

# Syria in Transition



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Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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## Yes, you can

### Making sense of European strategic patience

The European Syria policy of strategic patience has its fair share of critics but on the whole it has been correct. That does not mean that its 'passive' nature (the "three noes", wait-and-see approach) is without its pitfalls. One is a tendency to over-rely on the negotiation strategy of the UN's Office of the Special Envoy (OSE), which in recent months has encountered stiff push back from the Syrian opposition. Informed sources say that in mid-October the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) sent a letter to American, European, and Arab diplomats setting out its many misgivings about the UN's current steps-for-steps initiative and calling for its rejection. This shocked the Europeans, who, in the absence of pro-active US leadership, had conveniently fallen back on whatever guidance they were receiving from the UN. The opposition letter presented the Europeans with an awkward choice: continue to support the UN's steps-for-steps initiative as it is now, or back the opposition and call for a re-think. Four years into steps-for-steps, some European officials are frustrated with what some describe as a "blind reliance" on the UN despite its lack of tangible achievements. With frustration with the UN mounting, and the risk of a second Trump term very real, Europeans should now be launching a re-think on how to advance the political process.

### A third way forward

The reliance on the UN became conspicuously problematic in the first half of 2023, when Russia launched a negotiation track between Turkey and the Assad regime, while several key Arab states moved towards normalisation and the re-admission of Syria into the Arab League. The flurry of regional diplomatic activity made the UK, France, Germany, and the US (known as the 'Quad'), plus the EU, feel somewhat isolated. To counter this, they lashed themselves to the UN mast

and attempted to surf the steps-for-steps wave that Arab normalisation was meant to unleash. But the expected wave became barely a ripple. The regime's commitment to the UN on steps-for-steps was cynical at best. In the main it sought to exploit any diplomatic opening to achieve long-term security goals, such as neutering the Syrian opposition. Syria's reinstatement into the Arab League led to hesitation in Arab capitals in engaging publicly with the opposition, given the League's rules on respecting members' sovereignty. Meanwhile, the UN and the Quad were keen to gain seats at the Arab-Assad negotiating table and in that context viewed the opposition SNC as something of a liability. At a meeting of Western envoys in September, UN and Arab representatives were invited but the SNC was not. Perhaps the French hosts did not want to embarrass their Arab guests; but also they wanted to imagine a political process involving regional deals without any meaningful role for the opposition.

The illusion did not last long. The suspension of the Arab Contact Group and the halt in talks between Turkey and the regime brought the normalisation bandwagon to a screeching halt. Turkey's interests remain fundamentally at odds with those of Assad, and the goodies that the Arabs tried to sell did not address European concerns such as migration and security, let alone advance the political process in any meaningful way. In one year, steps-for-steps has gone from fashionable idea to conversation-killer.

Any political process requires gradual and reciprocal concessions, regardless of how they are marketed. The UN might insist on sticking to the steps-for-steps 'brand', but the contents of steps-for-steps remain open for discussion. According to a close observer, in mid-November the SNC formally presented to the OSE four core principles that should guide a credible and legitimate steps-for-steps process: parity between Syrian sides, reciprocity of concessions, a snap-back mechanism in case of non-compliance, and a clear connection to UNSCR 2254. The SNC now waits to see if the UN is ready to discuss a re-configuration of steps-for-steps in line with these four principles. The failed Arab normalisation and the impasse reached by the UN's approach have served as catalysts for new thinking. With a more pro-active SNC, the Europeans no longer must choose between the UN and the opposition. If the goal is to support UN diplomacy and uphold UNSCR 2254, having an opposition that engages constructively and in good faith with the UN must surely be welcome.

### **Beware the Kissinger doctrine**

Exchanging papers and holding meeting does not amount to a breakthrough. At a November meeting between the SNC and Syria envoys in Geneva, European representatives repeated the "three noes" policy but said little more, according to a source with direct knowledge of the meeting. On European policy in general, a US diplomatic source remarked: "The Europeans conveniently convinced themselves that they can't do anything and then mastered the art of whining about it." Doubtless, Europe's policy of strategic patience on Syria is preferable to random actionism; but it cannot be effective without positive application. Put simply, strategic patience doesn't have to be merely passivity.

