



**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (27)

***Russia's Increasing Stalemate in Southwest Syria***

Alexey Khlebnikov, RIAC

## **The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)**

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation established in 1995, with 53 member states, for the primary purpose of promoting peace, security and international cooperation through executive education, applied policy research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants and NGO and private sector staff in pertinent fields of international peace and security.

## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

### **Editor:**

Abdulla Ibrahim, Project Lead Researcher

Tamer Badawi, Research Assistant

### **Author**

#### **Alexey Khlebnikov**

Alexey Khlebnikov is an independent strategic risk consultant and a MENA expert at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). He consulted various institutions and INGOs, including humanitarian ones. He has been published on international relations topics in particular on the MENA region in academic journals and media sources in Russia, Europe, U.S., and the Middle East. He holds an MA in global public policy from the University of Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs and a BA and MA in Middle Eastern studies from Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod where he also completed his PhD studies. He was an Edmund Muskie fellow (2012-2014) in the U.S., a research fellow at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in 2013 and a visiting fellow at Tel Aviv University in 2011. Currently Alexey consults various think tanks, institutions and INGOs in Europe, Middle East, Russia, and the U.S. Alexey's research interest is focused on the regional transformations, conflicts, intra-regional tensions and Russia's Middle East policy.

The ideas expressed are those of the author not the publisher or the author's affiliation

Published in October 2020

All rights reserved to GCSP

The town and province of Daraa in southwest Syria is known for being a “cradle of the Syrian revolution”. Six years after the start of the Syrian uprising, it has been included in one of the four de-escalation zones that Russia established in Syria striking deals between different opposition armed groups and Damascus, with the consent of external actors. The southwest de-escalation zone is comprised of three provinces – Daraa, al-Suwayda, and al-Quneitra – whose proximity to Israel has been a crucial factor in Moscow’s strategy in the region.

The southwest Syria de-escalation zone has several peculiarities that make it distinct from the other zones, in particular its geography, i.e. its proximity to Israel, which has defined Russia’s very special and nuanced approach to it. At the same time, the Russian approach to dealing with the armed opposition groups within the zone was similar to the groups in other de-escalation zones. So, what makes Russia’s approach different?

### **The pivotal Israeli factor**

Southwestern Syria is geopolitically a very sensitive area because of its proximity to Israel. The zone borders Israel, and therefore requires specialised security policies that divert the conflict from Israel’s northern frontiers. This factor played a key role in Russia’s delicate approach to resolving the conflict in southwest Syria.

Israel’s major concern about its northern neighbour is the continuous entrenchment of Iranian paramilitaries and proxy groups in the country, especially in the areas close to Israel’s border with southern Syria. Over the past several years, increasing Iranian presence in Syria has become a point of tension between Moscow and Tel Aviv. Russia clearly understands Israel’s concerns, and has to maintain a balancing act between Israel and Iran in order to avoid a major escalation that could jeopardise its own plans. In order to do so, Moscow strives to accommodate the interests of both partners: for Iran, it tries to decrease the intensity and frequency of Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria; and for Israel, it tries to make sure that Iranian and its allied forces are distant enough and disengaged from areas bordering Israel.

Escalation on the Syrian-Israeli border could radically change Israel’s position on the Syrian conflict in a way that would make Russia’s propping up of the Syrian establishment more costly and more difficult diplomatically. In the situation where Damascus together with Iranian forces conducts military campaigns near Israeli borders, the Israeli leadership views it as a direct threat to the country’s national security and see little difference between the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Iranian paramilitary forces. In other words, any military provocation organised by Iran near the Israeli border is perceived as testing Israeli red-lines and implies that Damascus is part of it, which could lead to a shift in Israel’s position on the removal of Bashar al-Assad’s government,

which it desires to see stabilised. Clearly, Moscow is eager to avoid such an escalatory scenario, which requires it to maximise its military and diplomatic capabilities. Therefore, Russia ensures that Iranian and proxy forces are not involved in SAA operations taking place in the southwest Syria.

When Russia, Israel, and the United States [agreed](#) to hand the south de-escalation zone back to Syrian government control in May 2018, they envisaged the withdrawal of Iranian and proxy forces in the areas that might threaten Israeli security. According to the agreement, Russia had to ensure withdrawal of Iranian forces from a 85-km zone bordering the Israeli frontiers. It turned out to be an unrealistic enterprise, as this area also includes Damascus and the Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, which is surrounded by Iranian forces and proxies. As a result, in practice, Russia had to find a *modus operandi* to minimise Iranian presence in the vicinity of the Israeli borders. It did so by deploying its own military police and the eighth brigade of the Fifth Corps, which controlled the bordering areas, to minimise entrenchment of forces loyal to Iran. Eventually, such moves created a more complicated environment for pro-Iranian forces to operate in the Syrian–Israeli border zone.

