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Syria and Iraq since the cruise missile attack

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1. Summary

In April 2017 the Trump Administration fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at an air base near Homs, in Syria, in retaliation for what the US said was the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against its own people in rebel-held areas.

The attack seemed a sharp U-turn from Donald Trump's isolationist 'America-first' comments during campaigning. It also seemed at odds with the US President's policy of rapprochement with Russia.

Russia is betting that its military support for the Damascus government has ensured its lasting survival and is moving to influence the final settlement.

As relations between the US and Russia seemed to return to their habitual hostility, there were other shifts in allegiance taking place over Syria.

Turkey and Russia have sharply improved their relations since Turkey shot down a Russian fast jet in 2015, and have jointly sponsored a new peace process. But their allegiance is shallow and cooperation tactical rather than strategic. Both are keeping groups onside as a hedge against betrayal by the other and, despite stronger cooperation against ISIS, their differences over the Syrian government remain.

Iran remains deeply committed to the survival of the Assad regime; some US politicians close to Trump argue that the Iran nuclear deal has allowed Tehran to increase its spending on this and on supporting Shiite militias in Iraq – a powerful factor in shaping Iraq after the eventual fall of ISIS, something many observers now see as inevitable. If the US goes ahead and imposes new sanctions on Iran, particularly if it categorises the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a terrorist organisation, the delicate cohabitation between the US and Iran in Iraq may be destabilised.

The prospects of some sort of negotiated settlement may have increased since the Syrian government re-established control over Aleppo at the end of 2016 – the mainstream rebel groups supported by the US and its allies, and ISIS/Daesh, have both become weaker. However, the durability of any Syrian government that looks at all like the current one must be questionable.

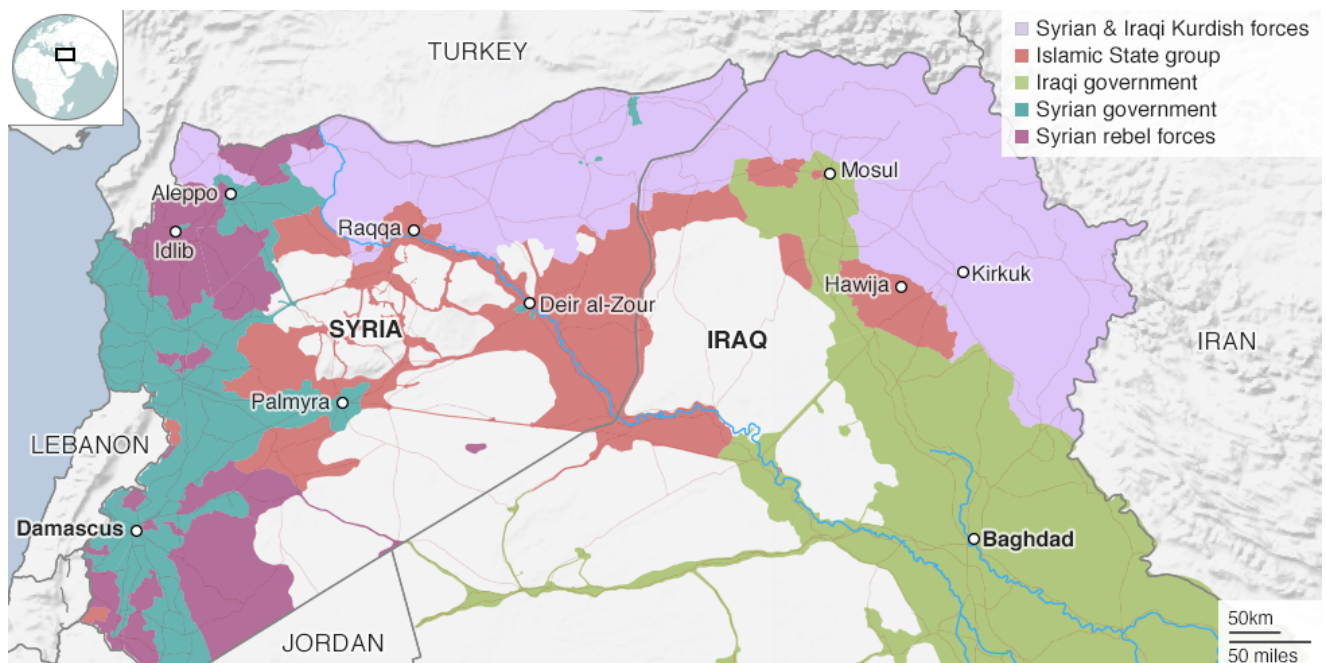
As ISIS/Daesh comes under increasing pressure in Mosul and al-Raqqah, analysts worry that it will abandon its strategy of holding territory and concentrate on more familiar tactics of violent *jihadi* groups: organising or inspiring sporadic attacks. ISIS claimed responsibility for the March 2017 attack in Westminster, for example, as well as the attack in Paris in April 2017. If and when fighters leave a collapsing caliphate in Iraq and Syria, there may be a surge in such attacks in the West.