This European passivity largely stems from decades of self-imposed dependence on Washington in world affairs. Even Europe's united response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was largely the result of US leadership. The problem is that, unlike Ukraine, US leadership on Syria ranges from "non-existent" to "deeply problematic".

In his book "Master of the Game", Martin Indyk writes about the late Henry Kissinger:

*He would prove mightily resistant to more ambitious efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict because he feared that pursuing peace as an idealistic end state would jeopardize the stability that his order was designed to generate. Peace for Kissinger was a problem, not a solution. The desire for it needed to be manipulated to produce something more reliable, a stable order in a highly volatile part of the world.*

US policy on Syria is shaped by officials like Brett McGurk, who closely follow the Kissinger doctrine. They accept that a certain level of violence is acceptable as long as key allies are protected and US strategic depth, resource extraction, and international trade are preserved. McGurk's prioritisation of an Israeli-Saudi peace deal over an Israeli-Palestinian accord underlines Washington's preference for authoritarian stability over genuine conflict resolution. What this means for Syria is that maintaining a volatile situation is fine as long as it promises more stability than alternative scenarios – a "Sunni takeover" for instance, which might challenge established power balances in the region favourable to US interests. Washington's approach was evident in its August 2013 failure to enforce red lines on chemical weapons use; in its May

2015 prevention of a Syrian rebel march on Damascus; and, most recently, in its early 2023 discreet encouragement of Arab normalisation. Put simply, the US can afford to maintain the status quo in a way that the Europeans cannot.

The present US position sacrifices the Syrian people on the altar of regional ‘stability’ and leads to loss of hope and more migration. Europe’s strategic patience, with its accompanying dependence on US cues thus conflicts with its own interests. A constructive application of strategic patience demands an active policy that addresses European concerns such as migration and security while protecting Europe’s main leverage in the political process (the “three noes.”) Inevitably, that means greater engagement with Turkey and the SNC on governance and stability in non-regime areas, while insisting on full implementation of UNSCR 2254.

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## Full spectrum transitional justice

Uniting truth-seeking,  
reconciliation and accountability

The goal of transitional justice is to enable war-torn countries to transition from violent conflict to peace. At the Track I level, the concept failed to gain traction because Bashar Assad rejected what would be efforts that undermine the claim to omnipotence that lies at the heart of his regime. For years, the Syrian opposition insisted on the inclusion of transitional justice in the UN-mediated political process, but international players, including the UN, hesitated, fearing that it might scare the regime away from the negotiation table. The exhausting debate over Assad’s future that contributed to the impasses in Geneva in 2014–17 showcased this struggle, with the opposition insisting on accountability as a major element of a transition clearly outlined in the Geneva Communiqué and confirmed by UNSCR 2254. Given Assad’s responsibility for heinous atrocities, avoiding the “Assad question” was absurd. The opposition was right then to insist on an end of impunity for systematic war crimes and crimes against humanity, a call that echoes louder now that President Putin is being sought by the Inter-

national Criminal Court on the same charges. Nevertheless, those who favoured putting transitional justice on the back burner prevailed. Assad, aware that any political transition would be the beginning of his downfall, remained defiant. Removing the transitional justice card from the negotiating table did not help advance the political process after all.

### ‘Creative’ accountability and its risks

Having sidelined transitional justice at the Track I level, the West then outsourced it to Syrian civil society organisations and specialised INGOs. In many ways, their twelve-year documentation, investigation, and advocacy campaigns implemented under the transitional justice label represent a Syrian (and Western) success story. Innovative approaches like leveraging universal jurisdiction to pursue Syrian perpetrators made headlines – the latest example being the French arrest warrant for Assad that was issued in November and that arose from France’s Court of Cassation ruling six months before upholding the country’s right to try foreign suspects under the universal jurisdiction principle. The message is clear: A return to normality is off the table. Assad may not be facing trial in a Paris court anytime soon, but the warrant enshrines in law the ostracisation of Assad at the European – and therefore international – levels. The forensic establishment of “the truth” in courts of law is a pillar of transitional justice, and the *process* of establishing facts and advocating for accountability is a goal in itself, irrespective of whether any war criminal ends up in the dock.

