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Idlib and the prospects for Syria

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Summary

Idlib

The fears of a disaster of enormous proportions in Idlib have been lessened by the agreement between Russia and Turkey establishing a demilitarised zone between the city, filled with Sunni refugees and other civilians and Islamist fighters, and pro-Government forces. The Islamist fighters in Idlib range from former members of the Free Syria Army to former (and possibly current) affiliates of al-Qaeda, and under the plan they must withdraw from the demilitarised zone by 15 October 2018.

Turkey and Russia agreed to the plan on 17 September 2017, to prevent the Syrian Government's armed forces, aided by Russian air power, from mounting a full-scale attack. The city and its region are the last stronghold of opponents to Bashar al-Assad's forces.

Turkey's motivation was to prevent a surge of refugees towards its border, which it would see as a severe security threat. Turkey is also close to some of the Islamist fighting groups in the city. While raising Turkey's profile in the conflict, the agreement presents a big challenge to Ankara, which must oversee the disarmament and disbandment of any groups seen as terrorist. This means principally Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Tahrir al-Sham has indicated that it will not disarm, and many of its fighters are battle-hardened and determined.

Israel and Russia

As attention was focused on Idlib, a Russian reconnaissance aircraft was brought down by a Syrian surface-to-air missile. Israeli aircraft had been attacking an installation near Latakia on the Mediterranean that it said was involved in transferring arms from Iran to Hezbollah. Syria launched air defence missiles, but they hit a Russian plane that was operating nearby. Russian authorities initially blamed the Israelis but later gave a more measured reaction, announcing the transfer of a more modern air defence system, the S300, whose transfer had been suspended at Israel's request since 2011. Although the rhetoric was toned down, the events marked a distinct shift in Russo-Israeli relations.

Iran and Israel

Israel insists that it will not allow Iran to establish a military presence in Syria and will not allow weaponry to be transferred to Hezbollah. Russia has been trying to limit Iran's role in Syria, partly to promote its own role in the country and partly so as not to provoke Israel into intervening more directly in the war. Israel, meanwhile has shifted from outright condemnation of Bashar al-Assad to a limited welcome for the re-establishment of government control near the Israeli border.

In August 2018, Damascus and Iran reportedly signed a deal for further military cooperation, and Iran, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are increasingly embedded in Syrian security institutions. Many analysts fear that Israel could be heading for more confrontation with Iran in Syria (and Lebanon).

Russia and Iran

What does that mean for the Russia-Iran alliance that has saved Syria for the Assad government? Russia and Iran have diverging interests, particularly in relation to Israel, with whom Russia is reluctant to pick a fight, and the person of Bashar al-Assad, whom Iran is probably keener to keep in place than is Russia. Nevertheless, they both want Syria's territorial integrity maintained and Damascus kept as an ally. They are both opposed to the US.

Those shared interests might be enough to keep the alliance together.

Iran's alliance with Moscow certainly looks robust in comparison with the Israel/Russia understanding, but Moscow's influence on Tehran is limited, particularly since Russia is drawing down some troops. Russia might want to reduce Iran's role in Syria but it may not have the influence to achieve that.

ISIS and the International Coalition

ISIS may have lost most of its territory, but it still operates as an organisation, although in a decentralised way. ISIS still has a land-based presence in eastern Syria, in the Deir al-Zour Governorate, where it controls several towns, but its most threatening presence is in poorly-governed spaces such as Libya and Afghanistan.

The US, the UK, France and various other nations are still participating in the international coalition against ISIS. The US has about 2,000 troops stationed along the Euphrates River, where they collaborate with Kurdish troops to fight ISIS.

Syria and the political process

The Astana Process political negotiations, begun in January 2017, formed the basis for cooperation between Russia, Syria and Turkey on various violence reduction initiatives. The process is supported by the UN's Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and Russia says that it contributes to the UN-backed Geneva process. The representation of the opposition in the Astana process is very weak, however. The selection of opposition representatives is highly restrictive and even those that have attended Astana process meetings have resisted talking to the Syrian Government.

The latest round of the Astana Process, held in Sochi, Russia, took place in July. There was no progress on the main item on the agenda: forming a committee to draft a new Constitution, composed of the Syrian Government, the opposition, and civil society. A presidential election is due in 2021.

One of the Government's strategies for ensuring its survival in a country apparently dominated by Sunni opponents to its rule is to reduce the number of Sunni oppositionists by discouraging the return of refugees it views as a threat.

Humanitarian situation

The suffering of the Syrian people remains dire. 5.6 million of them have fled the country. 13.1 million are in need of humanitarian aid, 6.1 million are internally displaced and 6.5 million people are food insecure. There are nearly 3 million people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas, according to the UN.

The UK has stepped up its humanitarian aid response including preparing for any offensive on Idlib. UK funding for the opposition, including Free Syrian Police, has been cut because the conditions on the ground are too difficult.

Outlook

While the end of the civil war phase may be nearing, it may be some time before peace reigns across the whole of Syria.

Kurdish representatives now signal that they expect Assad to survive and have started negotiating to keep some autonomy in the areas they control.

Russia and Turkey's agreement over Idlib could be good for overall political progress since each has influence over one side in the war.

The enmity of much of the population towards the Government has not diminished. It remains to be seen whether the Syrian Government's plans to exclude oppositionist

