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THE SITUATION IN SYRIA: AN UPDATE

Revised Draft Report

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Until this document has been adopted by the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group, it only represents the views of the Rapporteur.

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I. INTRODUCTION: A SIGNIFICANTLY ALTERED BATTLEFIELD

1. The tragic and bloody civil war in Syria has, since its inception, exposed many of the fundamental fault lines dividing that region and threatening its stability. Those fault lines have global implications as well, and, in some respects, mirror rivalries that are shaping contemporary international politics. Precisely for that reason, it would not be accurate to characterise this conflict simply as a civil war. Rather, it has become something of a “great game” in which both regional and external powers, as well as non-state actors, hold high stakes.

2. But it is a great game that has also had terrible humanitarian consequences which have spilt into neighbouring countries, the broader region and beyond to Europe. A horrific refugee crisis that compelled millions to flee their homes is the most obvious expression of the transnational humanitarian consequences of this war. Since March 2011 more than half a million people have been killed, more than a million have been injured and roughly 12 million people (half the country’s pre-war population) have been forced from their homes.

3. The mass movement of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has imposed enormous financial and social burdens on several regional countries including Jordan and Lebanon. While Turkey is far larger than these two countries, it too has made enormous sacrifices to accommodate more than 3.6 million desperate people fleeing the conflict. The refugee crisis that became a contentious issue between the EU and Turkey and a highly divisive matter in European domestic politics is yet another expression of how this conflict has ramified into unforeseen arenas of international politics while fomenting new divisions along international, partisan, sectarian, ethnic and class lines.

4. But the news is not all bad and there have been signs of vital cooperation arising out of this crisis. The EU-Turkey agreement reached by the EU Member States and Turkey on 18 March 2016 laid the foundation for cooperation in controlling irregular migration. Irregular crossings in the Aegean Sea have since decreased dramatically. That agreement effectively communicated to human smugglers that they can no longer conduct their illicit operations in the Aegean Sea. It also provided legal and controlled means for refugees to enter Europe. It is worth noting that Turkey has spent almost USD 40 billion (including municipalities and Turkish NGOs) to provide support for Syrian refugees and migrants. The EU and member countries have mobilised EUR17 billion for humanitarian, stabilisation and resilience support to Syrians inside the country and in neighbouring countries. This includes more than EUR 2 billion for 2019 and EUR 560 million for 2020 and beyond pledged by the EU and its Member States at the Brussels conference held in March 2019. EU humanitarian assistance has supported emergency medical treatment, healthcare, psycho-social support, protection of children and vulnerable people, food, safe drinking water, essential items, and shelters (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, Fact Sheet). Another essential component of the Agreement is EU’s promised contribution of EUR 3+3 billion for Syrians in Turkey. Out of this amount, EUR 3 billion has been contracted and expected to be disbursed to various institutions and NGOs. Turkey expects the remaining part to be disbursed as soon as possible and the implementation to be speeded up. As addressing the needs of Syrians is quite a heavy burden for a single country to carry, it is essential that Turkey receives more international assistance for delivering a sufficient response to dire requirements of the Syrians in the most efficient way.

5. It is also important to consider the ways in which this war has created opportunities for extremist terrorist organisations to fill the vacuum created by collapsing state authority. These groups, and Daesh in particular, have posed a serious threat to regional and indeed to global security. One of the central features of this conflict has been that extremist terrorist groups operating in the south and west of the country ultimately failed to win the loyalty of the population. Their fanaticism and horrific violence helped fracture the opposition to Assad and made it all the more difficult for governments opposed to that regime to identify and support viable alternatives. Their presence also prompted a US-led coalition to take active measures to challenge the control Daesh exercised over parts of Syria and Iraq.

6. The good news is that Daesh controls almost none of the Syrian and Iraqi territory it once occupied. The bad news, of course, is that a despotic regime remains in place and Daesh itself has not been defeated in the broader sense and still has the potential of reinventing itself. Moreover, the sheer violence Daesh committed against those it was seeking to woo has opened an opportunity for al-Qaeda which has recently unrolled a campaign to market itself as the moderate extremist option dedicated to directing its attacks only against non-Sunnis (NATO PA, 2018). It is important to point out here that Turkey has always been concerned about the empowerment of the Democratic Union Party's People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG) in the north of the country. It has designated the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation representing the Syrian branch of the PKK and argued that it poses a grave threat to its national security and regional stability. The intense negotiations between the United States and Turkey have resulted in the establishment of the safe zone between Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn followed by the Operation Peace Spring launched by Turkey on 9 October 2019.

7. The situation on the ground in Syria has changed dramatically over the past five years. The Russian and Iranian interventions in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad have proven decisive, by almost any measure, at least in the southern part of the country. The Syrian state itself has displayed a degree of resilience that initially surprised many and compelled several countries to revisit their strategies with regard to the region and to that country. Russia has played an instrumental role in this regard and is emerging from the conflict as a key protagonist in the region (IISS, 2019).

8. Whereas the Assad regime was clearly on its back foot in 2012, it has subsequently managed to retake a significant swathe of lost territory while winning the loyalty of some domestic groups that had essentially been sitting on the fence. The fractured nature of the opposition, the lack of unified international support and the prominent role played by extremists in it has had the effect of driving elements of Syrian society back into the arms of Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, Daesh has seen its area of control diminish significantly over the past two years. On 23 March 2019, the PYD/YPG dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) drove out the group's last militants from their stronghold of Baghouz, thereby proclaiming Daesh's territorial defeat. But that has hardly meant that Daesh has disappeared. Rather it has begun to recast itself to better conduct insurgency operations.

9. There are few analysts today prepared to argue that any of the domestic forces still fighting the regime are positioned to challenge its pre-eminence, although pockets of resistance are still evident. The Assad regime does not control parts of the country along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, and these regions are now drawing the lion's share of international attention (see below). But in the south, Syrian regime forces or military groups loyal or allied to it have recaptured large tracts of the territory once under the control of opposition groups. Assad has used these battlefield successes to take on opposition groups throughout the country. However, resistance in southern Syria against the regime is still evident. It is worth mentioning that the regime can hardly operate on the ground without the heavy military support of Russia and the active involvement of Shiite militia backed by Iran.

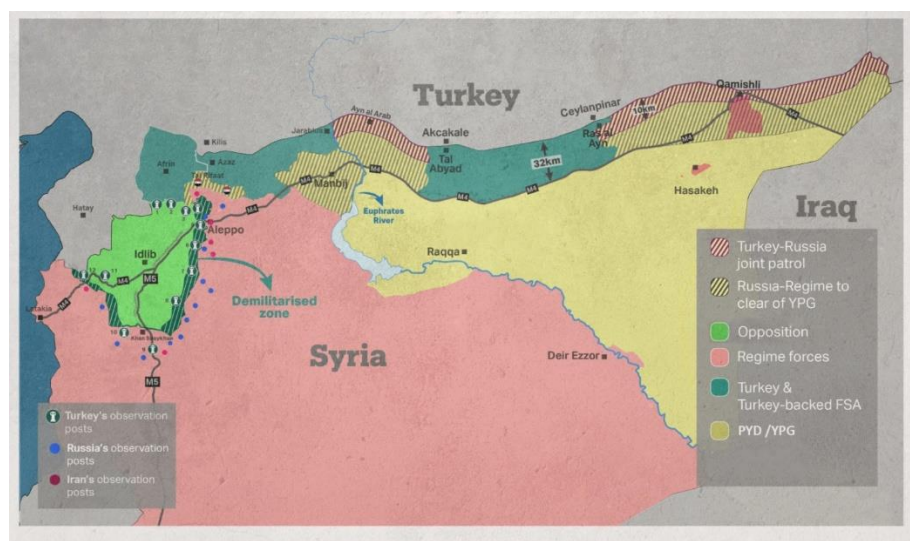
10. In the region east of Damascus known as Eastern Ghouta, the Syrian army supported by Russian military police patrols recaptured an opposition-held enclave. In Daraa, Syrian regime forces working with their Russian allies launched an offensive against opposition groups in the territory. This resulted in the capture of an array of towns in the southern provinces of Quneitra and Daraa in the Golan Heights. These forces then moved toward the demilitarised zone that had been patrolled by UN troops. By July 2018, all of Daraa province has been recaptured from opposition groups. This offensive included bombing raids that drove an estimated 160,000 Syrians from their homes.