ISIS may plan to hit other vulnerable states in the region, particularly Jordan, hoping for direct conflict with Israel. Countries neighbouring Iraq and Syria, such as Turkey and Jordan, have already borne the brunt of the refugee crisis caused by the conflict and many of their nationals are fighting with ISIS. They could also be the biggest victims of a new ISIS shorn of its territory.

2. Situation on the ground

In both Syria and Iraq, the picture is one of solid progress against ISIS, which has lost about half its fighters, according to the statement issued after the Coalition summit held in Washington on 22 March 2017.¹ The Syrian government, helped by Russia and Iran, has also improved its position markedly, re-establishing control over Syria's second city, Aleppo. It now looks unlikely that the Syrian government will fall.

In Iraq, the official Iraqi Security Forces have gained control of most of the territory around Baghdad and along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and have surrounded ISIS in part of Iraq's second city of Mosul, cutting ISIS's stronghold in Mosul off from the ISIS capital of al-Raqqah. According to the statement from the anti-ISIS coalition summit, Iraq has recovered about 60% of the territory once held by ISIS.



Source: IHS Conflict Monitor/BBC, April 2017

The Syrian government has taken Palmyra from ISIS and Aleppo from mainstream rebel groups. 'Syrian partners', according to the summit statement, have cleared more than a third of the territory ISIS once controlled in Syria.

The Turkish border is now inaccessible to ISIS, following Operation Euphrates Shield, which pushed ISIS away from the western end of the border. Analysts interpreted this as motivated as much by a desire to thwart any unification of Kurdish-held areas as to defeat ISIS.

ISIS cut off from Turkey

On 17 April, the Trump Administration fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at an airfield in Syria, in retaliation for the use in Syria of sarin-filled chemical weapons, allegedly by the Syrian government. The attack was widely regarded as contrary to international law,² but was also relatively well-received politically in the US and elsewhere.

¹ [Statement by Ministers of the Global Coalition: Meeting on the Defeat of ISIS](#), US Department of State, 22 March 2017

² Ben Saul, '[US Missile Strikes Expose the Untenable Status Quo in International Law](#)' Chatham House, 26 April 2017

The Syrian Foreign Minister denied that it had used chemical weapons and said that the US attack on Syria was an illegal act of aggression breaching international law and the sovereignty of a UN member state. The minister added that it also aimed to disable the peace process.³

³ [‘Al-Moallem: US aggression on Syria breach of Int’l law’](#), *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 13 April 2017

3. UK policy

The UK government says that it fully supported the cruise missile strikes against Syria. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said that the UK was not asked to participate in the action, but that it was justified.⁴

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn did not support the US airstrikes in April, saying that they were unilateral; that there was no investigation; that they were not supported by UN authorisation and risked escalation.⁵ Other senior Labour figures, including Hilary Benn and Tom Watson, supported it, however.⁶

Jeremy Corbyn more recently stated that as Prime Minister he could suspend UK air strikes in Syria and that his priority would be to persuade the Trump Administration to put its weight behind the Geneva peace process.⁷

The question of what say Parliament should have over any increased UK military commitment remains. It is over Syria that the developing convention that Governments should seek approval from Parliament for military action has crystallised.⁸

Parliamentary approval for military action

The House of Commons voted against striking the chemical facilities of the Syrian Government in August 2013,⁹ and this vote is thought to have influenced the decision of the Obama Administration to seek a deal to remove the weapons from Syria instead of carrying out missile strikes.

In 2015, the UK Government successfully passed its motion in the House of Commons to carry out airstrikes “exclusively against ISIL in Syria”,¹⁰ on the basis of [UN Security Council Resolution 2249](#).¹¹

Although many British politicians welcomed the Trump Administration’s intervention, there was concern about whether the UK might be drawn into wider action against the Syrian Government, particularly after the House of Commons votes. Sir Michael Fallon said at the time of the strikes that any further UK action would require a parliamentary vote.¹²

The Syria conflict is a test for relations between the Trump Administration and the UK. Back in January, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had signalled that the UK could support Bashar al-Assad being allowed to run for re-election – a change from UK policy up to that point, perhaps influenced by perceptions of US policy under the new Administration.¹³

The apparent US shift led to questions about UK policy and Parliament. James Cartledge MP suggested in a recent debate that the House should be consulted if the UK government was supporting a new US policy:

⁴ [‘Sir Michael Fallon says Russia should ‘learn’ from American air strike on Syria and ‘bring this slaughter to a halt’](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2017

⁵ [‘US missile attack risks escalation in Syria – Corbyn’](#), *Guardian*, 7 April 2017

⁶ ‘US airstrikes on Syria leave Labour hopelessly divided’, *New Statesman*, 7 April 2017