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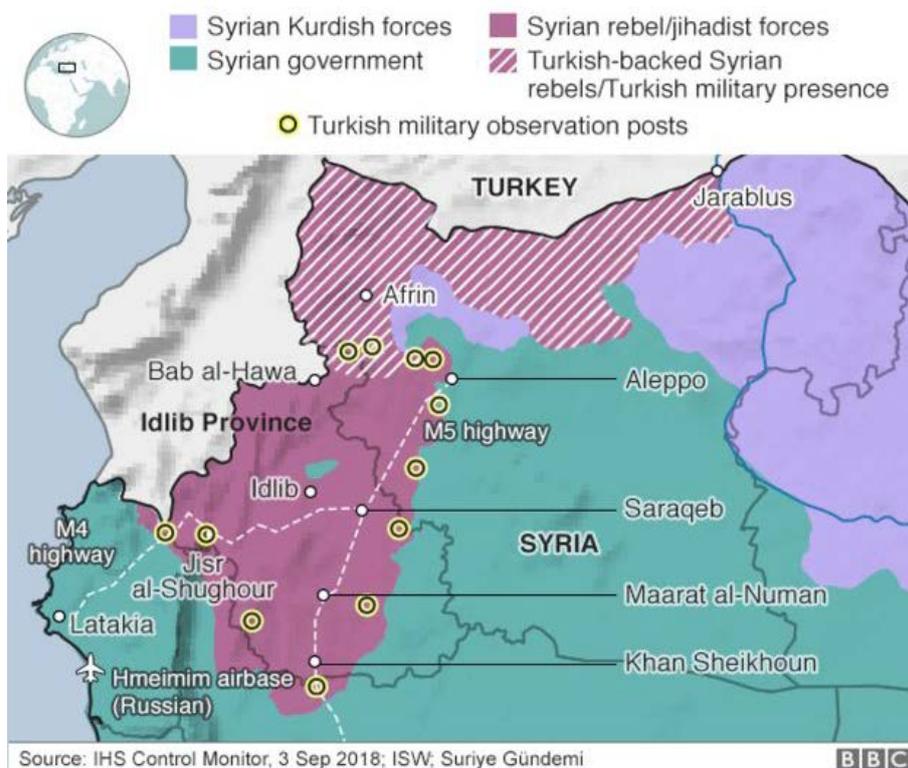
refugees and favour its supporters will significantly increase its threadbare legitimacy in the longer term.

Many commentators think that Western influence will be small in post-war Syria. Western intervention has been patchy and indecisive, leaving Russia and Iran to shape the outcome of the conflict. The next stage will involve the vast cost of rebuilding a country in ruins, when neither the Syrian Government nor its backers in Iran and Russia have the money or the inclination to pay for it. Some commentators argue that, whether the West supplies or withholds reconstruction funds, it is unlikely to wring many political concessions from an emboldened Syrian Government.

1. Idlib

In September 2018 Syrian Army forces and Iranian-backed militia were massing outside Idlib, the city in north-eastern Syria that is the last to hold out against the Syrian Government. The city and surrounding areas were being subjected to intense aerial bombardment by Russian and Syrian fighter planes, and artillery fire.

A Syria expert explained that there was no-where for the inhabitants of Idlib to go, unlike in battles for other cities: "This is going to be far more catastrophic than anything we witnessed so far."¹



Source: [BBC](#)

Russia also sent significant naval forces to the Mediterranean off the Syrian coast.

Who is in Idlib?

According to the US envoy to the coalition against ISIS, Idlib is the "the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11".² There is a variety of non-state fighting groups, civilians, and military personnel of both Syria and Turkey in the Idlib Governorate.

US-backed Kurdish forces that spearheaded the expulsion of ISIS from Raqqah, also control areas near Idlib.

¹ Krishnadev Kalamur, 'The Worst May Be Yet to Come in Syria', *The Atlantic*, 5 September 2018

² Sam Heller, 'Russia Can Stop a Slaughter in Idlib', *Atlantic*, 7 September 2018

Turkey and Syria

Both Turkey and Syria have military forces within the Idlib Governorate, although not regular forces in the city itself. The area controlled by rebel and Islamist forces is circled by Turkish military observation posts.

Tahrir al-Sham

There are possibly tens of thousands of fighters in Idlib aligned to various Islamist groups, with probably the largest number belonging to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, was formed from the remains of the Nusra Front/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a group that has been affiliated with al-Qaeda, although the present leadership of Tahrir al-Sham has denied being part of al-Qaeda.

Tahrir al-Sham

Turkey has called on Tahrir al-Sham to disband, but Turkish secret services have a “murky” relationship with the group, according to one analyst.³ Tahrir al-Sham rejected the call to disband on 28 August

National Liberation Front

The National Liberation Front (NLF) is close to Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood and includes groups that used to fight under the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, a banner that has largely fallen into disuse.

Turkey sponsors the NLF and this support helps to keep the disparate group together; Turkey has reportedly been moving heavy military equipment towards Idlib from areas it controls around Afrin, which could help bolster the NLF.

Minor factions

There are several small groups in Idlib, such as Hurras al-Din, a radical breakaway faction from Tahrir el-Sham, and the more moderate Jaish al-Ezzah.

Foreign fighters

Chechens and Dagestanis have been an important part of the violent *jihadi* element of the Syrian opposition. Many of these fighters from the North Caucasus have spent years involved in the insurgencies against the Russian State; Russian security services are reported to have helped North Caucasus militants to travel to Syria, particularly before 2014. Russian intelligence is reported to believe that 4,000 Russians and 5,000 fighters from former Soviet states were fighting in Syria as at 2017.⁴ Chechens and other North Caucasians are prized for their experience, bravery and skill and have fought for ISIS and for other violent *jihadi* groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵ The largest group is called Ajnad al-Kavkaz.

There are many Uighur Chinese jihadis with the al-Qaeda affiliated Turkistan Islamic Party. Although they have not so far attracted much

Chinese Uighurs

³ [‘Syrian war: Understanding Idlib’s rebel factions’](#), *IRIN*, 3 September 2018

⁴ [‘4,000 Russians Now Fighting in Syrian Insurgency, Says Putin’](#), *Moscow Times*, 23 February 2017

⁵ [‘The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?’](#) International Crisis Group, 16 March 2016

attention in the West, estimates of the number of Uighur militants in Syria range from 5,000 to 20,000;⁶ most of those are now in Idlib.

Civilians

The population of Idlib city was slightly over 380,000 in 2004. There are some 3 million civilians living in the city and surrounding areas, many of them refugees driven into Idlib by military action in other cities, such as Aleppo.

Russia and Turkey

Iran, Turkey and Russia issued a joint statement from Tehran on 7 September calling on all warring parties around Idlib to lay down their arms and pursue a negotiated settlement.

Turkish President Erdoğan said that Turkey was hosting 3 million refugees and could not cope with another 3 million, arguing that an assault on Idlib would be a national security threat to Turkey.

Russia had resumed a bombing campaign against Idlib with Syrian and Iranian support, after a 22-day pause.