11. The northwest province of Idlib has remained a final bastion for opposition forces. The Syrian regime has launched an offensive with Russian air support south of the de-escalation zone. Although the justification for the attacks was eliminating terrorists, it is primarily the civilians and the civilian infrastructure which have been indiscriminately targeted. This caused a strong international reaction and caused the establishment of an Inquiry Commission by the UN Secretary General in September. Moreover, Turkish observation posts and military convoys have also been targeted. This poses serious risks to the nearly 3 million people living in the region, many of whom are refugees from other parts of the country. The United States charged the Assad regime for renewing its use of chemical

weapons against the Syrian people, after an alleged chlorine attack on May 19th. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, at least 606 civilians have perished in the fighting since the beginning of the onslaught. The United Nations, which warned of a humanitarian catastrophe, said the death toll has surpassed 1,000. The UN estimates that the attack has already triggered more than 700,000 displacements out of which at least 300,000 toward the Turkish border. Aid organisations such as Amnesty International have denounced deliberate targeting of schools and hospitals. At least 45 of them have had to suspend their operations. A unilateral ceasefire has been in place since 31 August and relative calm on the ground has been maintained. It is crucial for Turkey to preserve the status of Idlib and avoid yet another humanitarian catastrophe and the collapse of the political process. The efforts for the full implementation of Sochi Memorandum dated 17 September 2018 are underway between Turkey and Russia.

12. As suggested above, one of the most important developments in Syria over the past two years has been the very significant reduction of territory control by Daesh. Syrian Democratic Forces, for example, captured Raqqa in October 2017, the command centre for Daesh in Syria since 2014. That fight followed on the heels of the Battle of Mosul, a military campaign led by Combined Joint Task Force *Operation Inherent Resolve* (CJTF-OIR) of the US-led international coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The CJTF-OIR was set up by US Central Command in December 2014 following the significant territorial expansion of Daesh-ISIL in Iraq in June 2014. The goal of *Operation Inherent Resolve* has been to root out Daesh from the largest cities of Syria. The Command centre is located at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait. Airstrikes on targets in Syria have been conducted by forces from the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. Significant efforts have been made to inform the Russian forces of these strikes to prevent incidents in the air space above Syria.

13. For its part, Turkey has conducted two major counterterrorism operations on Syrian territory. The first of these was *Operation Euphrates Shield* which primarily focused on countering the threat from Daesh. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) backed by Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and Coalition Air Forces launched *Operation Euphrates Shield* based on the self-defence clause outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter. *Operation Euphrates Shield* helped push Daesh out of a 2,015 square kilometres area containing 243 residential areas of various sizes. This virtually created a “terror-free safe zone” and effectively eliminated Daesh’s only land access to the NATO borders. After cutting Daesh’s border contact with Turkey, Europe and NATO, Turkey turned to address threats from the PKK and its Syrian branch PYD/YPG (Yesiltas, Seren and Ozcelik, 2017). With the *Operation Olive Branch*, in less than two months, Turkish Armed Forces and Free Syrian Army forces cleared another 2,000 square kilometres of land, including Afrin, from PKK’s Syria affiliate PYD/YPG and Daesh.



II. THE CURRENT DIPLOMATIC CRISIS OVER SYRIA

14. In December 2018, after a telephone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Trump tweeted: “We have defeated Daesh in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency.” He then ordered the Pentagon to pull the remaining 2,000 US troops out of Syria immediately—a decision that directly led to the resignations both of Defence Secretary James Mattis and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to counter ISIL, Brett McGurk (Myers). There was widespread opposition to President Trump’s decision to rapidly withdraw US troops from Syria both in Washington and in the region. Turkey, however, supported the US decision and offered to coordinate the withdrawal of the US forces. Turkey, which is a leading member of anti-Daesh Coalition, has reaffirmed its commitment to work with the United States and other NATO Allies to go after remaining Daesh elements that still pose a regional security threat. In early January, national security advisor John R. Bolton seemed to backtrack from President Trump’s early withdrawal announcement, telling journalists that US forces would indeed remain in Syria until all remnants of Daesh were defeated and Turkey provided guarantees that it would not strike the SDF, with which the United States has been working in Syria. Even though President Trump subsequently announced that the U.S. troops would remain deployed in the region, his apparent preference for withdrawal has injected a degree of uncertainty into the situation and this has compelled Turkey, the al-Assad regime, Iran and Russia to readjust their positions (International Crisis Group).

15. Concerned elements in the US security community worry about ceding the field to extremists but the decision has left unsolved tensions with Turkey over US support for the YPG which Turkey identifies as a terrorist organisation inextricably linked to the PKK. Some want the United States to pressure the YPG to both distance itself from the PKK and reduce its presence in the region. Turkey itself does not want any arrangement that would legitimise YPG governance in the North East of the country and it will actively resist any effort to achieve this. Turkey considered PYD/YPG as a serious threat to its national security and Syria’s territorial integrity. It should be noted as well that the YPG is also burdened managing a huge detention facility holding captured Syrians and Daesh elements from Syria and foreign fighters (International Crisis Group).

16. Given that Daesh ideology poses a serious and ongoing threat to regional stability and international security, it is premature to claim that that terrorist organisation has been defeated by all means. Indeed, that group has planted the seeds for its own regeneration. The problem is that while the anti-Daesh coalition has achieved important battlefield victories in Iraq and Syria, the ideology continues to have an attractive power to those alienated from political and economic life in the region and beyond. This loosely constructed organisation is still claimed to have thousands of fighters placed around the region, most notably where state authority is weak. It is worth noting that al-Qaeda has quietly regrouped in recent years and is operating with a force of some 30,000 members.

17. A US Department of Defense Report issued in early August 2019 has suggested that Daesh has begun to reconsolidate its power in both Iraq and Syria after President Trump announced that Daesh has been defeated in Syria and began to draw down forces from the region. The report which was produced by the DoD Office of the Inspector General suggested that between April and June Daesh consolidated power in Iraq and began a resurgence in Syria (Higgins). That report suggested that Daesh has between 14 and 18 thousand members in Iraq and Syria, including roughly 3,000 foreign fighters. It is deploying social media for recruitment and fundraising and continues to carry out assassinations, suicide bombings and acts of intimidation and taxation even though it does not control territory as such. The US drawdown has made it more difficult to collect intelligence and track the situation at the huge Daesh holding camp in Al Hol where 70,000 people are currently residing, 11,000 of whom are family members of Daesh fighters and as many as 45,000 could be Daesh sympathizer according to UN estimate (Higgins). This has meant that Daesh continues to exercise leverage in Syria and is positioned to spread its ideology in that war-torn country (Myers).

18. Because of these military defeats, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the late leader of Daesh instructed followers not to travel to Syria but instead to head to other centres of activity in North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. This change of tactics sought to ensure the longevity for the group and has

resulted in a new focus on conducting attacks in the West. The Manchester concert bombing, for example, was planned neither in Iraq nor in Syria but rather in the United Kingdom and possibly Libya. The organisation is thus decentralising and developing a new form and methods to compensate for the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq. Of the group's 35-40,000 fighters from 120 different countries, some 15,000 have fled Syria and Iraq with many relocating to hot spots like Sudan or repatriating to their home countries, including many who have returned to Europe.

