iran and thereby increasing the risk of military escalation between Iran and its antagonists, complicating the fight against ISIS, and endangering cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries. Europeans should attempt to insulate the war in Ukraine from Syria as much as possible, double down on efforts to renew the UN Security Council resolution that allows for humanitarian access to northwest Syria and contribute to the long-term objective of an inclusive regional security architecture.

While large-scale military operations have been reduced significantly over the past few years, stability in Syria has remained fragile, and conflict resolution has witnessed a protracted stalemate. Five foreign states as well as a multitude of domestic and foreign militias have a military presence on the ground. Russia, Turkey, the US and Iran have each established zones of influence, whose boundaries remain contested.

### Immediate Effects of the War

The effects of the war in Ukraine were felt immediately in Syria. It has led to a worsen-

ing of an already grim humanitarian situation in this former lower-middle-income country. Syria's economy had already all but collapsed due to war damage, large-scale displacement, poor governance, sanctions, Covid-19 and repercussions of the financial meltdown in Lebanon. Even before the war in Ukraine, 90 per cent of Syria's population lived in poverty, two-thirds were dependent on humanitarian aid and 55 per cent were food insecure. In December 2021, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization warned of the risk of famine against the backdrop of severe drought and a steep decline in Syria's wheat harvest.



Early in the war, Russia announced that it would not keep its December 2021 commitment to deliver wheat to Syrian regime-controlled areas that were meant to fill the gap. Northwest Syria is also likely to suffer shortages as it procures wheat from Ukraine and Russia as well as Turkey, where production has been affected by drought. In addition, the World Food Programme, which largely depends on Ukrainian production, is set to come under strain due to supply loss, soaring food prices and an increase in the number of people in need worldwide. Starting May 2022, it will have to reduce life-saving food assistance to some 1.35 million people in northwestern Syria. While the Syrian regime has adopted austerity measures such as rationing, price controls and export restrictions, it has not been successful in preventing the spiralling of food and energy prices.

In contrast, direct effects of the war in Ukraine on the geopolitical dynamics in Syria seem to have been limited to date. The main external powers with a military presence on the ground in Syria have so far insulated their cooperation there from tensions over Ukraine: military deconfliction between Russia and the US as well as Russia and Israel continues; Russia and Turkey maintain joint patrols in the north of Syria based on the March 2020 ceasefire arrangements; and informal talks among Russia, Turkey, the US and European countries on humanitarian access have still taken place. At the same time, Israel-Iran relations have been tense ever since the killing of two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers in Syria in early March 2022; this has resulted in Iranian attacks on Israel-linked targets in Iraq as well as Israeli airstrikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria.

### **Interests, Priorities and Capacities of External Actors**

Yet, some players – in particular Russia and Iran – have started to adapt their presence in Syria. Accordingly, Syria would not necessarily be left unscathed even if

the war in Ukraine were to come to an end sooner rather than later. While the overall interests of the dominant external players are likely to remain the same, their priorities, approaches and capacities are likely to be affected, prompting further adaptations and risking renewed and heightened conflict in Syria. The extent of these changes will depend on the duration and evolution of the conflict in Ukraine and its potential escalation into a wider NATO-Russia confrontation.

### **Russia – from pro-regime stabiliser to spoiler?**

The war against Ukraine directly impacts the capacities available to Russia for its involvement in Syria. In addition, a shift in priorities in Russian foreign policy can already be observed. To what extent this will affect Russia's specific interests in the Syrian conflict will depend on the duration and trajectory of the conflict in and beyond Ukraine.