⁷ Andrew Marr Show 23 April 2017, [Jeremy Corbyn](#)

⁸ See the Commons Briefing Paper [Parliamentary approval for military action](#), 13 May 2015

⁹ [HC Deb 29 August 2013, cc1547-1556](#)

¹⁰ [HC Deb 2 December 2015, c323](#)

¹¹ For information on UK and other military action in Syria and Iraq, see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), 8 March 2017

¹² [Sir Michael Fallon says Russia should ‘learn’ from American air strike on Syria and ‘bring this slaughter to a halt’](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2017

¹³ [‘Boris Johnson signals shift in UK policy on Syria’s Assad’](#), *Guardian*, 26 January 2017

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if the US moves towards a more explicit regime-change policy with regard to Assad, we would only support it after a vote in this House endorsing such a policy?¹⁴

Former Middle East Minister Alistair Burt asked specifically whether the Government remained bound by the 2013 vote of the House or whether it would have helped the US Administration if asked. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson did not address this question but said it would be “difficult for the United Kingdom to say no.”¹⁵

“Difficult to say no”

Boris Johnson also said that the UK’s Syria policy had not changed and is based on the text of [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#), which calls for a Syrian-led political transition leading to elections. The Resolution does not mention President Assad by name.

During the same debate, however, the Foreign Secretary made clear his view that the US-Russian deal to rid Syria of chemical weapons had failed:

That shows the emptiness of the agreement—reached in 2013 and guaranteed by Russia—that was supposed to rid Syria of chemical weapons once and for all, and, I am afraid, exposes the misjudgment of those who regarded that deal as a substitute for resolute action.¹⁶

He also said that the cruise missile attack against Syria had provided an opportunity to press for progress on the political negotiations:

America’s determined response creates an opportunity to break the deadlock and pave the way for a political settlement of Syria’s tragedy, but that will happen only if Russia is prepared to bring Assad to the negotiating table and begin a transition to a new Government who will represent the sole chance of peace in Syria.¹⁷

Shortly after the debate, Boris Johnson confirmed in an interview his view that it would be difficult for the UK to refuse if the US asked for help with further military action in response to a chemical attack, mentioning the possibility of cruise missiles launched from submarines in the Mediterranean. He said that this was the Prime Minister’s view, too.¹⁸ The dissolution of Parliament for the general election from 3 May until 13 June 2017 would preclude a parliamentary vote.

Further Russia sanctions?

A meeting of the G7 leading industrial countries was held in Italy on 10 April. Syria was high on the agenda; G7 leaders discussed how to persuade Russia to end its support for the Assad government.

Rex Tillerson encapsulated the change of emphasis for US foreign policy when he said after the G7: “We rededicate ourselves to holding to account any and all who commit crimes against the innocents anywhere in the world.”¹⁹

Rededication to Pax Americana?

Theresa May is reported to have agreed with President Trump during a telephone call that there was a window of opportunity to persuade Russia that its support for the Assads was not in its interests.²⁰

¹⁴ [HC Deb 18 April 2017, c563](#)

¹⁵ [HC Deb 18 April 2017, c561](#)

¹⁶ [HC Deb 18 April 2017, c551](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb 18 April 2017, c552](#)

¹⁸ ‘Johnson: Difficult to say ‘no’ to Syria strike’, *BBC News Online*, 27 April 2017

¹⁹ ‘G7 hardens line on Russia backing Assad’, *Financial Times*, 11 April 2017

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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The UK initiative for further targeted sanctions against Russian military officers working with the Syrian government was not agreed, however. A G7 diplomat reportedly thought sanctions likely to push Russia further into a corner, while using the present situation to try to move a political solution forward would be more promising.²¹ Some interpreted this as a failure for the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson,²² who also came in for some criticism for cancelling his trip to Moscow so as to leave the way clear for Rex Tillerson, his US counterpart.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² '[Boris Johnson: A weakened foreign secretary?](#)', *BBC News Online*, 12 April 2017

4. Shifting allegiances?

US

His campaign suggested that, as President, Donald Trump would operate an “America first” foreign policy, which would be interpreted as making allies pay for their defence and avoiding international interventions that were not obviously in the US national interest. He also outlined a more friendly approach to Russia and made clear that his first priority would be to defeat ISIS and other manifestations of radical *jihadi* terrorism.

In Syria, these ideas were taken to mean a lower priority for the removal of President Assad – even an acceptance that he might stay – being allowed to stand for election, for example. Some even think that Trump’s non-interventionist statements encouraged Assad to use chemical weapons.²³

A priority on fighting ISIS and a more tolerant attitude to Assad would ease collaboration with the Russians. It might also have the advantage of splitting the Russians from the Iranians, their partner in support for the Assad government; the Obama Administration’s nuclear deal with Iran was an early target for reversal by the incoming Administration.