19. The issue of wives and children of militants is proving particularly pressing. The Al-Hol camp, where women and children were sent during the military operation in Baghouz, is emerging as an extremist powder keg. Some 10,000 foreign women and children are kept in a closely monitored enclosure and the number of child deaths largely due to treatable conditions like malnutrition and pneumonia tripled between March and September 2019 (Yee). Most of the residents of the camp continue to express loyalty to Daesh's ideology and there are concerns among some security elements that their radicalisation poses a long-term security threat. The United States has called on the countries of origin of these people to repatriate them, but this is highly controversial. Several European governments have expressed their reluctance to do so and worry that they may not have sufficient evidence to carry out trials but still do not want potential terrorists to go free on their territories. European governments have thus generally adopted a case by case approach. France, for instance, has repatriated six children of fighters but refuses to bring combatants back, whereas the United Kingdom has stripped some Daesh militants of their citizenship. Recently, in the first such ruling against the government, a German court decided that the state should repatriate the wife and three children of a suspected fighter from Syria. Only Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have agreed to repatriate a large number of their citizens. A series of attempted attacks on civil airlines, some of which have been successful, illustrate the degree to which the group remains active and exceedingly dangerous.

20. Like Daesh, al-Qaeda has sought to make itself impervious to decapitation and has also decentralised its operations and planning centres. It has adapted in other ways as well and, for example, has begun to refrain from and criticise terrorist attacks targeting Muslims – a policy that, at least in comparison to Daesh, some might characterise rather absurdly as “moderate extremism”. This is clearly a play to win back support from political extremists who are nonetheless alienated by the ultra-violent tactics of Daesh (NATO PA, 2018).

21. Turkish President Erdogan initially endorsed President Trump's announcement that US forces should withdraw from Syria, although he also argued that this must be planned carefully and coordinated with key partners. He noted that Turkey is the only country with the power and commitment to perform the task of replacing US forces in that region of Syria. It should be noted that Turkey was the first country to deploy ground combat troops to fight against Daesh in Syria in an operation that severed the group's access to NATO borders and impeded its ability to carry out terror attacks in Turkey and Europe. Turkish troops along with fighters from the Free Syrian Army had engaged in door to door fighting to root out insurgents in Al-Bab, which until then, had been a stronghold of Daesh. Because it did not engage in aerial bombing, that city's infrastructure was left intact. Turkish troops also liberated the small town of Dabiq which is also the name of the famous Daesh propaganda magazine, and the area where Daesh claimed it would conduct its so-called Armageddon war.

22. Turkey's views on developments along the northern borderlands of Syria have been consistent and are very much conditioned by its concern both for the territorial integrity of Syria and security along its border. The Erdogan government strongly objected to the Trump Administration's 2017 decision to provide weapons to the PYD/YPG in North of Syria and has long characterised these forces as simply an extension of the PKK, which the United States and many other countries have designated as a terrorist organisation. Turkey has been very concerned that ceding this region to PYD/YPG control would have highly adverse implications for Turkish security and worries about the establishment of any enclave there would provide sanctuary for PKK terrorists from Turkey and Iraq. Turkey has also been concerned that a continued US presence in Syria would provide cover for the SDF and the PYD/YPG to build a kind of proto-state which would invariably conflict with Turkey's

vision for regional stability (Stein, 2019). President Erdogan repeatedly told parliament that Turkey would never support any arrangement that protected the PYD/YPG (Chulov, 2019).

23. President Erdogan has also called for the creation of a stabilisation force in this particular region that would engage security forces from all parts of Syrian society including the Kurdish community. Turkish authorities, however, would not want to include fighters with links to terrorist organisations in any stabilisation force, nor for that matter would it agree to these fighters participating in popularly elected local councils, which President Erdogan says Turkey will help establish. He has promised that his country will work with friends and allies, including Russia, to stabilise the situation (Erdogan, 2019). But Ankara has clearly stated that it would not accept any arrangement that included or in any way legitimised the PYD/YPG, which is the dominant power in the SDF.

24. Iran is also factoring into geopolitical calculations over Syria. In September then National Security Advisor John Bolton told journalists that the United States would remain in Syria as long as Iranian forces were deployed in that country (Sanger et al., 2018). For its part, the Israeli government has long objected to Iran's presence in Syria and was apparently surprised by the sudden shift in US policy. Mr Bolton's restatement of US policy, linking the mission to the Iranian presence, aimed, in part, to reassure Israel. Ousting Iranian-led forces from Syria might remain the desired objective but achieving this would require significantly more US forces deployed in the region. If anything, President Trump seemed to be moving in the opposite direction by reaffirming his commitment to reduce the US military footprint in Syria.

25. President Trump has since confirmed his initial decision to pull US troops out of Syria, albeit at a slower pace than he had originally suggested. The policy path has thus been set. The key question now is what this means for Syria, Turkey, Russia and the broader Middle East. As the United States reduces its presence in Syria, Turkey is prepared to assume a more prominent position there. The government began to lay the diplomatic groundwork for a higher level of coordination with Russia. It also moved substantial military forces and assets along the Syrian border, both as an insurance policy and to signal its determination to prevent this region of Syria from obtaining any form of sovereign autonomy. In line with President Trump's plans to create a safe zone, Turkey started talks with the United States to detail the steps of the process through which Turkey aims to create a 30 km deep safe zone along 480 kilometres of borderline to prevent the PYD/YPG from operating along or near the Turkish border (Evans).

26. As Turkey's discussions and following agreements with the U.S. on the establishment of a safe zone with a view to sustaining the fight against Daesh and PYD/YPG have remained inconclusive and dysfunctional; Ankara stating that its expectations and sensitivities regarding the PYD/YPG threat were brought to the attention of Allies, especially the US, emphasised that, if necessary, it would not hesitate to use its right of self-defence stemming from international law. Turkey illustrated that the commitments of the US military authorities have not been fulfilled and during the course of the safe zone talks, the US security bureaucracy has intensified its engagement with PYD/YPG. Against this backdrop, on 9 October 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces have launched Operation *Peace Spring*. Turkey highlighted the objective of this operation as twofold: (i) to ensure its border security and (ii) to neutralise terrorists in the region. Turkey further emphasised that it remains committed to the territorial integrity of Syria.

27. Most recently, Turkey's Operation *Peace Spring* and withdrawal of US forces from Northern Syria has been widely discussed in the United States and the EU. President Trump's decision to pull American troops out of north-eastern Syria and Turkey's ensuing decision to move its forces into the borderlands have proven divisive in Washington. That decision immediately sparked pointed criticism in the Congress. For some in Congress, the President's decision has reduced American leverage in the region, ceded influence to Russia, Iran and Syria and unnecessarily raised concerns about US credibility. Accordingly, on 16 October the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning the withdrawal. It stated that "an abrupt withdrawal of United States military personnel from certain parts of Northeast Syria is beneficial to adversaries of the United States

government, including Syria, Iran, and Russia" (US Congress).

28. There is also a sense among analysts and some members of Congress that the decision potentially diminishes U.S. influence in the broader Middle East and could lead other regional actors to loosen ties with the United States and engage more deeply with rival powers, most notably, Russia (Gardner). In that context, it is interesting that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi led a Congressional delegation to both Jordan and Afghanistan after President Trump's decision was announced to convey that Congress remains committed to the security of both countries (Hendrix).

29. Although there has thus been a kind of consensus in the US strategic community that the manner in which the US forces withdrew from Syria was not ideal, there is a discussion over whether doing so would ultimately have been inevitable. Firstly, a significant share of President Trump's political supporters and leading political analysts endorse the withdrawal and have applauded his decision. Moreover, some foreign policy specialists across the political spectrum suggest that eventually, the United States would have had to withdraw from its exposed position in north-eastern Syria. This perspective is not rooted in isolationist logic, but rather a recognition that the United States needs to husband its resources and avoid placing itself in precarious positions without clear long-term goals and the political will to commit resources indefinitely.