*Foreign policy priorities:* Overall, the order of Moscow's foreign policy priorities remains unchanged. Creating a zone of influence in the post-Soviet space and reshaping the European security order in Russia's favour have been the primary goals for decades. Yet, because the war against Ukraine and confrontation with the West bring about risks to regime stability in Russia itself, achieving success has become a matter of existential importance for the Kremlin. As a consequence, Ukraine has overtaken subordinate fields of Russian foreign policy, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in general and Syria in particular. At the same time, the Kremlin cannot afford to see its Syria policy fail. The military operation in Syria has become too much of a symbol for Russia's ambition to return to being a great power. Russia therefore now faces the challenge of securing its position in Syria and the MENA region with reduced capabilities.

*Capacities:* Russia has a strategic interest in maintaining its air and naval bases in Syria. They underpin Russia's military pres-

ence in the eastern Mediterranean, which becomes even more important in the face of increasing confrontation with the US and NATO. Russia's invasion of Ukraine doesn't risk significantly undermining its official military posture in Syria in the short-term as this presence primarily revolves around aerospace defence forces and military police rather than substantial ground forces, which only number around 4,000 according to the Military Balance 2022 report published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

However, the war in Ukraine may have a greater impact on Russia's deployment of irregular armed forces. In order to fill gaps in the Ukrainian theatre, Russia might find it useful to send private military companies and "volunteers" from Syria to Ukraine, which might undermine the striking power of the Syrian armed forces. Furthermore, Turkey's closure of the shipping route through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to military vessels from/to Russia's Black Sea ports is likely to cause problems and increase costs for Moscow. Specifically, supplies and reinforcements for Russian troops in Syria will largely need to be flown in.

In the medium-term, the sanctions-induced deterioration of Russia's economic capacities will also have an impact on its Syria policy. Russia's ability to engage in Syria's reconstruction and to influence its economic development is likely to significantly diminish.

*Shifting interests in Syria:* Preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, Russia has a strong interest in maintaining the current arrangements in Syria. At least in the short-term, Moscow is likely to avoid steps that could trigger significant armed confrontations in Syria as this risks stretching Russian forces thin. Yet, against the backdrop of Russian-Western confrontation, there are still incentives for Moscow to exploit its spoiler potential with regard to Syria, for example with respect to humanitarian access or military deconflicting. At the same time, Russia is unlikely to intensify its multilateral diplomatic efforts with regard to Syria. Rather, it will continue to seek to strengthen Presi-

dent Bashar al-Assad's position by encouraging regional actors to press ahead with normalising relations with the Syrian regime.

## **The US – deepening humanitarian concerns and a wary eye to ISIS**

US interests and capacities in Syria will remain largely unchanged by the war in Ukraine over the short to medium-term, but its priorities – particularly regarding humanitarian concerns – could shift depending on the trajectory of the Ukrainian conflict. Should the conflict in Ukraine become protracted, or worse, expand beyond Ukraine's borders, heightened military tensions between the US and Russia in Syria cannot be ruled out.

*US interests and capacities in Syria:* US interests in Syria will not substantially change as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States will continue to focus on ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS, maintaining current ceasefires in both the northeast and Idlib province, preserving – if not expanding – humanitarian access, demanding accountability for the Assad regime's human rights abuses and war crimes, pursuing a political resolution to the conflict via UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 (December 2015), and hedging against Iranian influence inside Syria.

US tools to pursue these priorities will not be impacted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The US will maintain its small footprint in the country (some 900 troops according to the 2022 IISS Military Balance) for the foreseeable future. Funding for stabilisation activities in northeast Syria will continue – if not increase – contingent upon the US budget. Sanctions – particularly the so-called Caesar Sanctions – will remain a key tool in the US's toolbox, and now coupled with extensive sanctions on Russia, their effect could be amplified, especially regarding normalisation and reconstruction in Syria. Efforts to mitigate the unintended effects of sanctions will be addressed through the issuance of General Licenses.

*Heightened humanitarian concerns:* Humanitarian concerns could become more acute

in the wake of the war in Ukraine. While US humanitarian assistance to Syria should remain stable, international funding shortfalls could become an issue depending on the scale of response to the Ukraine crisis. Renewal of UNSCR 2585 (July 2021), which provides for international aid to areas in Syria outside of regime control via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing – a key US priority in Syria –, could be in jeopardy depending on Russia's stance toward the resolution. The US will prioritise renewing the resolution, set to expire in July 2022, while making contingency plans if it is vetoed.