President Erdoğan called for a ceasefire, but Russia declined. This underlined the complicated relationship between countries driving the Astana Process – Turkey, Russia and Iran.⁷

Calls for negotiations

After an informal EU Foreign Ministers' meeting in August 2018, EU representative Federica Mogherini called on all parties to avoid a catastrophe:

First and foremost with a strong message on Idlib: we see the need to prevent and avoid a military action in Idlib that would be a humanitarian catastrophe, we believe.⁸

Alistair Burt, Middle East Minister, said that the UK Government was preparing for the possibility of large numbers of refugees:

...we are working very closely with Turkey on what the responses would be if a large number of people were to move. Preparations are already in place for the provision of support in safe areas on the Syrian side of the border. Turkey is cautious about a large number of people coming across the border, and we have offered assistance in relation to that. All this is currently being worked out to try to find the best ways in which humanitarian access can be safeguarded and to find how people can be protected.⁹

On 13 September, the UK called on Russia and the Syrian Government to work with the UN and allies such as Turkey to find a negotiated solution. Secretary of State for International Development Penny Mordaunt announced extra humanitarian aid to the area:

⁶ Joseph Hope, ['Returning Uighur Fighters and China's National Security Dilemma'](#) Jamestown Foundation, 25 July 2018

⁷ For information on the Astana process, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Syria and Iraq: update July 2017](#)

⁸ [Remarks by HR/VP Mogherini at the press conference following the informal meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers \(Gymnich\)](#), 31 August 2018

⁹ [HC Deb 10 September 2018, c475](#)

[...] today I announce that the UK will provide additional aid funding of up to £32 million for the Northwest Syria. This money will help to provide shelter, clean water and sanitation, mental health services, and support health workers and facilities. This is our second uplift of emergency funding for Northern Syria in recent weeks. On 17 August I announced a £10 million package of support, including the provision of emergency assistance and vital support for medical centres and mobile medical clinics.

1.2 Demilitarised zone agreed

A week later, on 17 September, Russia and Turkey finally agreed a demilitarised buffer zone (DMZ) around Idlib, after a meeting in Sochi, Russia. Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu said that there would be no massive military assault on Idlib.¹⁰ The two countries agreed that:

- The demilitarised zone would be fully operational by 10 October and would be 15-15km wide.
- Recognised terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, linked to al-Qaeda, would be required to leave.
- The Syrian Government would control an important road linking Idlib with the rest of the country.
- The zone will be patrolled by Turkish and Russian forces.¹¹

President Erdoğan said that this would prevent a “big humanitarian crisis”. He explained the content of the agreement:

We decided that a de-militarised area between the opposition and the regime will be formed. The opposition will continue to remain in the area where they are present. Meanwhile, we will ensure that radical groups cannot operate in that same area. Russia will take the necessary precautions to ensure that the Idlib de-escalation zone does not come under attack.¹²

President Putin said that the implementation of the deal would be a important boost to the political talks, including the UN-backed Geneva Process.

De-jihadification

The agreement was in some ways a victory for Turkey, after President Putin had rejected the earlier Turkish bid to establish a DMZ.

It involves risk for Turkey, however, as Ankara, with links with Islamist opposition groups in Idlib, is expected to deliver their departure or disarmament, as part of the agreement. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is [widely regarded](#) as a terrorist group and is the main group of concern when it comes to disarmament.

¹⁰ [Memorandum of Understanding on Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib's Deescalation Zone](#)

¹¹ [‘Russia, Turkey agree to create demilitarized zone around Syria's Idlib’](#), Deutsche Welle, 17 September 2018

¹² [‘Putin agrees to demilitarised zone around Syria's Idlib’](#), *Financial Times*, 17 September 2018

Militants from Tahrir al-Sham have rejected Turkey's call to partially disarm and disband, but under increased pressure from Turkey, Tahrir al-Sham may split into pro-Turkey and radical holdout factions.¹³ A more radical splinter group, Huras al-Din, has already formed with many foreign fighters joining up; this could be the nucleus of the holdout group.¹⁴

More radical
splinter group

Analysts say that Turkey will have to attack any members of Tahrir al-Sham that it cannot persuade to back down and disarm. These ultra-radicals may prefer to fight to the death and use the civilian population as human shields. The UN Commission of Inquiry welcomed the deal but said: "we are cognizant that a multiplicity of challenges may threaten this temporary ceasefire" and reminded the parties to the conflict of their binding obligations under international law to protect civilians.¹⁵ The possibility that the Idlib deal could collapse means that a new refugee crisis for Turkey and possibly for Europe has not yet been averted.¹⁶ Even if the deal holds there is still concern about what happens when non-Syrian violent *jihadis* return to their homelands, some of which are European.

The biggest
humanitarian
disaster yet?

On 28 September the [United Nations warned](#) that the situation in Idlib could become catastrophic:

...a worst-case scenario in Idlib will overwhelm capacities and has the potential to create a humanitarian emergency at a scale not yet seen through this crisis.

¹³ [Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions](#), IRIN, 3 September 2018

¹⁴ ['What will Turkey do next in Idlib?'](#), al-Jazeera, 25 September 2018

¹⁵ ['UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Temporary Agreement on Idlib a welcome provisional step'](#), UN Human Rights COuncil press release, 21 September 2018

¹⁶ Sebnem Koser Akcapar, [Turkey stands between Europe and the next refugee crisis](#), *New York Times*, 25 September 2018

2. Shifting alliances

2.1 Turkey's role

The Turkish Government was at the beginning of the Syrian conflict strongly opposed to the Assads but is now working with Russia, one of the Assads' main backers. They collaborate not only to stabilise the situation around Idlib but also elsewhere in the north of Syria. It seems a remarkable turnaround from the low point in relations, when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet in 2015.

President Erdogan described the Syrian Government as "Bashar Assad's criminal regime" in an article published on 10 September.¹⁷ Yet Turkey has sometimes been much closer to the Syrian Government than that description would suggest, particularly where their shared objective of limiting Kurdish gains is concerned. While Turkey talks about the undoubtedly enormous refugee burden that it has shouldered and stresses concerns about terrorists present in Idlib, Ankara is also pursuing its strategic goals. The campaign against largely Kurdish forces in Afrin, earlier in 2018, led to civilian deaths, according to the UN's latest Commission of Inquiry report.¹⁸

Turkey also participates with Russia and Iran in the Astana process (see below), political negotiations whose goal some might see as preserving as much of the current regime as possible.

"Bashar Assad's criminal regime"

2.2 Israel and Russia

On 17 September a Russian Ilyushin Il-20 reconnaissance plane was shot down, killing all 15 crew members. The plane had been hit by Syrian surface-to-air missiles when it was close to Israeli fighter jets that had probably been attacking Iranian/Hezbollah targets in Latakia.

At first, the Russian defence ministry blamed "deliberate provocation" from Israel and threatened commensurate action. A defence ministry spokesperson said:

We view the actions of the Israeli military as hostile. As a result of the irresponsible actions of the Israeli military, 15 Russian service personnel perished.¹⁹

The next day, President Putin said that the event was the result of a series of accidents and said that the Russian measures in response would aim to improve the safety of Russian service personnel.