30. Aaron David Miller, Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky have laid out this argument in a recent article which suggested that the United States had only maintained a limited objective in supporting SDF. That objective was to deprive Daesh of the territory it controlled in Syria. It was never intended to promote or defend an SDF controlled autonomous Kurdish region in north-eastern Syria, which, they maintain, would be an unrealistic and confused goal. Finally, oscillations in US Syrian policies over the last decade demonstrate that Syria is not a central US strategic priority. The United States has never committed substantial troop levels to the Syrian battlefield and limited its military engagement there to the fight against Daesh. This is obviously not the case for Russia, Iran, and Turkey so there has been an asymmetry of interests among the key players and a disconnect between public expectations in the United States and the strategic calculations of the current and previous US administrations (Miller et al).

31. Europe's view on the current Syrian crisis differs in several important respects from that of the United States. European nations were caught unaware by President Trump's sudden announced withdrawal from northeast Syria (Borger et al). The announcement raised concerns in European capitals about the lack of United States consultation with friends and allied governments (Kirpatrick et. al). Some European governments also criticised Turkey's decision to move forces into the projected safe zone. The credibility issue is also concerning. French President Emmanuel Macron told reporters after a European Council summit that he considered "what has happened in the last few days (in northern Syria) weakens our credibility in the long term." He added, "I understood that we were together in NATO, that the U.S. and Turkey were in NATO [...] and I found out via a tweet that the U.S. had decided to withdraw their troops." (Erlanger).

32. In Operation *Chammal*, France has deployed troops into both Iraq and Syria to take on Daesh and has suffered several notable Daesh attacks on its own soil. France's Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly warned that "We are going to be extremely careful that this announced disengagement from the United States and a possible operation by Turkey does not create a dangerous [move] that diverts from the goal we all pursue – the fight against the Daesh/ISIL – which is dangerous for the local population." French authorities have warned that the United States withdrawal may compel France to leave the theatre as well and are now citing this series of events as clearly demonstrating why the EU risks falling into foreign policy irrelevance unless it is able to operate with greater cohesion and strength internationally (Irish).

33. The current crisis seems to be giving this view wider currency in Europe, but Europe still does not have a sufficiently integrated military structure, the requisite military capabilities or united foreign policy for that matter with which it could turn this aspiration into a reality (Burama). Europe is also concerned about the consolidation of Russian influence in the region and its growing leverage over

the Middle East.

34. The crisis has thus left Europe feeling isolated, exposed and lacking the leverage to shape events and defend its core security interests. For that reason, it has strengthened the case being made by President Macron and others in Europe for greater spending on European defence so that Europe is better positioned to defend its own interests on the global stage. But even this ambition is not universally shared in Europe (Erlanger). Besides, the EU's efforts should be carried forward in a closed manner including non-EU NATO Allies and in a complementary manner with NATO. It is also notable that Germany's Defence Minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who is also the leader of the ruling CDU, has called for the establishment of an international security zone in Syria in cooperation with European partners plus Turkey and Russia. However, this proposal did not get solid support at the meeting of NATO Defence ministers, that is, that proposal has elicited a great deal of attention in Germany but so far, has not resonated elsewhere in Europe. The proposal also became inapplicable as Turkey has agreed both with the United States, on 17 October, and with Russia for the establishment of the safe zone and the removal of PYD/YPG elements from the bordering region.

III. RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO SYRIA

35. For its part, Russia has been very focused on defending its ally in Damascus. But it must play a balancing game as it also wants to maintain a collaborative relationship with Turkey. Russia does not want to contend with the United States directly in the region and President Putin tellingly congratulated President Trump on his decision to pull US troops out of north-eastern Syria. The Kremlin saw this decision as providing an opening for Russia's broader ambitions in the region and beyond. Russia thus needs to balance its ambitions in Syria with its quest to build closer ties with Turkey. The memorandum of understanding between Russia and Turkey on 22 October 2019 has opened a new chapter in their relations in Syria and changed the dynamics on the ground in the east of Euphrates.

36. Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, which the country publicly defended as a "war against terrorism", has been perhaps the most significant reason al-Assad has managed to hold power in Syria (Simons, 2019). In fact, Russia has carried out very few sorties against Daesh and left this role to the US-led coalition. Instead, it focused on injecting new life into the nearly collapsed and globally discredited al-Assad regime. Moscow's support started with financial and diplomatic aid. It then sold military equipment to the regime at cost and ultimately deployed its own forces to carry out critical operations (Daher, 2018). The Kremlin also provided the regime with important diplomatic cover and, on several occasions, used its veto power at the UN Security Council to counter Security Council measures condemning al-Assad for the conduct of a war against his own people (Phillips, 2017).

37. In September 2015, when the Syrian regime seemed near the point of collapse, the Kremlin stepped up its assistance, ultimately deploying its own forces to Syria in what would later be understood as the key military turning point of the conflict. Since then, Moscow has demonstrated its military capacity to project power in the region with accurate missile strikes, sustained aircraft sorties, and a now proven capacity to conduct complex and decisive sealift operations (Borchshevskaya et al., 2018). Russia has also provided pivotal advisory support to the Syrian army on force restructuring and manoeuvre warfare. Since 2017, the Russians have slowly turned the leading role back over to the Syrian Arab Army, which is now planning and conducting key operations. In delivering the S-300 air-defence system to Damascus, Moscow further clarified its support for al-Assad and his Iranian allies operating in the field (Giustozzi, 2019). In short, the regime's success in reconquering territory would not have been possible without sustained Russian support, and this, in turn, has helped restore Russian leverage throughout the broader region.

38. Along these very lines, with the al-Assad regime ineluctably regaining control of Syrian territory, Russian advisors are encouraging it to reintegrate former opposition commanders back into Syrian society. Russia is also pushing for a final political resolution of the conflict that could help cement Moscow's status as a regional powerbroker. Moscow is looking to identify those compromises that might provide pillars for a broad agreement. Russia, for example, has helped establish de-escalation zones while encouraging the PYD/YPG and the Government of Turkey to create a security zone in northeast Syria. It has also sought to cultivate relations with the Gulf States while nonetheless working closely with their greatest nemesis, Iran. It turned a blind eye both to Iran's support for Hezbollah in Syria and to Israeli retaliation against Iran and its proxies in Syria (Gvosdev, 2019). This delicate balancing game has helped Russia cultivate the image of a peacemaker while it nevertheless doggedly pursues its narrow national interests, which, by any definition, is a testimony to its deft strategy with regard to the conflict (Giustozzi, 2019).

39. Indeed, Russia's approach to the Syrian conflict reflects its broader global grand strategy (Gvosdev, 2019). The Kremlin has sought to rebuild Russia's capacity to project power in the Eurasian space in order to safeguard its military, economic, and energy interests. By intervening in a region that is the leading alternative to Russian oil and gas, it is seeking to raise its leverage in Europe. It has also sought to cultivate the notion that other countries believe that Russian power can be instrumental to the defence of their own interests. The Kremlin's involvement in Syria is a case study in this regard. Through its role in the conflict, Russia has reinforced its image as a challenger to the West and an indispensable power to those who would challenge Western primacy (Omelicheva, 2019).

40. Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict has proven an invaluable training opportunity for the Russian military. It has allowed it to demonstrate its prowess, given it a permanent base for regional operations, and entrenched Syria's dependence on its trainers and weapons systems. It has also granted Moscow access to invaluable regional intelligence (Borshchevskaya, 2018). In addition to the Khmeimim airbase operated by Russia since 2015, Moscow and Damascus signed an agreement in 2017 allowing Russia to maintain its leased naval facility at the port of Tartus for 49 years. Russia has announced its intention to base 11 warships and nuclear submarines there (Sogoloff, 2017). It has thus enhanced its power-projection capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean and developed and deployed a credible anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capability that significantly complicates US and NATO military planning in the region (Borshchevskaya, 2019).

41. Russia also has important economic interests in Syria. Its energy companies have long sought a foothold in the Syrian energy sector (Borshchevskaya, 2018). But rather than seeking a direct share in the country's resources, these companies have actively invested in oil and gas infrastructure. Russia does not see Syria as a key supplier of oil and gas as such, but rather as an important potential energy hub that will play a role in directing energy supplies to the European market. Moscow thus holds a dual objective: expanding its political and military leverage in the eastern Mediterranean while exercising influence over those global oil and gas supplies on which the West, and Europe in particular, relies (Borshchevskaya, 2018). The more control it exercises, the more political leverage it will be able to exert over Europe.