*Wary eye to potential resurgence of ISIS:* The US will watch closely for any resurgence of ISIS in regime-held Syria – which could then reverberate into northeast Syria. Should Russian counter-ISIS capabilities deteriorate due to Moscow's pivot to Ukraine, ISIS's presence could strengthen in the Badia, Syria's central desert region, possibly enhancing its ability to launch attacks on detention centres and displacement camps in Kurdish-held northeast Syria. Significant ISIS regrouping in Syria could prompt a rethinking of the US's counter-ISIS strategy and posture. The US will also seek to preserve its capability to strike Al Qaeda and other extremist elements in northwest Syria, a situation that could become more complicated if air deconfliction channels with Russia falter.

### **Turkey: walking a tightrope under economic and political pressure**

Putin's invasion of Ukraine will not alter Turkey's main goals in Syria. The Turkish military presence and its administrative and infrastructural involvement in northern Syria serve three main purposes: 1) the prevention of Kurdish autonomy under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), 2) the prevention of a new influx of refugees into Turkey, and related to this, 3) the repatriation of Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey. These goals are largely shared by the mainstream opposition parties as well, meaning that in the

case of a change in government after the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for June 2023, some changes in methods rather than objectives may be observed. This is particularly true with respect to prioritising diplomacy over military means, and a preference among some for re-establishing direct contact with Assad.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ankara has so far hedged its bets and protected its economic and security interests. Turkey's leadership is carefully trying not to antagonise Russia, while continuing to offer military support to Ukraine. Pressure on Turkey to align its position with the US and the EU with respect to sanctions and closing its airspace to Russian planes is likely to increase if the war becomes protracted, thus increasing the likelihood of a confrontation between Turkey and Russia and jeopardising the March 2020 ceasefire agreements in the north of Syria. The fragile situation in Idlib that directly endangers the lives of Turkish troops on the ground (some 3,000 plus a gendarmerie unit, according to the 2022 IISS Military Balance) would be a particular challenge in this context. Ankara's immediate priority is to avoid a breakdown of the ceasefire arrangements; in this vein, it would particularly like to avoid a regime offensive in Idlib, as this would entail another wave of migration to Turkey.

Turkey is also susceptible to the economic effects of the war in Ukraine. Russia is one of Turkey's largest trading partners for imports and one of its main gas suppliers. Turkey also expects a decline in tourism revenues and supply shortages in grain imports from Russia and Ukraine. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey's deepening economic crisis made it more difficult to justify the economic costs of its Syria policy. What's more, the humanitarian consequences of the war in Ukraine will add to Turkey's economic burden in northwest Syria. The continuation of cross-border aid is therefore a pressing priority for Turkey, now more than ever.

## Iran – filling the void

Iran, Russia's closest partner in supporting the Assad regime, has already started to adapt its Syria policy to the changing conditions resultant of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It seems that Tehran views Moscow's focus on Ukraine as an opportunity to increase its influence in Syria in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a growing trend among Iranian and Iran-backed forces to expand their activities in northeast Syria (Iranian troops now number around 1,500 according to the 2022 IISS Military Balance). In this vein, they have increased their presence in al-Hasakah. In the past, Russia's dominant role in the area had limited the scope of Iran's activities. Expanding infiltration into al-Hasakah, close to the areas controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), brings Iran one step closer to its long-standing goal of putting pressure on Washington to withdraw from Syria. At the same time, some reports suggest that Iran has equipped its proxy forces in various parts of Syria with quality weapons, including anti-armour machine guns. The official reason given for this armament is the need to be able to fight against renewed ISIS activities. Like in al-Hasakah, however, Iran's decision to reactivate its allied and proxy forces in vast areas of the Homs and Deir ez-Zor provinces indicates a desire to expand its geographical reach and – probably – to replace Russia in as many regions in Syria as possible. In this vein, in early April, Iranian forces, along with the Lebanese Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian Fourth Division of the Syrian Army, reinforced their presence in the Mahin military warehouse in eastern Homs following the withdrawal of Russian and Russia-backed forces.