On 23 September the Russian defence ministry released a report again blaming Israel and on 24 September announced that Russia would be supplying the S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Syria, for delivery

Russian plane shot down

S-300 air defence missiles

¹⁷ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 'The World Must Stop Assad', *Wall Street Journal*, 10 September 2018

¹⁸ [Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 9 August 2018

¹⁹ ['Russia military aircraft 'disappeared' off Syria during Israeli strikes'](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 18 September 2018

within two weeks.²⁰ The navigation systems of hostile aircraft in the Mediterranean would also be jammed. The equipment had been proposed in 2011 but delivery to Syria had been postponed after protests from Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu offered condolences in a phone call to Moscow, but reiterated Israeli determination to prevent Iran from gaining a military foothold in Syria and to frustrate Iranian attempts to supply Hezbollah with weaponry to target Israel.²¹

The incident illustrated the precarious nature of the many complex relationships in the conflict. Like Turkey, Israel has shifted towards Russia as Russia has gained leverage through its military action. Russia and Israel reportedly arrived at an agreement that Iran would keep its forces out of southern Syria, near the Israeli border, and that Israel would attack Iranian targets it deemed a threat, as long as that did not endanger the Syrian Government.²²

But that relationship could be blown off course by Syria using the S300 missile system to destroy Israeli fighter planes, if and when the missile deal goes ahead.

2.3 Iran and Russia

John Bolton, US National Security Adviser, suggested during a visit to Israel in August 2018 that President Putin would back the withdrawal of Iranian troops from Syria:

What he [Putin] was saying is that Iranian interests in Syria were not coterminous with Russian interests and that he would be content to see the Iranian forces all sent back to Iran.²³

The next day Bolton met his Russian counterpart but, after a five-hour meeting, they failed to reach any formal agreement. Russia was asking for oil sanctions against Iran to be lifted, something which the US was unwilling to offer.²⁴

Some commentators have suggested that Russia and Iran are likely to fall out. The Russians, according to this argument, are not particularly concerned that Bashar al-Assad himself should stay in power, and would like to see a widely-supported political settlement likely to help ensure stability and reduce any need for Russian intervention in the future.

The Iranians need the Alawite regime to survive, since a Sunni-dominated government would be likely to turn against Iran.

²⁰ 'S-300 missile system: Russia to upgrade Syrian air defences', *BBC News Online*, 24 September 2018

²¹ '[Putin Says Israel Didn't Down Russian Aircraft; Netanyahu Offers Condolences](#)', *Haaretz*, 19 September 2018

²² '[Russia-Israel Deal Is Clear: Iran Away From Border, Assad's Rule Accepted](#)', *Haaretz*, 15 July 2018

²³ '[How Iran's Defense Minister in Damascus sent a message to Washington](#)', Mideast Centre.org, 26 August 2018

²⁴ Leonid Issaev, '[Will Russia force Iran out of Syria?](#)', Al-Jazeera, 29 August 2018

Russia does not want to provoke Israel and therefore tends to urge restraint on Iran, while Iran is determined to line up the maximum force possible against Israel because Tehran, as well as maintaining an ideological hostility to Israel, views it as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic.

A threat to the Islamic Republic

So far, however, any desire that Moscow may have to limit Iranian and Hezbollah military presence in Syria is not being fulfilled (see below).

Differing interests may be putting pressure on the alliance between Iran and Russia but at present they are resisting it; their alliance has delivered for them so far, and frustrated Western objectives.

One analyst even suggests that, far from distancing itself, Russia will deepen its engagement with Iran, to use that as a lever against the US.²⁵

2.4 Israel and Iran

Enmity between Israel and Iran is a constant in the region, and Israel has set down a 'red line' on Iranian military presence in Syria, particularly close to the Israel border. Israel has attacked targets in Syria more than 200 times since 2017, involving some 800 bombs or missiles, according to an Israeli military spokesperson. The targets were often Iranian arms convoys destined for Hezbollah, but also Iranian bases and infrastructure.²⁶ Iran has tens of thousands of troops on the ground in Syria.

More than 200 Israeli attacks since 2017

In supplying new air defence systems to Syria, Russia will undermine Israel's ability to strike Hezbollah and Iranian targets, something that Israel has pledged to do.

Both Iran and its proxy Hezbollah have reportedly vowed to remain in Syria.²⁷ Iran signed a new military cooperation deal with Syria in August. Details were not revealed, but Iranian military advisers would remain in Syria as part of it, according to comments by the Iranian military attaché. He also said that Iran would help Syria rebuild its defence industry.²⁸

Iran's Revolutionary Guards are establishing permanent bases in Syria, intended for Shiitete militias sponsored by Iran along the lines of Hezbollah and militias in Iraq.

So far, Iran has remained focused on Syria, rather than stoke up its conflict with Israel. That has meant taking some losses from Israeli air attacks, without that turning into direct military confrontation. As David Gardner argues, such restraint might not last:

²⁵ Clement Therme, '[Q&A: Iran's missile strike on Syria](#)', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2 October 2018

²⁶ '[Israel says it launched 200 strikes in Syria since 2017](#)', *Al-Jazeera*, 5 September 2018

²⁷ '[Hezbollah leader says to stay in Syria](#)', *Reuters*, 8 June 2018

²⁸ '[Iran says to maintain military presence in Syria despite U.S. pressure](#)', *Reuters*, 28 August 2018

Things can change — violently. The conflict between Iran and Israel in Syria — where Israeli warplanes have hit Iranian and Hezbollah targets with about 200 air strikes — is beginning to impose heavy losses on Tehran and could escalate out of control. Everyone is riding a tiger in this still highly volatile conflict.²⁹

“Riding tigers”

Sayyed Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, has vowed to stay as long as the Syrian government wants it to, although he said there would be a reduction in numbers;³⁰ Damascus will probably need their help, even after the civil war winds down. Iranian supply lines to the militia look to have been safeguarded by the survival of the Assad Government, which means that the Hezbollah, as well as other Iranian-funded Shiite militia in Syria, could in the longer term pose a potent threat to Israel.

Golan Heights

In September, Syrian troops returned to the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, the Syrian territory occupied by Israel since 1967, and in October Israel re-opened the Quneitra crossing to UN troops, restoring the situation to its status before the Syrian conflict began.

The move by Israel underlined the fact that Israel is more worried about militant Islamist groups, Hezbollah and Iran than it is about the Syrian Government; Israel’s border with Syria was quieter than other borders for many years.