42. Finally, Moscow's role in Syria, at least on the surface, fits within its broader counterterrorism policy. Between 2011 and 2015, an estimated 900-2,400 citizens of Russia travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight with extremist terrorist organisations. In 2015, Daesh set up a Russian affiliate, *Vilayat Kavkaz*, after most mid-level commanders of the Caucasus Emirate organisation defected to Daesh (Omelicheva, 2019). Although Russia's experience with this form of terrorism is not new, recent events, such as the bombing of a flight between Sharm El-Sheikh and Saint Petersburg in 2015 or the explosions two years later in the Saint Petersburg metro, have illustrated the security threat posed by these groups to Russia (Clarke, 2017).

43. Russia is concerned that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which grew out of the Nusra Front, a rebel group linked to al-Qaeda, has entrenched its power in the region. According to experts, the recent

Russian-backed offensive in Idlib Province has been driven by Moscow's impatience with the deteriorating situation in that region. Syrian rebels say Moscow has recently deployed ground forces in north-western Syria to fight alongside al-Assad's forces for the first time since the beginning of the offensive. Idlib province is crucial to Russia as it is close to its Latakia airbase. It also provides a valuable point of passage for trade flowing from Turkey to the Persian Gulf which would significantly strengthen the Syrian government's leverage were to regain control the region (Yee and Saad, 2019).

44. Four years after the beginning of its military intervention, Russia has achieved many of its key objectives. It has presented itself as the key peace broker by mediating between a wide range of actors. It has succeeded in maintaining al-Assad in power while entrenching its long-term military presence and economic access to the region. Russia has thus seized the opportunity presented by disarray in Syria to strengthen its status on the international stage.

IV. IRAN'S ROLE AND AMBITIONS IN SYRIA

45. Iran's objectives in the Syrian conflict have remained consistent, and it has ardently supported the al-Assad regime throughout. As early as 2012, Iran operated an air bridge to Damascus, which provided critical military supplies to al-Assad's regime (Gordon, 2012). Furthermore, it encouraged al-Assad to safeguard a strategic swathe of territory from Damascus northward and to sharpen its capabilities before attacking opposition strongholds – advice that proved highly useful to the regime (Phillips, 2018). Iran likely helped the Syrian regime expand its chemical-weapons arsenal and provided much-needed financial assistance, including a USD 4.6 billion loan in 2013 (Sadjapour, 2013). It is worth noting that the United States has concluded that Syria used chlorine gas in an attack against rebels in May 2019 and called this the latest use of chemical weapons by the al-Assad regime. This is part of a pattern. In April 2017 the United States bombed a Syrian air base after the US government determined that the Syrian regime had used the nerve agent sarin in an attack that killed 80 people. Another 40 people died in an April sarin or chlorine attack that led to US, UK and French attacks on Syrian chemical weapons storage facilities and military depots (Jakes, 2019).

46. Tehran has also deployed military forces to Syria, primarily the Revolutionary Guards' elite Quds Force. It first dispatched advisers to the al-Assad regime to help in the creation of an allegedly 50,000-strong Syrian paramilitary group, *Jaysh al-Sha'bi* (US Treasury Department, 2012). As the situation for al-Assad worsened, Iran gradually stepped up its military involvement, ultimately deploying several thousand Iranian troops to Syria. Iran dispatched the Quds Force as well as elements from Iran's conventional army, the Artesh – an unusual decision given that the Artesh usually manages the country's territorial defence (Bucala and Kagan, 2016). Iranian forces in Syria have taken on different roles, mostly by serving in advisory or supervision positions, with Shia militias forming the bulk of fighters and the core of Iran's military intervention. Iran also continues its relationship with the YPG. Over eight years of conflict there are no major clashes between Iranian-backed militias and the YPG. Moreover, Iranian-backed militias have tried to support the YPG in Afrin against the Operation Olive Branch.

47. Although estimates vary, approximately 20,000-30,000 foreign fighters have engaged in the Syrian conflict. Roughly 6,000 of these are Iranian supported Hezbollah fighters and advisers. In July, Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah announced the movement has reduced its forces in Syria as fighting declined. The other fighters are to a large extent Afghan, Iraqi, Lebanese or Pakistani Shia combatants who enrolled for financial or religious reasons. These militias, initiated, trained and funded by Iran, do not answer directly to the Syrian regime but rather to the Quds Force. In essence, this is a replication of the Hezbollah and *Hashd al-Sha'bi* model. Beyond their military activities, the militias are inculcated in Iranian ideological and political doctrines. This should help ensure that even if Tehran were to withdraw formally from the theatre, it would retain significant influence through these irregular forces and the ideas that they are promulgating (Ghaddar, 2018).

48. Iran has also pursued a range of religious and cultural goals in Syria and has exploited the mass movement of people to reinforce this effort. Iranian supported forces actively pushed Sunni communities and opponents of the regime out of the suburbs of Damascus and replaced them with pro-al-Assad groups. “Law No. 10”, issued in April 2018, reflects this broader strategy: it gives property owners 30 days to appear in person with real-estate documents to prove their claim to the property. Should they fail to comply or to provide the proper documents, they face expropriation. Given that many property owners fled the fighting, or, in some instances, face arrest or execution should they return, this law should be understood as providing the regime with a means to target its opponents and refugees with expropriation. Many of the expropriated belong to the Sunni community, and Shia allies of Iran and al-Assad have essentially seized their homes (Ghaddar, 2018). Legally, foreigners cannot take over the property of exiled Syrians, yet Iranian companies can own real estate in Syria if they participate in the reconstruction process (Fisk, 2018). According to Syrian records, more than 8,000 properties around Damascus now belong to non-Syrian Shia. Likewise, Iran has entrenched its influence in the south by compelling local fighters to relocate to opposition strongholds in northwest Syria (Ghaddar and Stroul, 2019).

49. Iran has also provided social, religious and economic services to selected communities in which its proxies are operating. In western Syria, it reportedly built Shia meeting halls, mosques, and schools, sometimes in locations where Sunni institutions once flourished. In the east and south, Iran has established an almost clientelist relationship with local tribes. It has also recruited young unemployed Sunnis for non-combat roles in its militias. Finally, Iran has created a network of Farsi-language schools that seek to further entrench its burgeoning influence in the country (Ghaddar and Stroul, 2019).

50. Iran has also signed an array of economic deals with the regime. By 2018, it had signed agreements related to mobile-phone licenses, phosphate mines, agricultural lands, and port infrastructure (Sinjab, 2018). In January 2019, Damascus and Tehran signed 11 additional agreements and memoranda of understanding covering a range of fields including economy, culture, education, infrastructure, investment, and housing (AFP, 2019).

51. Iran’s sustained and multifaceted involvement in Syria has helped it weave an ever-denser network of links in that country. Tehran’s primary objective, of course, has been to protect the al-Assad regime. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran’s close relationship with Syria has been a bulwark of its regional strategy. For Iranian leaders, Syria has proved a valued Arab ally in what they perceive as a fundamentally hostile region (Goodarzi, 2009). That an unfriendly government might replace the al-Assad regime represents Tehran’s strategic nightmare and would threaten its regional ambitions (Mohseni and Ahmadian, 2018). Iran has thus sacrificed treasure and lives to preserve its leverage and help ensure that a friendly state rules along its western flank (Phillips, 2018).