There were also strong indications from Donald Trump during the presidential campaign that he would end support for the ‘moderate’ Syrian rebel groups that had hitherto, not very successfully, been supported by the Obama Administration. No such decision seems to have been taken in 2017, but the mingling of *jihadi* and ‘moderate’ rebel groups is a problem for the US.

An early indication of a working relationship with the Russians and Damascus came in March 2017, when US airstrikes helped the Syrian government to retake Palmyra from ISIS.²⁴

Cruise missiles

It was perhaps surprising that the Trump Administration’s first major decision on Syria was to fire US cruise missiles against a Syrian government airfield, in response to reports of chemical weapons use and in defiance of Russia. This pointed up the possible contradictions in presidential campaign rhetoric. Trump specifically criticised Mike Pence, his running mate, during one of the televised debates for advocating attacking the Syrian armed forces if they attacked civilians.

Having suggested during the campaign that he sought better relations with Russia, partly through a joint focus on terrorism, following the cruise missile attack they seemed to be sharply worse. After Mr Tillerson’s return to the US, President Trump said that relations with Russia were at a “low point” since the Cold War. The Secretary of State

Iran nuclear deal a Trump target

²³ Thomas Wright, [What the Syria strikes tell us about Trump’s foreign policy](#), Brookings Institution, 7 April 2017

²⁴ [‘Hezbollah, Russia and the U.S. help Syria retake Palmyra’](#), *Washington Post*, 2 March 2017

said that “The world’s two foremost nuclear powers cannot have this kind of relationship.”²⁵

Aligning with Russia in the Middle East was always going to be problematic, however: it would have alienated traditional US Sunni Arab allies. It would also spread to Syria the US alignment with Iran in Iraq, where the two countries support the Baghdad government.

Having described as the Iran nuclear deal as “terrible,” for the Trump Administration to be seen to be implicitly aligning with Iran over Iraq and Syria would seem contradictory.

In the longer term acceptance of the continuation of the Syrian regime would have implied problems – it suffered from lack of legitimacy even before becoming the biggest killer and torturer in the conflict.²⁶

The cruise missile punishment attack on Syria suggests that the US may continue its world policing role under Donald Trump; carrying out an isolationist “America first” policy is difficult in the light of events.

World policeman is back?

Adding to that suggestion was the hint that the US might take military action against the Syrian regime for barrel bomb attacks – large conventional explosive devices that have caused many civilian deaths in rebellious areas in cities such as Aleppo.

However, analysts point out that Donald Trump remains unpredictable.

Kurds to lead Raqqa operation?

A crucial question will be the role of Kurdish forces. The Obama Administration cooperated deeply with Kurdish forces in Syria. A plan to retake al-Raqqa from ISIS was reportedly drawn up by officials from the outgoing Administration to arm the Kurds of northern Syria with armoured cars, anti-tank artillery, machine guns and mine-clearing equipment.

In February 2017 the incoming Trump Administration quickly scrapped the plan.²⁷ They said that it had too many weaknesses, including failure to set out how the US would work with the Russians, and no clear idea of how to placate Turkey, for whom working with the Kurdish YPG of Syria is tantamount to supporting terrorism.

Although the Trump administration has seemed concerned about Turkey, Trump praised the Kurds while campaigning; the new Secretary of State Rex Tillerson described the Kurds as “our greatest allies” and at his confirmation hearing called for the US to “recommit” to them.²⁸

“...our greatest allies”

²⁵ [‘Tillerson and Putin Find Little More Than Disagreement in Meeting’](#), *New York Times*, 12 April 2017

²⁶ I am Syria, [Syrian conflict in six years](#)

²⁷ [‘Obama’s White House worked for months on a plan to seize Raqqa. Trump’s team took a brief look and decided not to pull the trigger’](#), *Washington Post*, 3 February 2017

²⁸ [‘Trump scrapped Obama’s plan to arm Kurdish forces for Raqqa’](#) *Rudaw*, 3 February 2017

Many commentators think that, despite tearing up the Obama plan, the Trump administration will continue to opt for the Kurds as ground troops in the coming battle for Raqqa.²⁹ The US has sent over 1,000 ground troops to support the YPG.³⁰

Safe zones

On 26 January President Trump said that he would “absolutely do safe zones in Syria” for Syrians fleeing violence.³¹ He said that Europe had made a mistake in accepting so many refugees.

In February a plan for safe areas in Syria was dropped from the draft executive order that attempted to implement the ‘Muslim travel ban’, but the Administration has not abandoned the policy.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both expressed their support for safe zones, while Russia and the Syrian Government opposed it. Humanitarian organisations and some US allies have also criticised the plan, which is raising legal and ethical questions about forcing refugees back into Syria. The Portuguese Foreign Minister said in March:

We were never close to favouring this solution. Our line was always that we should comply with international law on refugees and the protection of refugees. If you force them to stay in Syria then you cannot ensure that they will not be attacked by some of the warring factions.³²

Turkey is worried about the safe havens being used as bases by the Kurdish YPG, which it considers a terrorist organisation.