The problem is that this ‘creative’ transitional justice approach offers the West a convenient and relatively low-risk way of publicly engaging with the Syrian conflict without having to invest in its resolution. The United States, for instance, emphasises accountability in its public positioning on Syria while shying away from making an investment to advance the political process that would make possible Syrian-owned accountability. That investment might have come in the shape of an aircraft carrier off the coast of Latakia; but what actually happened was years of gradual regional normalisation with Assad amid talk of accountability from Western capitals. Granted, the creative approach to accountability makes Assad’s rehabilitation more tricky, and the process has its own intrinsic value; but in the long run continued impunity will discredit the transitional justice concept as a whole. Time is the enemy, because the regime is implementing its own Orwellian version of transitional justice where accountability is entirely ignored,

truth-seeking reinforces the loyalist victimhood narrative, and reconciliation is an act of pardon by the Dear Leader. The longer this model is allowed to persist and gain legitimacy – including at the international level where Russia and China are advocates – the smaller will be the room for real transitional justice.

This is why those Syrian civil society organisations and specialised INGOs and their backers should take further steps to construct a transitional justice model that counters the regime's efforts. A collaborative effort by governments and implementers should recognise the roles of the political opposition, civil society organisations, and victim groups in a legitimate process, and not dismiss them as irrelevant ("like Cuban exiles") or too partisan, given their claims to be operating in a supposedly "neutral" space. A new approach to transitional justice should aim to identify, address, and transform cultural and institutional practices shaped under decades of totalitarian dictatorship that normalises violence and impunity in society at large. As the late Raed Fares once remarked, Syria's transformation to peace entails dismantling the "little Assad" that the regime has instilled in every Syrian. These words cannot be overstated for any far-reaching transitional justice effort.

#### Tearing down the wall

To conceptualise and implement a meaningful alternative to the regime's efforts, it's time to go beyond the narrow focus on accountability – however 'innovative' – and embrace the full spectrum of transitional justice. The South African model's three pillars – truth-seeking, reconciliation, accountability – are a useful guide for Syria. Truth-seeking means acknowledging the truth of what happened and establishing inclusive narratives. Reconciliation is the process of societies rebuilding relationships that allow peaceful co-existence. Accountability, often intertwined with truth-seeking, involves the prosecution of perpetrators through judicial mechanisms. The aim is a society where facts are recognised and can be critically reflected upon, thus allowing the rule of law to have meaning. For Syria, transitional justice based on these three pillars requires a common understanding of each pillar's meaning in the specific local context. The Assad regime has been busy creating obstacles, such as hijacking the term "reconciliation" and turning it into a euphemism for military surrender and social submission. Without genuine reconciliation, however, accountability risks becoming a tool for revenge, and truth-seeking merely a way to target enemies. The

three pillars of transitional justice are interdependent: lack of movement on one leads to inertia or dysfunction in all.

Assad's reconciliation approach comes from thought structures inherent in what sociologists describe as the 'violent state.' The "wall of fear" that many Syrians describe is a manifestation of the often invisible tyranny that permeates their everyday existence, and which idealistic revolutionaries attempted to tear down. The uprising was not just about toppling a dictator. It also involved the removal of the underlying thought patterns that make dictatorship possible. This is particularly evident in the influential revolutionary literature of Razan Zeitnouch, who argued in the early days of the uprising that revolution should be rooted in the patterns of socialisation with which the Assad regime has been reproducing itself for 50 years. These patterns revolve around a particular relationship with truth, social identities with clearly determined friend/enemy distinctions, and a historical narrative steeped in existential struggle. Of course, these are completely incompatible with truth-seeking, reconciliation, and accountability. Understanding better the regime's reconciliation rationale is important as a means of predicting its actions, and as a tool to refine truth-seeking, reconciliation, and accountability efforts to resonate with ordinary Syrians and thus engender widespread engagement and impact. Meaningful transitional justice requires new models based on a holistic approach that challenges both the dictator *and* the dictatorship.