52. Iran has also framed this relationship as constituting an “axis of resistance” against Israel. Syria has offered Iran a land bridge through which it supplies equipment, resources and advisers to its Lebanese ally—Hezbollah (Sadjapour, 2013). From Iran’s perspective, the corridor linking Syria’s Alawite coastal regions with Hezbollah’s territories in Lebanon through Homs, the suburbs of Damascus, and al-Qalamoun is of central importance. By consolidating its access to Syria, Iran ensures its continued support for Hezbollah, thereby preserving its capacity to project power in the Levant (Mohseni and Ahmadian, 2018). According to some analysts, Iran’s expansion within Syria, both westward and southward, reflects a deeper ambition to move ever closer to the Golan Heights, something which some would see as posing a direct threat to Israel (Ghaddar, 2018; Yaari, 2018). Iranian activity here could reflect a broader effort to consolidate its regional leverage and deterrence capabilities – something that it might enhance if it moves assets closer to the Israeli border (Mohseni and Ahmadian, 2018).

53. Iran has thus dramatically expanded its influence over core decision making in Syria and has, reinforced its leverage by establishing two military bases in Syria, a missile facility in Baniyas, and a military compound in al-Kiswah, which Israel bombed in 2017 (Delory and Kasapoglu, 2018). Yet it

has also entrenched its power in a manner that does not undermine Russia's influence there. Iran has primarily invested in parallel institutions, leaving state structures more pervious to Kremlin influence (Ghaddar, 2018). Like Russia, Iran has largely achieved its primary objectives in Syria. The al-Assad regime seems to have consolidated its control over much of the country while Iran now enjoys an enhanced capacity to exercise regional influence (Smyth, 2018).

V. THE VIEW FROM ANKARA

54. The emerging security threats in Syria compelled Turkey to alter its approach over the course of the conflict. According to some analysts, the increasing reluctance of the United States to project force in the region has created a vacuum that regional powers, including Turkey, have felt compelled to fill (Phillips, 2017). When the Syrian war erupted in 2011, Turkey had little choice but to work to shape events (Manhoff, 2017). After several attempts to persuade al-Assad to cease the repression of his own people, and given his reluctance to implement significant reforms, Ankara moved to actively support the opposition in Syria. It also stepped up diplomatic efforts to build an international coalition to push out the al-Assad regime (Manhoff, 2017). Uniting the political opposition and building any kind of coalition willing to intervene militarily proved nearly impossible. Then-President Barack Obama, for example, was not willing to commit US forces, perhaps in light of his country's very difficult experience in Iraq. At the same time, Russia had begun to mobilise financial resources, diplomatic capital and military assets to bail out the al-Assad regime and was never genuinely challenged as it did so (Phillips, 2017).

55. Given the ever-more intractable nature of the Syrian conflict, the Turkish policy is focused on achieving three main goals. Paramount among these has been eliminating terrorist threats and preventing separatist agendas along its borders. The Syrian conflict has considerably empowered the People Protection's Units, the Syrian branch of the PKK that Ankara and many Allied countries consider a terrorist organisation, and which has been carrying out terrorist activities in Turkey and other countries for decades (Stein, 2018). Ankara has recognised the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation and considers PYD/YPG-controlled areas to be a threat to its national security (Zandee, 2019). US support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are, in turn, dominated by the PYD/YPG, has thus proven a source of tension between Ankara and Washington. The SDF have received weapons and military training from the United States and have leveraged that support to gain control of the north-eastern part of the Syrian territory, close to the Turkish border (Manhoff, 2017). Ankara now aims to block the SDF's territorial extension and prevent the formation of a permanent SDF-PYD/YPG-dominated authority along Ankara's border with Syria (Young, 2017).

56. Ankara stresses that the PYD/YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organisation. Moreover, it states that the PKK/PYD/YPG cannot represent Kurdish people. That is to say, Syrian Kurds cannot be identified with the PYD/YPG. Turkish officials further state that, as a terrorist organisation the PYD/YPG, has no legitimacy and does not represent the Syrian Kurdish community. Turkey has no problems with the majority of the Kurds which has no connection to terrorists. Indeed, Turkey opened its doors to Kurds fleeing Saddam Hussein's oppression in Iraq in the 1990s and accepted over 200,000 Kurds from Ayn al-Arab, Syria, while incidents were taking place in the city. According to Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the United Nations, PYD/YPG militants have violated international law and committed war crimes by recruiting children, displacing villagers, conducting arbitrary arrests, executing the PYD's political opponents, carrying out abuse in detention facilities, and conducting abduction and murder (Amnesty International, 2015; UN Security Council Report, 2018). These reports suggest that the PYD/YPG is oppressing Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Christians and anyone that does not submit to their rule.

57. Turkey has suffered many terrorist attacks perpetrated by the PYD/YPG in recent years. On 17 February 2016 on Merasim Street in Ankara, buses transporting military personnel were targeted by a suicide bomber with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED); 29 people were killed, including 12 military officers, and 80 people were injured. On 13 March 2016, in Kizilay, Ankara,

civilians were targeted with a VBIED, 34 were killed and 229 were injured. On 10 December 2016, in Istanbul, near the Dolmabahce Palace, a riot-police bus was targeted with a VBIED, and a suicide bomb attacker targeted police officers responding to the terrorists near Macka Park; 45 citizens, including 38 police officers, lost their lives and 237 citizens were injured. Turkish official records also indicate that members of the PKK and the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation operating in Syria have carried out more than 20 rocket/missile attacks since 2017, targeting the Turkish military guard posts, on the Syrian border, of Kilis, Sanliurfa, Hatay, Gaziantep, Sirnak and Mardin.

58. Ankara states that the PKK and the PYD/YPG share the same leadership cadres, organisational and military structure, modus operandi, strategies, and tactics. They both draw from identical financial resources and conduct training exercises in the same camps. In essence, they constitute different parts of the same entity. Independent academic and international institutions, including but not limited to: the UK-based Henry Jackson Society (Orton, 2017); the Institute for the Study of War (Kozak, 2016); NATO's Defence Against Terrorism Review (Self and Ferris, 2016); and the US National Counterterrorism Center (Coats 2018; 2019) as well as EUROPOL (EUROPOL, 2016) have pointed to the direct links between the PKK and PYD/YPG. Ankara has accordingly called for Allies to support its fight against terrorism and to recognise the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation. The findings of Turkish authorities and rulings of relevant courts on the bombings reveal that the terrorists, who staged attacks in Turkey, are members of the PKK and received explosives training at YPG camps in Syria. They also state that the PKK procures equipment like anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons through the PYD/YPG in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, EUROPOL's 2016 report on counterterrorism (TE-SAT) pointed to the PKK's link with the PYD/YPG by highlighting the fact that the funds raised by PKK-affiliated organisations in several countries, including Allied countries, have been used to finance the activities of the PYD/YPG. The PYD/YPG is also employing Daesh-like recruitment methods, and has attracted foreign terrorist fighters from Europe and North America (Orton, 2017). Turkey has criticised several Allied countries for indulging the PYD/YPG and argued that this represents a violation of the spirit and values of the Alliance.

59. Ankara's second objective is to help find a lasting solution to the conflict. Turkey believes that the conflict ultimately can only end through a political settlement, in which the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, are realised and a legitimate government takes charge in Damascus. This process should be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, so that only the Syrian people will be the masters of their own future. In order to transform this vision into reality, Turkey supports the UN-led political process in Geneva. Turkey's ongoing consultations with the other Astana guarantors and the UN have aimed to reduce violence on the ground and to revitalise the Geneva process. After months of a stalled peace process, the UN Secretary General announced the formation of the constitutional committee in September. The committee began its work on 30 October. Turkey has long sought to bring the positions of the primary stakeholders closer together to facilitate the prospect of a political solution. This ambition lay behind the convening of a Quadrilateral Summit between the leaders of Turkey, France, Russia and Germany in October 2018.