One Israeli commentator suggests that there could be a deal over the Golan Heights, which could bring peace between Israel and Syria and serve the interests of Russia and the US.³¹

2.5 Kurds and Damascus

In June 2018 a delegation of the “tolerated” Syrian opposition travelled to a Kurdish-held city for discussions with representatives of various Kurdish parties. The visit followed threats from Bashar al-Assad that he would not hesitate to use force to re-take Kurdish held areas if negotiations with the Kurds failed.

Kurds still control about a quarter of Syrian territory and their effective ground forces still count on the backing of US air power. This puts them in a relatively strong position. But Turkey’s increasing influence in Northern Syria is a threat, since Turkey views the Kurdish YPG of northern Syria as little more than an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which Turkey, UK and other countries regard as a [terrorist organisation](#). Meanwhile, the task that they shared with the US (and the International Coalition) – defeating ISIS – is now largely complete.

Kurds control a quarter of Syria

In July 2018 the first direct meetings took place between the Syrian Government and the Syria Democratic Council, political wing of the Syria Democratic Forces Kurdish-led militia that spearheaded to

²⁹ [‘Donald Trump’s lack of a Middle East strategy benefits Iran’](#), *Financial Times*, 27 September 2018

³⁰ [‘Hezbollah leader Nasrallah says group will stay in Syria until further notice’](#), Reuters, 19 September 2018

³¹ Uri Halperin, [‘A Strengthening Shiitete Axis Paradoxically Gives Peace between Syria and Israel a Chance’](#), Washington Institute, 10 October 2018

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operation to drive ISIS from its Raqqah “capital”. After another meeting, a Kurdish leader said:

Whether the regime wants to name it decentralisation, federalism, or a confederation, we do not care as long as it is the self-administrative power that we want and deserve.³²

Negotiations may prove difficult, however, with Damascus in no mood to give way on democratisation or decentralisation proposals.

³² [‘Kurds hold Syria territory talks with Damascus’](#), *Financial Times*, 14 August 2018

3. ISIS

State of the organisation

In August 2018 the UN issued a report on ISIS/Daesh, underlining that the organisation is far from being destroyed.³³ The group's position in eastern Syria has stabilised, according to the UN; it controls several villages and small towns in Deir al-Zour Governorate.

There has been a reduction in ISIS terrorist attacks, beginning late in 2017 and continuing in 2018.

ISIS has, however, broken up into cells and largely gone underground, except in its territory in eastern Syria in Deir al-Zour. Discipline is intact. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is still in control of an ISIS bureaucracy that runs security, finance, propaganda, migration and logistics.

Global spread

Perhaps the most worrying trend is the rising threat from ISIS operations elsewhere than in Iraq and Syria. The UN says that significant numbers of ISIS-affiliated fighters operate in Afghanistan, South-East Asia, West Africa and Libya, and to a lesser extent in Sinai, Yemen, Somalia and the Sahel, the semi-desert areas to the south of the Sahara.

It is easy for ISIS to obtain arms in the areas where it is active, because of weak law-enforcement there. ISIS also has the capacity to manufacture its own improvised explosive devices and turn hobby drones into weapons by fitting them with bombs.

Ahvaz attack

On 22 September gunmen attacked a military parade in Ahvaz, a south-eastern Iranian city that is home to many Arabs (as against the majority Persians in Iran). The attack caused 25 deaths.

Iran blamed ISIS and its international backers, by which it meant Saudi Arabia and the US, and the IRGC launched ballistic missiles at ISIS targets in eastern Syria near the town of Abu Kamal.

Analysts have questioned whether ISIS was really behind the attack, however. Arab separatists in Ahvaz are not reported to have worked with ISIS before and the Ahvazi separatist movement is largely Shiite, unlike ISIS, which is Sunni.

Iran did also spread the blame to Western countries including the UK for harbouring Iranian opposition groups.³⁴

ISIS in Afghanistan

³³ [Seventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL \(Da'esh\) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat](#), 16 August 2018

³⁴ ['Iran blames Gulf foes for deadly Ahvaz attack'](#), *BBC News Online*, 22 September 2018

3.1 US and the international coalition against ISIS

The US military is still present in Syria as part of the international coalition against ISIS.³⁵ Although ISIS/Daesh has lost most of its territory in Syria, there remain pockets of resistance and US forces continue to target them, although the number of ISIS-directed strikes has decreased significantly since mid-2017.

US and other forces are concentrating more on stabilisation operations, including training and surveillance. The US says that it intends to maintain a “conditions-based” presence focused on ISIS but that will include working with the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), the force led by Kurdish commanders largely from the YPG.

There are some 2,000 US troops stationed in posts along the Euphrates river, the main dividing line between Kurdish-held territory and territory held by the Syrian Government. The US presence counters any resurgence by ISIS, keeps some territory under the control of US allies and prevents Kurdish forces from overly threatening Turkish territory.

2,000 US troops on the ground

The small size of the US contingent and the low priority given the conflict in the Pentagon mean that US leverage is small. US support of Kurdish forces has amplified its influence, and the Kurds played a crucial role in the expulsion of ISIS from Syrian territory but recent Kurdish moves towards the Syrian Government could undermine the Kurdish-US alliance.

Withdrawal of stabilisation funds

In August 2018 the US Administration said that it was withdrawing \$230 million of funds for reconstruction, denying that it was a downgrade of US commitment to the conflict and saying that allies were contributing more to make up for the change.³⁶

Even if the amount was modest and allies do compensate for it, commentators said that the move was a signpost of the Administration’s lack of enthusiasm for working in Syria, particularly as continuing the work as an Assad victory approach nears could imply support for the Syrian Government.³⁷

3.2 UK participation in the International Coalition

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are supporting *Operation Shader* in Iraq and Syria, conducting airstrikes in support of local forces on the ground and providing intelligence and surveillance to Coalition operations. With the UK’s training contingent in Iraq (currently 500 personnel), the UK’s total footprint across the region in support of this

850 UK personnel

³⁵ For more on this see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: what now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?](#), July 2018
³⁶ [‘Syria Stabilization Efforts Continue With Coalition Contributions’](#), State Department press statement, 17 August 2018
³⁷ Krishnadev Calamur, [‘The U.S. Will Spend Billions in Syria—Just Not on Rebuilding It’](#), 20 August 2018

operation is approximately 1,350 personnel. Those personnel on the ground are not combat troops.