In addition, Russia has set up several military observation posts and deployed its military police along the armistice line in the Golan Heights. It also helped re-deploy the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission to the de-militarised zone in the Golan Heights for the first time since 2012, which also helped to restore some aspects of the originally envisioned buffer.

### **The indispensability of external guarantors**

In order to establish the southwest de-escalation zone, Russia was forced to negotiate with actors outside of the trilateral Astana format – namely Jordan, Israel, and the United States – for several reasons. First, the zone borders both Israel and Jordan. The US military is also present in Amman, necessitating its participation. Second, all three countries were involved in supporting and supplying the opposition groups in south Syria. Third, negotiability of armed opposition groups and their will to negotiate with Damascus and Moscow is strongly tied to their sponsors. Therefore, the Russian plan to pacify and reintegrate southwest Syria under Syrian government control was impossible without involving Israel, Jordan, and the United States in one way or another, who could easily spoil Moscow's plans. Therefore, in order to achieve any success and ensure a substantial amount of sustainability, Russia had to deal with all three states as guarantors for the ceasefire in the southwestern de-escalation zone. As a result, Russia managed to reach a reconciliation agreement between the opposition armed groups in the southwest and Damascus thanks to the mutually agreed halting of external support to those groups from the United States,

Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, which left them with only one viable option – to strike a deal with the government. This is what makes it different, for instance, from Idlib, where Turkish support to the armed opposition groups does not allow Russia to mediate in striking reconciliation deals with Damascus.

When Russian military formed the Fifth Corps, which predominantly consisted of former armed opposition fighters who agreed to reconcile with Damascus, it created the eighth brigade<sup>1</sup> from the Shabab al-Sunnah armed group, which was based in southwest Syria's Busra al-Sham. In order to keep certain leverage over Damascus, Russia had to maintain and develop military structures under its control, which consist of former opposition fighters who could be utilised to restrain Assad's military and *Mukhabarat* pressure. When Moscow launched its reconciliation process in southwest Syria, armed groups that agreed to come to terms with Damascus gave up only their medium and heavy weaponry.

This preserved these groups' capacity to fight or at least to defend areas they controlled and to create a certain counter-balance to the SAA's structures and pro-Iranian forces in the region. For example, some parts of Maher al-Assad's Fourth Division (which is considered to be under heavy Iranian influence) are also based in southwest Syria and also recruit former opposition fighters who reconciled with the Syrian government.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Moscow is using newly formed semi-regular military structures under its control in the southwest as a buffer (along with the Russian military police itself) between Israel and SAA units (Maher's forces) and Iranian and proxy paramilitaries in the area. This is part of the deal (between Russia on one side and the United States, Israel, and Jordan on the other) that guarantees the blocking of external support to the armed group in southwest Syria.

### **Current challenges to the reconciliation agreements**

The unstable and quite volatile security situation in southwest Syria persists for several reasons.

First, there are continual frictions between the Russian-aligned eighth brigade and Maher al-Assad's Fourth Division, which is infiltrated by Iran. This is largely due to the eighth brigade's refusal either to disarm completely according to Damascus's parameters or to serve in the ranks of the SAA. Thus, Damascus's inability to incorporate and control all armed groups in the southwest

---

<sup>1</sup> Many fighters are under the protection of the eighth brigade, which makes Damascus even more uncomfortable, given that they refuse to completely disarm and to serve in the SAA.

<sup>2</sup> Although Damascus signed reconciliation deals with armed groups active in southwest Syria (including with Shabab al-Sunnah), it does not like the fact that Russia supports irregular military units that are out of its control, and tries to convince Moscow to incorporate them into Maher al-Assad's Fourth Division units (also comprised of the reconciled opposition fighters) based in the southwest. Maher's approach is to send such units to fight in Idlib, expecting them to be terminated. Apparently, those groups under Russian military control do not want to join the Fourth Division.

leads to frequent clashes between SAA units and reconciled armed groups, which perpetuates this continuous instability.

Second, Russia seems unable to create cohesive military structures under its control in the southwest, which could maintain order and stability without excessive Iranian presence and without intra-Syrian confrontation.

Third, Damascus will keep trying to completely disarm and incorporate reconciled armed groups into the SAA. It will naturally face resistance from the armed groups, which contributes to the continued unrest.

The only possible alternative, which has worked in other de-escalation zones in East Ghouta and Homs, is to transfer all those armed groups to Idlib in the northwest of the country. However, these groups do not want to be transferred there, and they insist on abiding by the terms of the reconciliation agreement that mandated that they may remain in the southwest.

As a result, the situation in southwest Syria is at a stalemate. Moreover, there is no reason to think that it will somehow be resolved, due to the continued deterioration in economic conditions, which only exacerbates frictions between the SAA and reconciled armed groups.