60. Turkey's third objective is to project a degree of stability in the region and to address the underlying problems that have pushed millions of Syrian refugees to seek shelter in Turkey (Young, 2017). According to UNHCR, as of 22 August 2019, Turkey had registered 3,654,173 Syrian refugees. Coping with that influx in a humane manner has posed an enormous challenge to Turkish society (UNHCR) and Turkey has made great efforts to shelter, feed and educate millions of people. But this has not been easy. Social tensions are reported to be high in some cities near the Syrian border, where average salaries have been driven down by the huge influx of migrant workers. Housing rental prices in those same areas have naturally increased—this in a region where about one in four people is unemployed. The Turkish government estimates it has spent more than USD 40 billion for refugees since the onset of the war and has asked Europe to step up to help fund this effort and to create a viable security zone for these people, particularly in light of the Idlib offensive now underway. Lately, Turkey has undertaken another initiative together with other neighbouring countries Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan to seek ways to create conducive conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of

the refugees. Turkey increasingly voices its frustration that the growing refugee problem can no longer be shouldered by the neighbouring countries alone.

61. As the situation in Syria has evolved, Turkey has had little choice but to alter its strategy, and it has now adopted a more conciliatory line *vis-à-vis* Russia and Iran in recognition of the realities on the ground. In August 2016, Presidents Erdogan and Putin met in Russia for the first time since the Turkish military shot down a Russian fighter jet that had strayed into Turkish airspace. The meeting helped initiate a normalisation of political and economic relations. That same month, the Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers visited each other's capitals (Phillips, 2017). These meetings in many ways marked an important shift in Turkey's Syrian policy (Phillips, 2017).

62. In August 2016, Turkish forces and the Syrian National Army, which represents the opposition forces of the Syrian National Coalition and the Syrian Interim Government, moved into Syria's northern borderlands in *Operation Euphrates Shield*. The intervention reflected Ankara's aim to lower the emphasis on toppling al-Assad and to refocus on targeting Daesh and destroying the PYD/YPG. The new strategy also informed Ankara's decision to withdraw support for opposition factions in Aleppo, enabling the al-Assad regime to regain control of parts of that city (Phillips, 2017). In *Operation Olive Branch*, launched in January 2018, Turkish forces and Turkey-backed militias entered the Afrin district to oust the PYD/YPG (Kasapoglu and Ulgen, 2018).

63. With the end of the campaign and as a result of the infrastructure work and the security and stability provided by the Turkish Armed Forces in the region, more than 300,000 Syrian nationals have returned to the *Euphrates Shield Operation* area. In the cities of Jarablus, Azaz, Al-Rai and Al-Bab, liberated by the Turkish forces, hospitals, schools, mosques, bakeries as well as other public buildings and spaces such as playgrounds were restored to ensure that the local population had access to accommodation, food, water and electricity. Turkey also helped recruit, trained and deploy law enforcement units from the local Syrian population.

64. Turkey, along with Iran and Russia, has also established the Astana platform, which has designated a series of cease-fire regimes and de-escalation zones. At the Sochi summit, these countries discussed finding a broader political solution to the conflict. A Russian-Turkish bilateral agreement signed in September 2018 temporarily stymied a Russian-backed Syrian-regime offensive against Idlib province, which Turkish authorities feared would trigger a massive refugee influx into Turkey. As suggested earlier, however, this deal fell apart when the Syrian government, with help from the Russian military, launched an offensive to retake the territory. Even on the most contentious matter, Idlib, they have succeeded to maintain relative calm on the ground since the end of August.

65. Astana platform has achieved modest but important goals despite the serious divergence of opinions among the guarantors *vis-à-vis* many aspects of the conflict. Establishment of the constitutional committee is the most prominent one as it raised expectations again for the political resolution of the 9-year-old crisis. The Astana guarantors have also succeeded in implementing projects to release detainees and prisoners of both the regime and the opposition as a confidence-building measure.

66. The Syrian conflict has triggered a degree of tension in the Turkish-US relationship. US support for the PYD/YPG and Turkey's rapprochement with Russia reveal the two countries' diverging objectives in the civil war (Arslan, Dost and Wilson, 2018). President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria could repair ties between the two NATO allies, but the question of how, when and on what terms this withdrawal will happen is not yet entirely clear. More specifically, the definition of what both sides mean by the implementation of a "safe" zone along the Turkish border, could generate new frictions that the two allies would have to manage (Sly, 2019).

67. As Turkey's discussions with the U.S. on the establishment of a safe zone have remained incomplete and the withdrawal of their forces from Syria has not been implemented by the United States; Turkey has launched "Operation Peace Spring" on 9 October 2019. Turkey pointed out

the objectives of the operation to ensure its border security, neutralise terrorists in the region and thus, save Syrians from the oppression of terrorist groups. Turkey remarked that it has been exposed to over a hundred cases of harassment and hostile acts by the PYD/YPG terrorist organisation during the last two years. Ankara identifies that through tunnels dug by PYD/YPG along the bordering areas in this region, explosives and ammunition have been smuggled to Turkey to be handed over to the PKK terrorist organisation.

68. Ankara further emphasised that its operation also aims to support the international efforts to facilitate safe and voluntary returns of displaced Syrians to their homes of origin or to other places of their choice in Syria, in line with international law and in coordination with relevant UN agencies. To this end, Turkey affirmed its aim to resettle refugees, who had to leave their country due to the atrocities of the Syrian regime as well as terror groups like Daesh. PYD/YPG has also been using Daesh as justification for their occupation of Arab towns along that border. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians, including Kurds, from this region have fled from the oppression of the PYD/YPG. Hence, Ankara, during the last five years, revealed that regardless of their ethnic or religious origin, the Syrian people deserve to reclaim their lands following eight years of war, displacement, persecution, and fear.

69. In the midst of Operation *Peace Spring*, US Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo paid a visit to Ankara and met with President Erdogan. Turkey and Washington agreed on 17th of this October for Ankara to halt its operation for 120 hours while YPG terrorists withdraw from a safe zone in north-eastern Syria. A “Joint Turkish-US Statement on Northeast Syria” was also issued. The statement has been so far implemented successfully.

70. The Statement underlines that the US and Turkey reaffirm their relationship as fellow members of NATO and the US understands Turkey’s legitimate security concerns on Turkey’s southern border. Turkey and the United States also remain committed to protecting NATO territories and NATO populations against all threats with a solid understanding of “one for all and all for one”. It is further remarked that Turkey and the US are committed to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS/Daesh activities in northeast Syria. This will include coordination on detention facilities and internally displaced persons from formerly Daesh-controlled areas, as appropriate. Both countries reiterated their commitment to the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria and UN-led political process, which aims at ending the Syrian conflict in accordance with UNSCR 2254. In addition, Turkey and the United States agreed on the continued importance and functionality of a safe zone in order to address the national security concerns of Turkey, to include the recollection of YPG heavy weapons and the disablement of their fortifications and all other fighting positions.

71. At the meeting of President Erdogan and President Putin in Sochi on 22 October 2019, Turkey and Russia agreed on a “memorandum of understanding” that highlights two countries’ commitment in combatting terrorism, ensuring Syria’s territorial integrity and political unity, and of facilitating the return of refugees. As of noon, on 23 October, the YPG terrorists and their weapons will be removed to the depth of 30 kilometres within 150 hours. It has been reported by the Russian Federation that YPG has been taken out 30 kilometres away from the Turkey-Syria border as well as out of Manbij and Tel Rifat with their heavy weapons at the end of these 150 hours. Turkey further underlined that it is closely monitoring this removal of PYD/YPG from the planned safe zone. Turkish-Russian joint patrols have started in the west and east of the borders of current Operation *Peace Spring* at a depth of 10 kilometres, except for the city of Qamishli.

VI. THE VIEW FROM ISRAEL

72. Israel's involvement in the Syrian conflict has been relatively limited – although it has adopted a more active posture in recent months. Israel, for example, has engaged in a number of cross-border strikes to prevent shipments of weapons to Hezbollah. To a limited extent, it has sought to establish links with certain Syrian populations, notably Druze communities, both in the hopes of keeping regime forces out of these areas and to be mindful of the concerns of its own Druze civilians. Israel has also engaged in a dialogue with Moscow to ensure deconfliction of forces among other things (Hanauer, 2016).