[This is part I of a series of articles on advancing transitional justice in Syria. Part II will be published in the next issue.](#)

## Diminishing returns

### The decline of Russia's soft power in Syria

In January 2023 the St. George's Greek Orthodox Church in the town of Irbin, in eastern Ghouta, was inaugurated to great fanfare, with Russian officials at the ceremony keen on asserting cultural and religious ties with Syria. Irbin was reduced to rubble by the Russian airforce five years before and remains largely in ruins with most of its inhabitants IDPs. The Orthodox church, however, was given special attention by Moscow, which funded its full restoration. Russia's military intervention from late-2015 has been accompanied by a major expansion of its soft power influence: Russian language schools have been established in Damascus, and Russian companies have won energy, IT, and resource extraction contracts. This soft power, however, is only an annex to Russia's far more formidable hard power; and with major fighting having subsided, and the Ukraine war dragging on, it is not increasing and may even be declining. This is bad news for President Putin, whose Mediterranean strategy rests on a long, comfortable, and low-cost stay in Syria.

#### Rise and check of Russian soft power

In the initial, 2011-15, phase of the Syrian conflict, Russia's soft power influence was limited to the provision of finance and hardware to Damascus. Internationally, Moscow provided diplomatic cover through its use of its veto in the UN Security Council. Building on its Soviet-era relations, Moscow nurtured some cultural activities in Syria, especially involving religious institutions and charities. This was illustrated in November 2011, when Russian Orthodox leader Patriarch Kirill emphasised the importance of mixed marriages between Russians and Syrians during a meeting with Bashar Assad in Damascus.

The second, 2015-19, phase was characterised by full blown Russian military intervention. As a result, the scope and scale of all Russian activities expanded because managing the intervention required parallel hearts-and-minds activities. Through its close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church and organisations such as the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society and the Ahmad Kadyrov Foundation, Russia drew closer to specific communities in Syria. In February 2016 the Russian Reconciliation Center (RRC) was established, headquartered at the Hmeimim air base

in Latakia. Part of the RRC's mission was to balance Tehran's growing influence through its IRGC-affiliated companies and charities. To turn military advances into political gains, the RRC negotiated the surrender of besieged communities – often using humanitarian aid as a carrot – and incorporated surrendered rebels and draft dodgers into the Syrian Army's Russian-created 5th Corps. Crucially, the RRC presented itself as a shield that could protect surrendering rebels and their families from the regime's revenge, underlining an image of Russia as a firm but fair actor. In this same, second, phase came the adoption of UNSCR 2254, the 2016 Kerry-Lavrov dialogue, the fall of rebel-held eastern Aleppo, the establishment of the four de-escalation zones via the Astana process, the effective smear campaign against the White Helmets, interference in international investigations on the regime's chemical weapon usage, and the introduction of Russian as a second foreign language taught in Syrian schools.

In the third phase, 2018-2022, Russian soft power peaked then started a slow decline. Things changed with the recapture of three of the four de-escalation zones (the easy ones) and the switch of Russia's attention to the northwest (the difficult one). Diplomatically, the UN's Constitutional Committee process began in late-2019 with much Russian backing. Back then, Russia saw potential for Western reengagement with Assad, or at least a grudging acceptance of his military victory, and used the constitutional process to buy time for slow motion normalisation. However, the West's Syria fatigue may have been overestimated by Moscow, which failed to translate momentum on the ground into tangible political victories. When the Turkish army crushed regime forces attempting to advance deep into the northwest in early 2020, it became clear that Ankara would not accept the "forced reconciliation" approach. On the international stage, Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine ended the idea that a deal with Moscow was possible, and its soft power investment took a tumble.

#### Russian soft power today

Activities of the RRC and affiliated charities have waned in the past year because the reduction of large scale offensives means there is no need for a 'good cop'. Even in the areas recaptured from rebels, Iran has proved more successful in embedding itself in the social fabric of communities and infiltrating the inner echelons of the regime. Much of Russia's soft power lost its rationale once the violence abated. The Christian communities are naturally less prone to Iranian



influence. Today, Russia's key societal support operations are in areas with Christian Orthodox majorities such as Safita and Mashta al-Helu along the coast, Wadi al-Nasara in rural Homs, and Suqaylabia and Maharda in rural Hama; and in rural Damascus, especially Sednayah, Irbin, and Malloula, where RRC-approved charities such as the Russar foundation are particularly active.

In the rest of Syria, Russia has sought to consolidate cultural ties. Russian scholarships for Syrians doubled to over 1000 in 2022 and 2023. Under the oversight of the Russian Embassy, the Russian House in Damascus has recently been refurbished and expanded, offering language courses and a variety of cultural and musical events. Local sources report that talk about "opportunities" in Russia is common, with many students pursuing their higher education in Russia with a view to staying there permanently.