The UK has been the second largest contributor to air operations in Iraq and Syria, behind the United States, conducting sorties at a tempo not seen since the end of the Second World War. As at July 2018, the UK had conducted 1,700 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria and provided approximately a quarter of intelligence and surveillance to the Coalition. Operations continue.

With ISIS deprived of most of its territory and the military campaign moving towards clearance, stabilisation and training, attention has increasingly been given to the long-term presence of British military assets in the region, in particular the air component. The MOD has made it clear, however, that the military effort is not over and “there will be no respite in UK operations against Daesh until we can guarantee their absolute defeat”.³⁸

Long-term UK presence?

³⁸ For more on this see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: what now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?](#), July 2018

4. Syria and the political process

4.1 New focus on political negotiations?

At the end of 2017, officials suggested that the US Administration would “allow” Bashar al-Assad to stay in power until an election in 2021.³⁹ Commentators suggested that this reflected the reality on the ground and, since then, that reality has shifted further in favour of the Syrian Government and its backers. Western acceptance that the Syrian Government will win may produce a new urgency to the political negotiations. The US has pledged to keep a military presence in Syria until there is a UN-sponsored presidential election.

4.2 Geneva process

In January 2018, however, UN-led talks in Vienna collapsed, with no progress on the essential elements of [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#): a transitional governing body, the drafting of a constitution and UN-sponsored parliamentary and presidential elections.

Constitutional Committee

On 18 September, UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura [briefed the Security Council](#) on progress with the UN-led Geneva Process. He said that the Constitutional Committee was in the process of being formed. It would be composed of one third Syrian Government representatives, one third opposition representatives and one third civil society representatives, constitutional experts and women. The opposition and Government delegations were agreed but not the civil society representatives.

De Mistura said that the composition of the Constitutional Committee was a matter for UN to decide, not the Astana 3 countries or for Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, which he referred to as the Small Group.

He underlined the importance of the Constitutional Committee as the basis for progress on a political solution.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has resisted the UN plans for the Constitutional Committee, saying it should be based in Damascus and be an advisory body only.

4.3 Astana process

Russian, Iranian and Turkish leaders, along with some representatives of the opposition met in the Russian resort of Sochi in November 2017 to discuss Syria. At the Sochi round of the Astana process there was some agreement on the need to work together on a presidential election in 2021, although much of the opposition boycotted the meeting.

³⁹ [‘Trump to Let Assad Stay Until 2021, as Putin Declares Victory in Syria’](#), *New Yorker*, 11 December 2017

The most recent round of talks was again held in Sochi, in July 2018. Again, much of the opposition boycotted the talks, particularly opposed to the fact that they were hosted by Russia.

Russia, Iran and Turkey issued a joint statement after the meeting reaffirming their support for progress on the goals of Security Council Resolution 2254:

The Parties would continue joint efforts aimed at advancing the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process of the political settlement in order to create conditions to facilitate the beginning of the Constitutional Committee's work in Geneva as soon as possible consistent with the decisions of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi and the UN Security Council resolution 2254. They expressed satisfaction with useful consultations with the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria held on 31 July in Sochi and agreed with him to convene next round of consultations in Geneva in September 2018.⁴⁰

There was no breakthrough and the next high-level meeting of the Astana process was scheduled for November 2018.

Opposition
boycott....

4.4 Refugee return?

Unparalleled numbers of IDPs

In August 2018 the UN Commission of Inquiry underlined the massive numbers of people displaced from their homes by pro-government forces' military action to recapture large areas of Syria from anti-government forces in the preceding six months. More than a million civilians were driven out by the intense fighting in Aleppo, northern Homs, Damascus, Rif Damascus, Dara'a, and Idlib governorates: displacement on a scale never seen before during the conflict. War crimes were committed during most of these battles, according to the Commission of Inquiry.⁴¹

Russia plan

In July 2018 Russia presented a plan to return "up to 1.7 million refugees" in the coming months.⁴² Russian diplomats travelled to Jordan and Lebanon to discuss the plan, which involved setting up a refugee centre in Syria in conjunction with the Syrian Government.

The UN High Commission for Refugees does not consider that the [conditions it set out in February for supporting a return programme](#) are met so it does not support the Russian plan.

Commentators have suggested that the scale of the planned return programme made it unrealistic, while interviews with refugees suggested that many were suspicious of the plan and did not trust either Russia or the Syrian Government.⁴³

⁴⁰ [Final statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria, Sochi](#), July 30-31, 2018

⁴¹ [Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 9 August 2018

⁴² Allaa Barrii, 'Coming home to Syria', *World Today*, October/November 2018

⁴³ '[Assad Needs the U.N.'s Help for Refugees to Return Safely](#)', *NewsDeeply*, 16 August 2018

Demographic engineering?

The Assad Government's response to its lack of legitimacy and the consequent threat of continued instability seems to be to try to change the demographic balance in Syria. Before the war, the Sunni Arab population was in the majority, at about 60%,⁴⁴ while other groups, including Alawites, Kurds and Christians, made up the rest.

The Syrian Government has started to filter out people it views as a threat from Syrian refugees and those displaced inside the country, and prevent them from returning to their homes. Most refugees are Sunnis who oppose the Government, because the Government has attacked those areas, particularly the outskirts of large towns, where opposition has been concentrated.

Filtering people out

The Syrian authorities refused entry to men of fighting age among refugees who were due to return from Lebanon, and only 200 of a planned 3,000 refugees went home.⁴⁵

Internally displaced people are targeted too. When the Government retook Eastern Ghouta in April 2018, residents were offered a choice between fleeing and Government protection. Analysts say that "Government protection" amounts to internment, until security clearance is granted, which is an indefinite process.

A list of 1.5 million Syrians allegedly being sought by various security branches of the Syrian Government was recently released on the internet.⁴⁶

Housing law

A law passed in April 2018 underpins the strategy. It provides for the Government to designate certain areas for reconstruction. Local authorities would then have a limited time to produce a list of property owners in the area. Owners not included on the list have a year to provide documentary evidence of ownership, otherwise their property is forfeited to the State.

In practice, analysts say that it will be nigh on impossible for refugees to prove their ownership of property and many are likely to be dispossessed..