These dynamics on the ground are accompanied by Iran's renewed political and diplomatic activity in Syria. On February 27, Assad's Special Security Adviser Ali Mamlouk visited Tehran to meet with senior Iranian officials. One month later, on March 23, Iranian Foreign Minister

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Syria. In addition to reassuring Assad about Iran's continued support, the diplomatic visits also sought to help Iran expand its economic role in the country. In recent years, Tehran has increasingly come to see Moscow as a rival in the Syrian economy. It might be hoping that Russia's economic challenges due to the Western sanctions on the one hand and the prospect of lifting the sanctions against Iran with a successful restoration of the 2015 nuclear deal, on the other, could give Tehran more room for manoeuvre in Syria's post-war economy.

## Geopolitical Dynamics

Protracted violence in Ukraine or an expansion of the war in Ukraine into a larger NATO-Russia confrontation is likely to have an impact on conflict dynamics in Syria beyond the adaptations of individual external actors. Not only would it make multi-lateral cooperation on conflict management, conflict resolution and humanitarian issues more difficult or even impossible, but it would also likely affect the volatile status quo in Syria and usher in a number of destabilising effects.

## Potential effects of Russian redeployments or spoiler action

With regards to Russia's posture and approach in Syria, three trajectories seem plausible: First, Moscow might be forced to reduce its military presence and decrease its attention and resources spent in Syria. In that context, Russia might no longer block the expansion of Iranian influence over Syria's military-security infrastructure and post-war economic activities as long as Moscow's strategic interests in maintaining dominance over the Mediterranean ports of Latakia and Tartus are duly observed. Tehran's ultimate desire to expel the US from Syria might also become more acceptable to Moscow. Such a development could therefore tilt the power balance in Syria in Iran's favour.

Second, if Russia is forced to move air assets from Syria to Ukraine, this could have a negative effect on Russian (and the Syrian regime's) efforts to contain ISIS in the Badia, as well as other regime-held areas. To date, air assets, especially attack helicopters, have been employed to prevent ISIS resurgence in these areas. However, there are rising concerns that an ISIS comeback in regime-held areas could be a real threat in the time to come. The problem could be compounded if Syrian soldiers and pro-regime militias are deployed to Ukraine in considerable numbers, as this would undermine the striking power of Syria's armed forces. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, over 40,000 Syrian fighters had registered for deployment in Ukraine by mid-March 2022, including soldiers from the Syrian Armed Forces. Up to the end of March, according to press reports, only several hundred fighters from Syria arrived in Russia for training. None have yet been deployed to Ukraine.

Third, while Moscow has aimed at preserving the status quo in Syria for the time being, against the backdrop of a perceived threat to the security of its own regime, the Kremlin might radically shift its approach in Syria and exploit its spoiler potential. This could happen with the aim of coercing NATO members, including Turkey, into offering concessions with regard to Ukraine or perhaps just to deflect attention away from Ukraine. In concrete terms, this scenario might play out by Russia complicating or denying US-led counter terrorism operations in areas under its control, in engaging in risky encounters with US aircraft over Syria or in taking aggressive action against Western warships in the eastern Mediterranean.

Moscow might also veto the renewal of UNSCR 2585, which allows for cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries to rebel-held areas. A veto could induce a severe humanitarian crisis in northwest Syria and trigger another wave of forced migration to Turkey (and Europe) and thus compound the impact of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Russia could thus make Turkey and Europe directly

feel the impact of both conflicts on a much larger scale than that witnessed in its earlier attempts at instrumentalising refugees to pressure Europeans.