Given its limited aid and development budget, Russia clearly prioritises some activities over others. In September 2023, an RRC-sponsored "Peace and Educational Center" was inaugurated in the southern Damascus countryside, providing social, medical, cultural, and educational services to the families of Syrian army 'martyrs.' Similar centers have opened in strategic areas of Latakia and Homs. The size of Russian support is hard to assess as Moscow prefers full control over its limited humanitarian assistance and implements it via secretive state agencies. Russian financial support for the UN, including UNIDO, WFP, UNDP, and FAO, has totalled less than \$50 million since 2011. The extent of bilateral support, i.e. via the Russian-Syrian Joint Intergovernmental Committee for Commercial, Economic, Technical, and Scientific Cooperation, is as yet unknown. In Assad's July 2023 visit to Moscow, 40 investment projects including rehabilitation of airports and modernisation of thermal power plants were announced. These announcements, however, must be treated with caution as Russia has somewhat creative definitions of the term "investment project." Syria aid fatigue is not a phenomenon exclusive to the West.

A strong Russian presence in the eastern Mediterranean depends on a friendly regime in Damascus whose existential costs for Moscow are not too high. The reality, however, is that Assad's military will never be strong enough to stand alone, and his government cannot survive financially without generous external support. A state collapse would be ruinous for Rus-

sia, and is a very real risk eight years into its 'decisive' intervention.

### Looking ahead

Observers have noted Russia's lack of involvement – weakness perhaps – in such local conflicts as the tribal uprising in Deir Ezzor and the protest movement in Suwayda. The latter was an embarrassing setback because Russian representatives engaged with the Druze community in an abortive attempt to calm the situation. Indeed, Druze leader Shaikh Hikmat Al-Hajari refused to speak to the Russians at all – perhaps because Moscow didn't meet its side of the 2018 deal to guarantee a buffer zone that keeps Iranian proxies away from the border with Israel, and drug smugglers away from the border with Jordan. Many such reconciliation deals that Russia helped broker in the south have been reneged upon by the regime – with Russian complicity.

With the recent crisis in Gaza, Russia's tiring with its Syria investment and its linked inability to contain Iran in southern Syria may now be exposed for all to see. The Israeli government has declared an intention to create a buffer zone to protect its northern border once the offensive on Gaza is completed. Russia doesn't want to get drawn into any conflict with Israel; yet its nominal guarantor role in Syria and its mixed relationship – cooperative and competitive – with Iran makes it difficult to avoid the risk. Any gap left unfilled by Russia will be filled by Iran, and an increase in Iranian influence might erode Russia's grip on Assad's regime. The escalating Israeli air attacks on Syria without Russian consent undermine Russia's claim to be master of Syrian skies. At the same time, however, Iranian-linked militias persistently engaging the US is not the worst scenario for Moscow.

Russia today finds itself at odds with Israel, preventing it from advancing its interests with Tel Aviv by exploiting emerging tensions between the Israelis and the West over human rights violations against the Palestinians and war crimes in Gaza. The UAE is now reportedly attempting to mediate between Russia and Israel a recommitment to the 2018 southern buffer zone deal, with the aim of reducing tensions. The UAE mediation offer was also likely a favour to Iran, which wants to avert any Israeli offensive against Iranian proxies, whose value lies more in their potential to strike than in their actual combat operations against the IDF.

## Brothers in arms

### Plot twists in the Deir Ezzor tribal revolt

The Bedouin soap opera is an underappreciated genre of Arab television drama. Set usually in pre-1945 traditional Levantine village settings, it tells the story of ambitious men (often related by blood) competing over power, money, and the love of a beautiful woman. The plotlines are moralistic, not unlike a John Wayne Western, and tend to revolve around themes of honour, revenge, and the patriarchy.

Should Netflix consider making a modern day *musalsal badawi*, they should look no further than the present drama unfolding in Deir Ezzor. The tribal revolt there, launched in August by the Hifel brothers against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has come unstuck as clans desert them and close family members plot against them. But the two brothers also have their own differences: the moderate and Qatar-backed Musab (the older brother and recognised chief of the Ugaidat tribe) wanted to cooperate with the US for better terms, while the hot-headed younger brother Ibrahim (the field commander), who received support in men and weapons from the regime and the IRGC, point blank refused. Following an SDF counter-insurgency sweep of restive towns east of the Euphrates, Ibrahim fled with a handful of men and is now believed to be hiding out somewhere on the western bank of the Euphrates under regime protection. The revolt now largely consists of shelling and counter-shelling, much to the annoyance of civilians.