‘Secular’ rebels

The Trump administration is reported to be sceptical about the previous Administration’s policy of supporting rebels, with some advisers arguing that there is no reliable distinction between ‘moderates’ and other groups that want an explicitly Islamic state to replace the present regime.

No decision appears to have been taken by the Administration to end support for the rebels. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did not mention them in his opening remarks at the anti-ISIS summit in March.

Russia

Russia remained consistent in its support for the Assad government, in spite of the chemical attacks, which the Russians, along with the Syrians, described as the fault of “terrorists” rather than Damascus, after legitimate airstrikes by the Syrian Air Force hit an alleged rebel chemical weapons storage facility. Many experts thought that this explanation was not credible.³³

²⁹ Alan Philips, ‘[Is the Russian-led troika stuck in Syria?](#)’, *World Today*, April/May 2017

³⁰ ‘[Trump’s Syria Dilemma](#)’, *Foreign Policy Journal*, 24 March 2017

³¹ ‘[Syrian Rebels Await Trump’s Promise of Safe Zones](#)’, *Newsweek*, 26 January 2017

³² ‘[Tillerson’s Push for Safe Zones in Iraq and Syria Faces Questions, Obstacles](#)’, *Foreign Policy*, 22 March 2017

³³ ‘[Syria chemical attack: Sarin gas likely weapon used in Idlib as experts say Russian claims ‘don’t add up](#)’, *Independent*, 5 April 2017

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Russia reacted strongly, characterising the missile attack as an illegal attack on a sovereign state under a “far-fetched pretext.”³⁴ Russia suspended an air safety agreement with the US that aimed to coordinate warplane movements and avoid accidents (although it was reinstated on 25 April). A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman promised to reinforce Syrian air defences:

To protect key Syrian infrastructure a range of measures will be taken reinforce and improve the effectiveness of the Syrian armed forces air defence.³⁵

Russia also diverted a warship to the Syrian coast.

Dmitry Medvedev, Russian Prime Minister, said that the cruise missile attacks had damaged Russian trust in the new Administration: they had brought Russia and the US close to a “military clash” and were “good news for terrorists.”

The US had warned Russia about the strike, so Russian forces were removed from the base and none was damaged in the action. Nevertheless, after the alleged support for Donald Trump in the US presidential election, there may be some Russian disillusionment with the new team in the White House.

Many Russians think that the US ‘deep state’ has captured the Trump Administration and forced it to abandon its proposed rapprochement with Russia.

As Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was visiting his counterpart in Moscow in April, President Putin was on Russian television, saying that the level of trust had deteriorated: “One could say that the level of trust on a working level, especially on the military level, has not improved, but rather has deteriorated.”³⁶

Russia and Syria

The UK ambassador to the United Nations, Matthew Rycroft, said that Moscow had been “humiliated by its failure to bring to heel a puppet dictator,”³⁷ an accusation that brought an angry response from the Russian UN representative. Vladimir Safronkov said that the accusations from the UK were “lies,” and advised “Once again, I warn you: Don't even try to get into fights in the Arab world. Nothing will work, and nothing will be achieved.”³⁸

The advice might perhaps be as useful to Russia as to the West. Although Russia's initial reaction was firmly in support of the ‘legitimate’ government of Syria, Moscow is aware of the

“...far-fetched pretext”

“Trust has deteriorated”

³⁴ [‘Russia Says U.S. Broke International Law In Striking Syria, Citing ‘Pretext’](#), *NPR*, 7 April 2017

³⁵ [‘US strikes on Syria: Xi Jinping told Donald Trump he understood the US response ‘because of the death of children’](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2017

³⁶ [‘Syria war: US-Russia ties worse under Trump. Putin says’](#), *BBC News Online*, 12 April 2017

³⁷ [Russia Says U.S. Broke International Law In Striking Syria, Citing ‘Pretext’](#), *NPR*, 7 April 2017

³⁸ *Ibid.*

unsustainability of the Assad regime and would like to see a political settlement acceptable to a broader range of Syrians than an outright military victory for the Syrian government would be. Russia has no particular interest in the confessional nature of the regime, unlike Iran, which fears that a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus could no longer be an Iranian ally. Moscow also realises that US support is necessary for a lasting settlement.³⁹

Nevertheless the Syrian government remains a vital ally. Syria has been aligned with the USSR/Russia since the present president's father, Hafez al-Assad, came to power in a coup in 1970. Bashar al-Assad strengthened the alliance, increasing arms purchases from Russia and allowing the construction of a naval re-supply port at Tartus, Russia's only remaining naval base on the Mediterranean and in the Middle East.

More important for Russia, though, is the politics. Moscow sees itself as supporting a legitimate government against Western-backed attempts at regime change. Russians consider stopping 'colour revolutions' to be vital in the preservation of friendly governments in its self-declared sphere of interest and ultimately in its own survival.