## **Potential effects of an emboldened Iran**

Iran's seizure of the opportunity to expand its influence in eastern Syria has brought its forces closer to the positions of the US and its allies than ever before. Over the past months, Iran has been trying to make life difficult for Washington in eastern Syria by infiltrating Arab tribes of Deir ez-Zor and inciting them against the US-backed Kurdish forces. Also, American positions have been repeatedly targeted by attacks believed to have been carried out by forces backed by Iran. In this sense, the risk of conflict between Iran and the US in Syria has already increased. If the Vienna talks to revive the Iran nuclear deal succeed, Tehran may, at least temporarily, wind down its anti-US activities in Syria and elsewhere in the region. That said, Iranian leaders generally believe that in the current circumstance, they are closer than ever to their strategic goal of "expelling the United States from Syria and Iraq."

Iran might also take advantage of the erosion of Russia's capacity and expand its presence in southern Syria, near the Israeli border. Indeed, the increase in Iranian activities in Syria over the past months has already raised concerns in Israel. So far, and first and foremost because it depends on military deconflicting with Russia in Syria, Israel has taken a cautious stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has also declared that military communication channels with the Israelis regarding Syria will remain open, and Israel has continued to attack targets linked to Iran and its allies in Syria. Yet, a protracted war in Ukraine or an escalation beyond Ukraine will make Israel's balancing act towards Russia ever more difficult. In any case, the risk of military escalation between Iran and Israel in Syria is set to increase as Iran expands its presence, transfers weapons to its allies and infiltrates Syria's military and security

infrastructure. If the Iranian nuclear talks fail, heightened tensions – possibly even a regional war – over Iran’s nuclear program cannot be discounted.

## **Potential effects of a changed calculus in Ankara**

Ankara perceives a protracted war in Ukraine and, as a result, a heightened stand-off between Russia and the US in Syria as potentially playing out to its own advantage for two main reasons. First, the weakening of Russia’s military posture in Syria could lead to the opening of new diplomatic opportunities. Turkey’s closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to all warships – in accordance with the 1936 Montreux Convention – might negatively influence the Russian presence in Syria should the war become prolonged. Second, any understanding between Russia and the US on the future of Syria becomes more unlikely as tensions increase around Ukraine. This allays Turkish fears about a recognition of Kurdish rights or Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

What’s more, for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Western leaders’ renewed attention to Turkey is being seen as evidence of the country’s increased strategic significance. Turkey’s geographical position, its relevance with regard to the implementation of the Montreux Convention, its NATO membership and, last but not least, its close relations with Ukraine and Russia have all seemed to help it overcome frictions with its Western allies. For Ankara, the war in Ukraine therefore plays into its efforts to mend ties with the US and Europe. Indeed, it has facilitated security dialogue between Turkey and the US. While this is very unlikely to lead to convergence with regard to the YPG/PYD issue, it could lead to increased cooperation with respect to the humanitarian situation in northern Syria and joint efforts to maintain cross-border humanitarian aid.

At the same time, Turkey’s pro-government media has reported that Ankara sees the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to mend ties with Damascus.

According to these reports, Turkey’s three demands on Syria (i.e. maintaining a unitary system in Syria, maintaining Syria’s territorial integrity and guaranteeing the safety of Syrian returnees) were communicated to Assad during his mid-March 2022 visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). If true, this suggests that the diplomatic outreach of Arab countries to Assad and Syria’s potential return to the Arab League might push Ankara to normalise relations with Assad in a way that saves Erdoğan face as he desperately searches for a way to repair Turkey’s economic woes. That would dovetail with Turkey’s efforts to mend ties with others in the region, including Egypt, the UAE, and, most recently, Israel and Armenia.