Reports suggest that the demographic and power balance has already shifted in cities recaptured by the Syrian Government: "Homs, like all of the cities recaptured by the government, now belongs mostly to Syria's victorious minorities: Christians, Shias and Alawites."⁴⁷ The Government has already distributed thousands of empty homes to Shiite militiamen

"Homs belongs to the victorious minorities"

⁴⁴ Pierre Beckouche (Ed.), *Europe's Mediterranean Neighbourhood, An Integrated Geography*, 2017

⁴⁵ David Gardner, '[Russia launches a diplomatic offensive on rebuilding Syria](#)', *Financial Times*, 21 August 2018

⁴⁶ '[Check your name in Syrian regime's wanted list: 1.5 million people wanted](#)', *Zaman al-Wasl*, 16 March 2018

⁴⁷ '[How a victorious Bashar al-Assad is changing Syria](#)', *Economist*, 30 June 2018

and the Shiite quarter in Damascus has expanded into formerly Sunni and Jewish areas.⁴⁸

Syria is still likely to have a Sunni majority, but a smaller and less hostile one, according to one analyst:

The cities may be a bit smaller than before, but they will be reliably regime-friendly. The country as a whole will still have a Sunni majority, but probably a less overwhelming one, and the most hostile elements will be living in exile. It is demographic engineering on a very large scale, and nobody can stop it.⁴⁹

Effect on Lebanon

Meanwhile, if Sunni refugees stay in Lebanon, the resulting demographic shift there could upset that country's delicate political scene, resulting in violence between Sunnis and Shiites. Damascus could also intentionally destabilise Lebanon, paving the way for renewed Syrian dominance.⁵⁰

4.5 Reconstruction

Costs too high for Russia and Iran

Staffan de Mistura has estimated the cost of reconstruction at some \$250 billion, although some estimates go far higher. Syrian GDP shrank by more than 70% from 2010 to 2017, according to estimate;⁵¹ while more than a quarter of the housing stock had already been damaged or destroyed.⁵² Since then much more destruction has taken place. The external help needed to rebuild the country will be enormous – bigger than either Russia or Iran want to provide.

The effort has not really begun yet, but it is already entangled in political struggles.

Russia and Syria argue that refugees cannot return until reconstruction has begun to provide something for them to return to.

Western position

The US, EU and its member states, and allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey are the largest contributors of humanitarian assistance, and do not want to start contributing to reconstruction until political process is underway, providing the refugees with a political environment they can return to. Their representatives met on 22 September 2017 and set out their conditions for reconstruction support:

⁴⁸ [‘Assad’s Law 10: Reshaping Syria’s Demographics’](#), Washington Institute, 17 September 2018

⁴⁹ Gwynne Dyer, [‘Changing Syria’s demography’](#), *Hürriyet*, 17 July 2018

⁵⁰ [‘The New Reality in Syria Constitutes an Existential Threat to Lebanon’](#), *Washington Institute*, 27 July 2018

⁵¹ [CIA World Fact Book Syria](#)

⁵² [The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria](#), World Bank, 2017

24 Idlib and the prospects for Syria

Recovery and reconstruction support for Syria hinges on a credible political process leading to a genuine political transition that can be supported by a majority of the Syrian people.⁵³

“Credible political process”

In April 2018 the US House of Representatives passed a bipartisan Bill to “keep taxpayer dollars out of the hands of the murderous Assad regime and its proxies”.⁵⁴

US and EU sanctions against Syria are another obstacle to companies getting involved in reconstruction.

⁵³ [Joint statement from the ministerial discussion on Syria](#), FCO, 22 September 2017

⁵⁴ [‘No Assistance for Assad’](#), House Foreign Affairs Committee Press Release 24 April 2018

5. Humanitarian situation

According to the UN's humanitarian needs overview, 13.1 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.1 million people are internally displaced and 6.5 million people are food insecure. There are nearly 3 million people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

Outside Syria there are more than 5.6 million refugees, more than half of them children. Turkey hosts the most refugees, with some 3.6 million, while more than a million are in Lebanon, meaning that almost every fourth person in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee. Most of these people live in poverty, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon.

The World Food Programme fed 2.92 million people in August 2018.⁵⁵

In September 2018, the [UN High Commission for Refugees \(UNHCR\) warned](#) that a looming shortfall in funding was increasingly troubling – the agency needs about \$270 million to make sure that the most vulnerable refugees and internally displaced people get essential protection, particularly in view of approaching winter. That help includes things like child immunisation.

UK aid

The UK's Department for International Development is spending significant sums in Syria and Turkey on the Syrian crisis:

DFID budget Syria and Turkey

	Syria	Turkey	Total
Planned budget for 2018/19	£130m	£150m	£280m
Planned budget for 2019/20	£110m	£140m	£250m

[Source: DFID Syria \(including Turkey\)](#)

Three quarters of 2018/19 Syria budget is allocated to humanitarian assistance, aimed at helping with the immediate crisis for Syrians. The rest is spent largely on human development, which includes longer-term projects. Total UK humanitarian aid reached its highest ever level in 2016, partly as a result of the crisis in Syria.⁵⁶

Syria pushes UK humanitarian aid to highest ever level

The UK has made special preparations for the event of an attack on Idlib, as set out in answer to a Parliamentary Question in September 2018:

The UK is supporting refugees and host communities in Turkey through EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT). The FRIT is supporting refugees and host communities by building schools, providing health services and social welfare payments for the most

⁵⁵ WFP [Syria Situation Report #8](#), August 2018

⁵⁶ For more on UK aid, see the Commons Briefing Paper [UK aid: frequently asked questions](#), May 2018

vulnerable refugees, to alleviate pressure on Turkish communities hosting refugees. The UK committed €328 million to the FRIT in 2016, as well as an additional €155 million in 2018.

The UK is already supporting those living in Northwest Syria, and has boosted this support in preparation for a regime offensive in the region. On 13 September, DFID announced additional aid funding of up to £42 million for Northern Syria. This money will help to provide Syrians affected by a regime military offensive with shelter, clean water and sanitation, mental health services, and support of health workers and facilities.⁵⁷

Although humanitarian relief has been stepped up, the UK has ended some of its support to the Syrian opposition. The Access to Justice and Community Service programme, funded through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, closed at the end of September.⁵⁸ The programme used to support the Free Syrian Police, but the conditions on the ground were making it too difficult to ensure that funding was not diverted to terrorist organisations. One commentator suggested that the scheme's closure symbolised acceptance that the Syrian opposition is facing defeat.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ [Written question - HL10262](#), 19 September 2018

⁵⁸ [HC Written question – 156387](#), 4 July 2018

⁵⁹ ['Britain to axe funding for scheme supporting Syrian opposition,'](#) *Guardian*, 20 August 2018

6. Outlook

6.1 End of the civil war phase in sight

The immediate fall of Idlib and an accompanying human disaster seem to have been averted for now, as long as the understanding between Russia and Turkey holds. Most observers think that Idlib will eventually come under control of the Syrian Government and at that point the civil war phase of Syria's conflict will largely be over.