Turkey

Kurds remain Ankara's biggest concern, with Turkish officials alarmed by the success of Syrian Kurdish groups. The YPG, allied to the banned Turkish PKK, controls large swathes of territory along Syria's border with Turkey, and this is seen as a long-term threat to Turkey's territorial integrity.

Although Turkey takes a much stronger line against ISIS than in the past (when some accused Turkey of allowing ISIS fighters to cross the border into Syria and to use Turkish hospitals when injured) Turkey looks unlikely to spearhead the coming attack on the ISIS 'capital' of al-Raqqah, with the Trump Administration widely predicted to use Kurdish forces.

Turkey's increased targeting of ISIS, together with its fears of Kurdish gains, might lead to expectations of a downgrade of the policy of removal of the Assad government.

One of the biggest shifts has been the reconciliation between Turkey and Russia after the shooting down by Turkey of a Russian warplane in 2015. Practical collaboration between the two over Syria was backed up by an apparent political deal as Turkey toned down its anti-Assad rhetoric.⁴⁰ The two countries cooperated on the evacuation of Turkish backed fighters from Aleppo and jointly sponsored peace talks in Kazakhstan in March 2017.

However, Russia and Turkey are traditional adversaries and the rapprochement over Syria is tactical – tensions are rife. Turkey is

Russia-Turkey
reconciliation?

³⁹ Dmitri Trenin, '[Russia needs American help to seal the deal in Syria](#)', *Financial Times*, 10 April 2017

⁴⁰ '[Turkey and Russia walk Syria tightrope](#)', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 December 2016

concerned about closeness between the YPG and Russia; Russia is keeping close to the YPG as a hedge against the breakdown of its Turkish alliance.⁴¹ A Kurdish sniper allegedly killed a Turkish soldier firing across the border from Syrian territory controlled by the YPG but with a Russia presence. Three Turkish soldiers were also accidentally killed in a Russian air raid recently and there remain problems over the lifting of trade sanctions imposed after the downing of the Russian jet.⁴²

Iran

Iran condemned the missile strikes against Syria:

Iran strongly condemns any such unilateral strikes ... such measures will strengthen terrorists in Syria ... and it will complicate the situation in Syria and the region.⁴³

President Rouhani said that he wanted an impartial, international investigation of the chemical weapon use and that the strikes would encourage “global lawlessness and instability.”

Some have speculated that one of the objectives of the strikes might be to persuade Russia to distance itself from the Assad government, and therefore from its Iranian ally. Iran has an interest in the Alawite nature of the Damascus government that Russia does not share. Many observers think that any such expectation on the part of the Administration would be optimistic.

Iran remains fully committed to the survival of the Assad government.

The election of Donald Trump spells change for the US/Iranian relationship, however. Donald Trump criticised the nuclear deal during his election campaign, and now there is growing argument in the US Congress and elsewhere about the nuclear deal. Many in Congress think that the JCPOA sanctions relief is providing Iran with funding that is being channelled to violent groups such as Hizbollah and to the Assad government in Syria. There is concern about the supply of aircraft to Iran, following the easing of sanctions, which may be used to resupply Iranian proxies in Syria rather than for commercial aviation.⁴⁴

A bill before Congress would designate Iran’s elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. That would complicate relations in Iraq, particularly, because the IRGC is involved in Iraqi Shiite militias (see below).⁴⁵

At the beginning of February the US imposed a fresh set of sanctions against Iranian entities and individuals for working on the Iranian

Fully committed

⁴¹ Hervé Balanche, [‘Will Astana Displace Geneva in the Syrian Peace Process?’](#), *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 20 January 2017

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⁴³ [‘Saudi Arabia, Iran, others react to US strike in Syria’](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 7 April 2017

⁴⁴ Emmanuele Ottolenghi, [‘Trump’s Syria strategy must target Assad’s chief protector: Iran’](#), *The Hill*, 17 April 2016

⁴⁵ [‘Congress cautiously takes on Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’](#), *al-Monitor*, 29 March 2017

ballistic missile programme.⁴⁶ In April, the Administration informed Congress that, although Iran was in compliance with the deal, the US would review the deal and consider not complying with the lifting of sanctions outlined in the agreement, because of Iran's continued alleged support for terrorism.⁴⁷

Polls suggest that Hassan Rouhani, the figurehead of the nuclear deal in Iran, faces an uphill battle to retain the presidency in the election, scheduled for May 2017.⁴⁸

Hostility between the US and Iran will probably grow – the Institute for the Study of War predicts that a major conflict between the US and Iran is likely in the next five years⁴⁹ – and will affect the conflict in both Syria and Iraq.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the battle against ISIS has strengthened Iranian influence. Iraqi Shiite militias, of Popular Mobilisation Units, are largely funded and supervised by Tehran. They are an essential element in the array of forces in Iraq, numbering 60,000 to 100,000, and are providing about a third of the force deployed by the Iraqi Government to retake Mosul.⁵⁰

The Shiite militias' alignment, albeit discreet, with Kurdish and US-led coalition forces in Iraq has amplified their success (though the US does not provide air support for militia-led operations). Despite Iraqi and US policy to use official Iraqi government forces to take heavily Sunni areas, the Shiite militias are strong enough to establish control over Iraqi territory, ultimately helping Iran establish the land corridor it seeks to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.