Ibrahim's collusion with the regime and Iran means that he has become accredited as "their man." This has not gone down well with important clans from within the Ugaidat, like the Bukayr, the Gur'an, the Shu'atat, and the Burhama, who decided that an open-ended war with the SDF was not for them, and that an American security umbrella was preferable to an Iranian one. But the tribal revolt started off as a genuine expression of popular disillusionment with the SDF administration of the province, and the primary reason for it – the demand for a greater share of the oil wealth – is reasonable and legitimate. Step forward Hifel al-Hifel, US-based uncle to the Hifel brothers who successfully lobbied Washington to stop talking to his nephews and to listen to him instead. He harbours ambitions to become the chief of the Ugaidat, and US patronage

appears a sure way of achieving that. He is so determined to be the only senior member of the Hifel family to be physically present in Deir Ezzor that he reportedly blocked the return of Musab from his Doha exile after convincing the SDF not to trust him.

The scheming uncle went a step further by enlisting the help of a former Islamic State operative named Ammar al-Hadawi. The latter is a maternal cousin to the Hifel brothers and is known to be a shrewd and silver-tongued politician with a penchant for switching allegiances at opportune times. Having started with the Free Syrian Army, he progressed to supporting Islamic State (IS) but defected in late-2015 and fled to Turkey, where he became a founder member of the pro-Ankara Council of Arab Tribes and Clans, before falling out with the Turks and being deported back to Syria. In late November he returned to Deir Ezzor at the head of an impressive convoy of 4X4 pick-ups after agreeing a deal with the SDF brokered by Hifel al-Hifel. Concretely, this meant accepting the three conditions laid out by the Americans in their unsuccessful negotiations with the Hifel brothers: cutting all ties to the regime and the IRGC, no SDF withdrawal from Deir Ezzor, and no harbouring of IS sleeper cells. In return, the Arab tribes were promised greater say over civil administration, i.e. more oil money.

Hifel al-Hifel accepted the US terms on behalf of the Ugaidat and tasked fellow tribesman Al-Hadawi with making it happen. Al-Hadawi joined forces with another cousin, Mohammad Ramadan al-Muslih (aka "The Hyena"), a former IS emir turned SDF commander and Bukamil clan enforcer. Crucially, Al-Hadawi wants the leadership of the all-important Deir Ezzor Military Council (DMC) for himself and sees the support of the individual clans that make up the Ugaidat tribe as key to achieving that. Sources suggest that Al-Hadawi is currently engaged in efforts to win over the Bukayr clan by arranging for the release of its clansman Ahmad al-Khubail (Abu Khawla) from SDF custody (his arrest having triggered the tribal revolt) and giving him back his 'territory' north of the province. The 5 December assassination of Shirwan Hasan, the Kurdish SDF commander in effective control of the DMC, was a more than convenient coincidence as he was accused by Arab tribes of mismanagement, corruption, and murder.

For now, the Hifel brothers have been outmanoeuvred by their more pragmatic uncle and cousin. By offering themselves as pliable US clients operating under

the SDF banner, they have an opportunity to reconfigure the tribal power balance in their favour. There is no guarantee that it will work, and no assurance that they themselves will not be usurped by jealous relatives. Deir Ezzor's soap opera continues.

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## Looking ahead

### What to watch out for in 2024

The year began with a devastating earthquake, followed by months of failed Arab normalisation, and ends with two local uprisings (Suwayda and Deir Ezzor) and a famine alert. These developments still do not alter in any fundamental way the dynamics of an internationalised civil war, where conflict stalemate ("frozen conflict") at the national level sits atop active conflict evolution at the local level. Externals naturally look for movement at the national level, whereas exploiting openings at the local level might deliver more promising entry points for interventions. This is the primary challenge for those engaged in conflict resolution and stabilisation efforts in Syria, whether at Track I or II, and will help define the success or failure of diplomatic efforts in the coming year. Keeping a close eye on the local picture is therefore key.