It would also mean that Ankara would join in regional normalisation and alliance building including, among other things, engagement in the rapprochement between Arab states and the Assad regime, between Arab states and Israel, and among the Arab Gulf monarchies. These efforts have been driven by perceptions that the US is unreliable and pivoting away from the region; and they are aimed at containing Iran, undergirded by a consensus on authoritarian consolidation and primarily pushed forward by the UAE.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The war in Ukraine has already had immediate effects on the situation in Syria, rendering a very difficult humanitarian situation even worse. To date, the most relevant external players in Syria have tried to insulate their cooperation on Syria from tensions over Ukraine. In particular, they have continued military deconflicting and largely upheld ceasefire arrangements. At the same time, the balance of power on the ground has started to shift, with Iran and its allies filling the void left by Russian redeployments. This has led to serious concerns in Israel as well as continued air attacks on Iran-linked targets.

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ISSN (Print) 1861-1761  
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107  
doi: 10.18449/2022C32

SWP Comment 32  
April 2022

The more protracted the war in Ukraine becomes, or the more it escalates into an open confrontation between NATO and Russia, the more likely it is that Syria will be seen as another battlefield of the West and Russia. This could set dynamics into motion that threaten Syria's fragile status quo of the last few years. Much depends on whether Moscow will change its approach from (pro-regime) stabiliser to spoiler. If it does, international tensions over Ukraine would likely bleed over to fora aimed at conflict transformation, such as the Geneva talks and the Syria Constitutional Committee, rendering them even less effective. This would also likely negatively impact international cooperation with regards to conflict management. In particular, Russia might veto the renewal of UNSCR 2585 on the continuation of cross-border aid to north-west Syria. Additionally, Russia might be more reluctant to allow US-led anti-terrorism strikes in areas under its air control. If that were combined with Russia reducing its own air assets and Syrian troops being deployed in sizeable numbers to Ukraine, it would seriously diminish the capacity to fight a resurging ISIS.

## European policy priorities

Europeans are not in a position to shape the larger geopolitical dynamics in Syria. Yet, having shown their ability to act decisively and in unison with regards to Ukraine, they should not neglect other violent conflicts in their direct neighbourhood, but rather overcome their fatigue when it comes to Syria and attend to four policy priorities in particular:

*Insulate the war in Ukraine:* Europeans should attempt to insulate the war in Ukraine from Syria (and other conflicts in the MENA region) rather than thinking about transforming Syria into a battlefield for payback against Russia, as some pundits advocate. The latter course of action would only reignite violence and bloodshed, have destabilising effects for the whole region,

and further diminish prospects for a more inclusive, participatory, and liberal democratic order in Syria. Europeans should therefore maintain existing lines of cooperation with Moscow, for example in the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in Geneva, as opposed to shutting them down. They should clearly refrain from encouraging rebel offensives or attacks against Russian bases.

*Maintain humanitarian access:* Europeans should double down on efforts to renew the Security Council resolution that allows for humanitarian access to rebel-held north-west Syria via the Bab al-Hawa crossing. In doing so, they should cooperate closely with Turkey and the US to pressure Russia to keep that channel open. Without feeding self-fulfilling prophecies, they should at the same time continue to engage in concrete contingency planning.

*Contain ISIS:* Through the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS as well as through concrete engagement on the ground, EU member states and the UK should increase their efforts to prevent a resurgence of ISIS. This should include diminishing the future ISIS threat and alleviating the burden placed on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) through repatriation of European nationals currently in AANES detention centres. These efforts should also encompass the expansion of education and awareness raising activities in internal displacement camps and detention centres as well as the improvement of living conditions.

*Contribute to regional conflict mitigation:* The EU and its member states and partners, such as the UK, Switzerland, and Norway, should contribute to the long-term objective of an inclusive regional security architecture. In this vein, they should work to mitigate local and regional conflict by supporting track-II encounters and/or by liaising between conflicting parties including Iran and Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran, different Syrian Kurdish organisations (i.e. the SDF vs. Kurdish National Council), and AANES and Turkey.

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