In another sign that the Assad government is expected to survive, the Democratic Union Party, the political wing of the US-backed Kurdish YPG forces, held talks with the Syrian Government in August, aiming to retain some autonomy for the territory they hold in the north of the country.

Their contacts with Damascus may not be welcomed by the US, which still has a military presence linked to the Kurdish forces in the east of Syria, but analysts say the Administration can live with it as long as US interests – no return of ISIS and contained Iranian presence in Syria – are protected.⁶⁰

The Russo-Turkish agreement over Idlib may be a good sign, in that Moscow has influence over Damascus while Ankara is close to at least part of the opposition. The two working together might offer the best chance of progress towards a political compromise. The first step towards that would for Turkey be to deal with Tahrir al-Sham, something that Dmitri Trenin calls the "heavy lifting".⁶¹

6.2 Obstacles to a lasting peace

History of oppression

Apart from the immediate problem of Tahrir al-Sham, there remain fundamental obstacles to the legitimacy of the Syrian Government, rooted partly in demography; Syria has been suppressing dissent for decades. The incumbent's father, Hafez al-Assad, killed perhaps 30,000 in Hama 1982 in his campaign to suppress Sunni Islamist opposition to his rule.

Bashar's atrocities

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is a group based in London that is hostile to the Syrian Government and documents casualties. SOHR plausibly says that the Syrian Government is responsible for far more deaths than any other actor in the conflict. The SOHR also estimates that the Government has tortured tens of thousands of Syrians to death.⁶² Human Rights Watch says:

⁶⁰ ['Kurds hold Syria territory talks with Damascus'](#), *Financial Times*, 14 August 2018

⁶¹ ['What Are the Long-term Implications for Syria of the Russian-Turkish Alignment in the Country?'](#), *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 27 September 2018

⁶² [About 522 thousand people were killed in 90 months since the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011](#), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 13 September 2018

With Russia and Iran's support, the Syrian government has conducted deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, withheld humanitarian aid, employed starvation as war tactic, and forcibly displaced Syrians in contravention of international law. The Syrian government's practices of torture and ill-treatment in detention and enforced disappearances continue.⁶³

Syrian officials remain deeply corrupt, too, with security forces installing checkpoints along the country's main roads, where travellers are forced to pay bribes. More direct methods are reportedly used:

Whether in Eastern Ghouta and Yarmouk near Damascus or in Daraa to the south, wherever the army reclaimed control, soldiers have taken what they can, including refrigerators, freezers, microwaves and fans. Air-conditioning units are pulled out and taken away on hand carts or pickups.⁶⁴

Refrigerators,
freezers,
microwaves and
fans...

Continued instability?

For many Syrians, the end of the full-blown war will not in itself bestow legitimacy on the Government in Damascus. The Government only survived thanks to Iranian and Russian intervention, and even if Iran and Russia continue their support, it could struggle to hold all of its territory and suppress anti-government violence.

The outlook for regional stability is therefore uncertain; extremism could thrive. Commentators for the Brookings Institution argue that ISIS could re-emerge:

Assad's approach to retaking territory and the regime's post-capture governance fail to accommodate grievances of the population or address conditions that sparked mass protests in 2011, setting conditions that are favorable to the resurgence of groups such as ISIS.⁶⁵

It remains to be seen how much the Government's demographic engineering will succeed in minimising opposition to Assad rule.

Even with a subdued resistance to the Government, the outlook is clouded: sustained Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Syria presents a clear risk of direct confrontation between Israel and Iran.

6.3 Waning Western influence

France, the UK and the US issued a joint statement on 21 August warning the Syrian Government not to use chemical weapons:

Our position on the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons is unchanged. As we have demonstrated, we will respond appropriately to any further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, which has had such devastating humanitarian consequences for the Syrian population.⁶⁶

⁶³ [Syria: Events of 2017](#), Human Rights Watch, 2018

⁶⁴ ['Syria's Uncertain Future under Bashar Assad'](#), *Spiegel Online*, 16 April 2018

⁶⁵ Ranj Alaaldin, Jason Fritz, Steven Heydemann, Bruce Jones and Michale O'Hanlon, [10-degree shift in Syria strategy](#), Brookings Institution, September 2018

⁶⁶ [Chemical weapons attack in Syria: US, UK and France joint statement](#), 21 August 2018

Critics might say that barrel bombs have inflicted far more suffering on the Syrian population, horrifying though chemical weapons are. There has not been a similar threat of military action in the event of devastating conventional attacks against Idlib, even though some policy experts recommend that.⁶⁷ Western influence is correspondingly weak.

The International Crisis Group called for a clear commitment from the US to maintain its support for the YPG/SDF in seeking a negotiated settlement between the Syrian Government, Turkey and Russia.⁶⁸

Reconstruction aid as a lever?

The group also says that Western countries should make clear to Russia that a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib would mean that they would not work with Russia on reconstruction or re-engage with the Syrian Government.⁶⁹

Sam Heller argued in 2017 that the West should not pay for reconstruction at all, as it would result in no leverage to ensure “genuine political transition”.⁷⁰ Assad has already engineered the legal framework to favour the Government and its supporters, and channels humanitarian aid in the same way. He argued that it would be better to support Syrian refugees outside the country, particularly in the region. Other commentators have argued that reconstruction will go on with or without Western participation.

The French Ambassador to the United Nations said:

How to better help the Syrian populations in need without consolidating Assad’s power is a difficult equation, but it is the narrow path we must find.⁷¹

⁶⁷ See for example Ranj Alaaldin, Jason Fritz, Steven Heydemann, Bruce Jones and Michale O’Hanlon, [A 10-degree shift in Syria](#) strategy, Brookings Institution, September 2018

⁶⁸ [Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria’s North East](#), International Crisis Group, 5 September 2018

⁶⁹ [Saving Idlib from Destruction](#), International Crisis Group, 3 September 2018

⁷⁰ Sam Heller, [“Don’t Fund Syria’s Reconstruction: The West Has Little Leverage and Little to Gain”](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 4 October 2017

⁷¹ [‘Syria’s Uncertain Future under Bashar Assad’](#), *Spiegel Online*, 16 August 2018

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