Beyond the local picture, the *Syria in Transition* team has picked out five developments that are worth following. They are not listed in order of importance.

- **Elections:** Most impactful will be the US presidential elections in November. Regardless of who wins, Syria is unlikely to be a priority. Domestic posturing might prompt calls for troop withdrawals from the northeast, but given ongoing tensions with Russia and Iran it would be contrary to Washington's interests to relinquish a military presence in such a strategically vital region.

Across the Atlantic, Europeans will also be heading to the polls. The UK's general election is expected to take place in late 2024 with the Labour Party leading in polls. Whoever wins, it is unlikely that the UK's position on Syria will alter significantly given the consistent policy of the FCDO and the marginal role that foreign policy plays in British electoral campaigns.

Elections are also scheduled in Finland, Portugal, Slovakia, Lithuania, Belgium, Croatia, and Austria. Alone, none of these races will have a significant impact on Syria. Should there be a collective shift to the far-right, however – echoing on a wider level what transpired recently in the Netherlands – change on Syria policy might become likely as more capitals look for ways to curb migration. In Brussels, the spotlight will be on the European Parliament elections in June, with personnel changes in the Commission and Council potentially affecting foreign policy agendas, including those on Syria.

Syrian refugees might again take centre stage in Turkey's 2024 local elections. Long-term integration of Syrians and refugee returns will likely feature prominently in campaigning, particularly by the opposition, and depending on the outcome will likely impact Turkey's relationship with both the Syrian opposition and the regime.

- **Declining aid:** Shrinking humanitarian aid budgets will hit Syrians hard. The recent round of WFP cuts might be a foretaste of what is coming. Unfortunately, the much-needed overhaul of the UN's aid structure is not in sight, and the lack of unified action among donors hampers effective multilateral responses.

After years of evil tidings, there is growing shoulder-shrugging in capitals, as Ukraine, Gaza, and Europe's migration crisis dominate headlines. It is true that more sustainable solutions are needed for chronic humanitarian crises like that in Syria; but rather like a game of Jenga, a collapse could come all of a sudden if too much structural support is withdrawn too quickly.

- **Diplomatic tracks:** Syria has no shortage of diplomatic tracks, but all are in various states of disrepair. The Moscow Quad (Russia, Turkey, Iran, Assad regime) is at an impasse over seemingly irreconcilable core demands. The Arab track, meanwhile, is dormant and unlikely to gain traction as long as Arab leverage remains weak.

The UN-sponsored track faces multiple problems, not least of which is the regime's continued rejection of UNSCR 2254. While having a hard time to fulfil his mandate, the Special Envoy has the means to promote fresh ideas for practical and realistic confidence building measures (CBMs) that are



likely to resonate with war-weary Syrians. 2024 will show whether the Envoy's office has what it takes to adopt new approaches.

- **Gaza crisis:** Saudi Arabia's recent offer of mediation between the Houthis and the US underscores just how topsy-turvy Middle East politics has become. De-escalation is the regional dictate of the hour, and except for hardliners in the Israeli government, there's little appetite for further war in the region. The next year will likely see a surge in regional and international diplomacy to contain the fallout of the Gaza war.

Along Syria's southern border, Israel is expected to intensify measures against Iran and its proxies. This could involve establishing a buffer zone in coordination with Jordan and other partners, or it could simply be a reactivation of the 2018 agreement guaranteed by Russia. Iranian military logistics, however, are reportedly increasing their operations at the Basel al-Assad Airport in Latakia that shares a runway with Russia's Hmeimim air base. Serious escalation with Iran *and* Russia could be in prospect.

- **Black swans:** Unexpected events are always on the cards. The Assad family's increasing concentration of power and wealth may provoke a palace coup by disaffected army officers, leading to a sudden and unexpected peace agreement between the regime and the opposition. A man-made disaster such as a collapse of one of Syria's major dams could trigger a watershed moment that puts Syria on an unpredicted trajectory. The sudden death of a world leader – Putin, Biden or Khamenei, for example, could do the same.

Uncertainty and instability have long been hallmarks of the Middle East and there's no reason to think that that will change any time soon. What is predictable is that the team at *Syria in Transition* will continue to exert every effort to bring you the news behind the news, so that, whether negative or positive, developments at least will be understandable. We wish our readers all the very best for 2024.