Such a corridor would allow Iran to supply Hizbollah, rather than having to rely on airlifts. The Islamic Republic sees the Lebanese Shiite militia as its main protection against feared air strikes by Israel aimed at the Iranian nuclear programme or even at regime change.⁵¹ Hizbollah has shown its ability to hit Israeli cities, something that Iran is not capable of doing directly at present.

Hizbollah –
Iran's forward
defence against
Israel?

Kurds

The Kurds are widely perceived to have done well out of the conflict, expanding the area of Iraq controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government, fighting successfully against ISIS and establishing a *de facto* autonomous zone in northern Syria along the Turkish border. The

⁴⁶ [‘Treasury Sanctions Supporters of Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force’](#), US Office of Foreign Assets Control press release, 3 February 2017

⁴⁷ [‘Trump Administration Orders Review of Iran Nuclear Deal Sanctions: Tillerson’](#), NBC News, 19 April 2017

⁴⁸ [‘Iran Poll Shows Rouhani Could Lose Vote Despite Popularity’](#), Bloomberg, 17 April 2017

⁴⁹ [America’s way ahead in Syria](#), Institute for the Study of War/Critical Threats Project, 14 March 2017

⁵⁰ [‘Shia militias in Iraq’](#), ISS Strategic Comments, 31 March 2017

⁵¹ For more on this see Joost Hiltermann, [‘Syria: The Hidden Power of Iran’](#), *New York Review of Books*, 13 April 2017

Kurdish YPG, or People's Protection Units, has reconfigured itself to be the Syrian Democratic Forces, and now includes relatively secular Arab forces and others in the fight against ISIS.

But this simplifies the situation. Sinjar, the Yazidi stronghold in northern Iraq that was the scene of massacres by ISIS in 2015 has more recently seen skirmishes between Syrian Kurds of the YPG,⁵² affiliated to the Turkish PKK, and the Kurdish Democratic Party, the most powerful political force in the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Turkey is close to the KDP and the two have collaborated over getting oil from northern Iraq into Turkey. The YPG/PKK, on the other hand, are sworn enemies of the Turkish state.⁵³ Iran and the PKK have a tactical alliance, after the Turkish Kurds stopped an insurgency carried out by another PKK affiliate on Iranian territory (Iran also has a significant and restive Kurdish minority).

As Turkey has increased its pressure on the Syrian Kurdish enclaves, their survival as autonomous areas is not certain, but the PKK and its Syrian affiliates remain formidable fighters. The YPG would benefit, too, from being the primary US-supported force in the battle for the ISIS 'capital' of Raqqa (see above). But the Iraqi Kurds have access to the more established quasi-state of the KRG, and oil. Rivalry could escalate and the fragile peace between the KDP and the other force in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (the two were at war in the mid-1990s) could break down.⁵⁴

⁵² [Written question - HL5874](#), 7 March 2017

⁵³ For more on the Kurds, see the Commons Briefing Paper [The Kurds: new perspectives?](#), 14 August 2013

⁵⁴ Joost Hiltermann, '[Syria: The Hidden Power of Iran](#)', *New York Review of Books*, 13 April 2017

5. Syria negotiations

Astana talks

Russia, Turkey and Iran have sponsored a series of negotiations in the Kazakh capital Astana, endorsed by [UN Security Council Resolution 2336](#) on 31 December 2016. Analysts have described the process as putting a military solution first and providing for a political solution to flow from that, rather than having headline political objectives frustrated, like the Geneva process.⁵⁵

Several Arab countries were invited: Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq. China also announced its participation. An invitation was sent to the United States -- but directly to President-elect Trump's office rather than to the then Administration.

The first round was held in January 2017, with representatives of the Free Syrian Army, although the Syrian National Coalition did not participate, nor did the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (affiliated to the YPG (Turkey made sure that they were excluded). Designated terrorist groups ISIS and al-Qaeda did not attend.

A second round took place in February.

The talks achieved very little but the presence of Turkey among the sponsors did add some meaning to the process, which otherwise would have looked very pro-Damascus.⁵⁶ However, the Astana process seems even less likely to achieve results than the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva.

The rebels' side boycotted the third round of talks, in March 2017, saying that Russia had failed to uphold the December 2016 ceasefire. The only substantive outcome of the March round was an agreement to reconvene in May.⁵⁷

Geneva talks

Meanwhile, the UN-sponsored talks have continued, moderated by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. Between 23 February and 3 March the parties assembled in Geneva but little progress was made, other than to agree an agenda for the next round. But at least none of the parties walked out of the talks.