73. During the first phase of the conflict, Israel's actions aimed at pre-empting possible attacks on its territory and citizens, although it made a great effort not to entangle itself too deeply into the war. But Israel has recently adopted more assertive tactics out of concerns about Iran's growing presence in Syria and the sophisticated weaponry it could bring into the theatre. In January 2019, Israeli forces carried out a series of airstrikes against Iranian military targets in the Syrian theatre (Liebermann, 2019). While its earlier strikes were focused on a very narrow range of targets, from late 2018 the list of targets expanded. Importantly, Israel has abandoned its policy of ambiguity and now openly claims responsibility for the strikes and shares information about their targets with key partners (Hincks, 2019).

74. Several factors have driven this change of strategy (Abu Ahmad and Zehavi, 2019). The most significant seems to be the prospect of US withdrawal from the Syrian theatre, which Israel feels has left it vulnerable. While it is unlikely that Israeli strikes in Syria could have been carried out without Russia's tacit consent, this does raise some questions about the state of Russian-Iranian relations. Israel's relations with Moscow had considerably deteriorated after Syrian anti-aircraft missiles targeting Israeli planes shot down a Russian aircraft in 2018. Relations have since seemed to have improved largely due to shared concerns about the situation in Syria (Abu Ahmad and Zehavi, 2019).

75. The war in Syria has also provided an opportunity for Israel to undermine any residual Syrian claims to the Golan Heights, which it occupied in 1967 and annexed in 1981 (Hanauer, 2016). From the Israeli government's perspective, the mounting security threats posed by the presence of Israel's enemies on Syrian territory makes it all the more important to maintain its hold on the Golan (Kenner, 2018).

76. In contrast to most Western countries, which were initially focused on the rise of extremist groups in Syria, Israel has primarily been concerned with the growing influence of Iran close to its borders. The Iranian presence poses a security threat to Israel in two ways: on the one hand, Iran uses Syrian territory to supply Hezbollah with weapons (Pollack, 2015). Hezbollah's capacity to launch rockets from Lebanon into Israel's northern territories is designed, at least in part, to deter Israel from attacking Iran, while its military, social, and political power within Lebanon itself enables Tehran to project its influence more broadly throughout the region (Hanauer, 2016; Katz, 2018). Israel is also concerned that Iran may open a front in southern Syria and is determined to prevent this from happening. Hezbollah fighters have indeed been deployed close to the border (Herzog, 2015). Since Hezbollah's last war with Israel, that organisation is believed to have dramatically expanded its rocket and missile capabilities. On several occasions, Iran and its allies have fired rockets at Israel from southern Syria (Kenner, 2018).

77. Israel is concerned that Moscow's support to the al-Assad regime invariably bolsters Iran, both because it protects its ally and thus enables Tehran to control territory in the region and because Hezbollah's acquisition of some of the weapons transferred by Russia to the regime strengthens Iran's hand. Almost paradoxically, another Israeli objective is to see that a diminished Bashar al-Assad remains in power and does not cede the state to more radical and dangerous political forces. For Israeli authorities, the possibility that Assad might be replaced by a regime even more hostile and unstable makes his survival strategically preferable. Yet, if the regime emerges stronger from the war, it would also be positioned to enable Hezbollah and Iran to pursue their ambitions. Israel is thus

walking a very fine line (Hanauer, 2016).

78. Israel is also working to contain extremist terrorist groups operating in the Syrian theatre. These groups could pose a security threat to Israel if they were to establish themselves anywhere near its border (Dekel and Magen, 2015; Peled, 2015). That said, Daesh has so far not constituted an immediate threat to Israel, since it has primarily focused its efforts against other targets, some of which are also in an adversarial relationship with Israel (Hanauer, 2016).

VII. CONCLUSION

79. It seems very clear that preservation of the de-escalation status of Idlib Province will remain high on the agenda in the coming period. The fact that the Assad regime still has the illusion of a military victory throughout the country impedes the efforts of maintaining calm on the ground and the prospect for a political solution. The country is a shattered, impoverished and isolated territory in which half of the inhabitants have either been displaced or taken refuge abroad and the national infrastructure including hospitals, schools, and factories and farms have been destroyed. Years of systematic mass violence, unyielding oppression and displacement orchestrated by the regime have been a catalyst for resentment, anger and fear. The experience will poison the country and the region for years to come. Opposition to the regime will not go away although it will assume new forms that will not be conducive to stabilisation and reconstruction.

80. At the same time, the Syrian regime will owe an enormous debt both to Russia and Iran without which it would never have sustained in that civil war. Continued turmoil in this country despite the victory will provide both countries with wide latitude for initiative on Syrian soil and this is not good news for the region as a whole. But Syria could prove a poisoned chalice for both countries insofar as they will continuously be asked to help manage inevitable bouts of crisis and turmoil in that society.

81. Turkish-American relations are being tested by sharply different views of the situation in the North and on US cooperation with PYD/YPG forces that Turkey considers as terrorists. The extended talks between the two countries and the ensuing agreement on a safe zone controlled by Turkey bring about optimism for the future. However, it should be noted that Turkey will hardly accept the engagement of the US with PYD/YPG. This will remain as the most destabilising factor of their relations unless the United States takes steps forward to disengage with the PYD/YPG and seek new alliances in the fight against Daesh.

82. At the same time, Turkey and Europe might soon have to confront sharp differences on refugee management. Indeed, given that instability, insecurity and poverty will continue to prevail, the refugee crisis will very likely endure and political tensions it triggers will simmer. Those with no hope simply will not stay put and the mass movement of people out of Syria will unsettle the borderlands for years to come while challenging more distant countries of destination including Europe. The fighting in Idlib, albeit relatively less tense, threatens to send millions more refugees toward the border with Turkey, a country that is already supporting millions of Syrians who have fled the fighting in that country. NATO partners need to prepare themselves for this crisis and seek to hammer out common approaches informed by a shared sense of responsibility.

83. The threat of extremist terrorism operating in Syria may also continue. Even though groups like Daesh and al Qaeda are not likely to seize territory, a ravished and embittered Syria will provide fertile territory for the spread of ideologies rooted in resentment and alienation. This will mean that Syria will remain the object of serious concern among allied nations from both sides of the Atlantic. Continued vigilance on this front will also be essential.

84. The West might be in a position to contribute to humanitarian relief but certainly not to national reconstruction under an Assad-led government. More support, however, will be needed for

neighbouring countries which have suffered enormously as a result of this long civil war and which will continue to shoulder the burden as this country staggers towards a very uncertain future. It can be a very functional and productive step for member countries to support the voluntary return of the refugees in Turkey to the established safe zone, on which Turkey and the United States have recently agreed.

85. Terrible human rights violations and war crimes have taken place during the course of this war. Mass murder of civilians, torture, the bombing of schools and hospitals, and the use of chemical weapons are among the myriad recorded atrocities committed by the Syrian regime. Meanwhile, the terrorist organisations, with their fanaticism and horrific violence, have been other faces of war crimes, cruelty and mass atrocities, that almost caused the destruction of a nation. Justice has a long memory and it will be the responsibility of the international community to do what it can to hold those responsible for these crimes to account. Uncovering and preserving evidence will be essential and that process should begin now.

86. The killing of Daesh's ringleader Baghdadi, who is responsible for gruesome terrorist attacks across five continents, marks a turning point in the Alliance's joint fight against terrorism, and a great success which gives everyone a sanguine hope. But it is not an endgame. NATO has no luxury to turn a blind eye on the other developments in Syria as its south-eastern border continues to be confronted with war, terrorism and other asymmetric threats which could easily spread to whole Transatlantic Region.

87. Instead of a conditional and sequential approach, NATO member countries should adopt a more dynamic and united position on the solution of this tragic and bloody civil war in Syria. Only this united and dynamic approach could help Syria to re-emerge as a stable, peaceful, prosperous and democratic country that is governed in line with the legitimate aspirations of its people.

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