The last round was held from 23 to 31 March. Afterwards, Staffan de Mistura accepted that the real peace negotiations had not yet started but warned against dismissing the achievements of the process.⁵⁸

Little progress

⁵⁵ Fabrice Balanche, [Will Astana Displace Geneva in the Syrian Peace Process?](#) Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 January 2017

⁵⁶ Malak Chabkoun, ['Astana: What talks?'](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 26 January 2017

⁵⁷ ['Syria peace talks in Astana close with no sign of the rebels'](#), *Reuters*, 15 March 2017

⁵⁸ ['Transcript of press stakeout by the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura - End of the Fifth Round of the Intra-Syrian Talks'](#), UN News Centre, 31 March 2016

18 Syria and Iraq since the cruise missile attack

Given the difficulties of progress on the core problem, talks have focussed on smaller practical issues. The UK has argued for more effective ceasefires and better access to embattled areas for humanitarian agencies.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ [HC Deb 18 April 2017, c562](#)

6. Outlook

Does the cruise missile attack make a negotiated settlement more or less likely? The Syrian government may abstain from using any more chemical weapons, or the US may be drawn further into the conflict if it does not but neither would necessarily hasten the end of the conflict.

Some commentators think that US military credibility has been re-established and that this is a useful first step.⁶⁰ But military action bringing Russia and the US “to the brink” of a military clash could well make the diplomacy needed for a political solution more difficult.

One commentator argues that such one-off strikes usually signal weakness rather than resolve, and that sustained military pressure together with diplomatic coordination and a far clearer idea of the kind of political settlement wanted are the preconditions for a successful strategy.⁶¹

It is Russian and Iranian support for the Syrian government that has really changed the situation over recent months. As the former US Ambassador to Syria said: “A year or two ago, Assad’s position seemed more tenuous. I don’t think anyone now thinks he is going to be forced out of office.”⁶²

“I don’t think anyone now thinks he is going to be forced out”

In the longer term, however, it is difficult to see how a government led by Bashar al-Assad or the Alawite elite could regain its legitimacy. Sunni opposition to the government is likely to remain strong – Sunni opposition to the Iraqi government led to the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISIS, and Sunnis in Iraq are in a minority, unlike their counterparts in Syria.

The future of ISIS

ISIS has already diversified its activities to include organising, facilitating and inspiring attacks in the Middle East, Europe, the US and elsewhere. Mass-casualty attacks such as those in Paris, Brussels, Orlando and Istanbul have been claimed by ISIS over the past year and many of these attacks were found to have been directed by planners in Syria rather than being lone-actor events merely inspired by the group, as many thought at first.⁶³

The group has been found to have organised a cell in India and to have reached into countries including Malaysia, Germany, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Australia.

⁶⁰ Michael O’Hanlon ‘[Syria missile strike could lead to a political solution](#)’, Brookings, 8 April 2017

⁶¹ Daniel Byman, [What Effect Will Trump’s Airstrikes Really Have?](#), Lawfare, 6 April 2017

⁶² ‘[UN’s Syria envoy pledges ‘serious try’ as peace talks resume in Geneva](#)’, *Guardian*, 23 February 2017

⁶³ ‘[Not ‘Lone Wolves’ After All: How ISIS Guides World’s Terror Plots From Afar](#)’, *New York Times*, 4 February 2017

ISIS is under severe pressure in both Iraq and Syria and the territory it holds in both those countries is likely to be retaken before too long. It would be optimistic to assume, however, that the military planners and fighters it has gathered will simply go away.

Many are likely to return to their home countries, where there is a danger that they could carry out terrorist attacks. Those who carry out attacks in their own countries are less likely to be troubled by border security and less organised attacks are less vulnerable to detection by the security services.

With an increasing number of attacks in home countries, to a greater or lesser extent organised by ISIS, security services are worried about the potential for a surge in the number of attacks in countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan, as well as in Western countries.

Jordan is particularly worrying because of its political and economic fragility, its huge numbers of refugees from the Syrian conflict and its proximity to Israel. An attack that destabilised the precarious monarchy could present a threat to Israel that led to Israeli intervention, especially given that a majority of Jordanians are of Palestinian origin. Violent *jihadi* organisations would welcome the opportunity to engage Israel directly.

Jordan worries

Governments are aware of the problem, and the statement after the Washington summit in March said that steps are being taken to prevent weapons and fighters dispersing from areas retaken from ISIS.⁶⁴

The prospect of *jihadi* violence emerging yet again in Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria, after the eventual defeat of ISIS, has also been considered. The stabilisation and reconstruction of areas cleared of ISIS is also a priority for the US-led coalition.

⁶⁴ [Statement by Ministers of the Global Coalition: Meeting on the Defeat of ISIS](#), US Department of State press release, 22 March 2017

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