



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Research Project Report (5)

Understanding Russia's Endgame in Syria: A View from the United States

Mona Yacoubian, U.S. Institute of Peace

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

Author

Mona Yacoubian

Mona Yacoubian is a senior advisor for Syria, the Middle East and North Africa at the U.S. Institute of Peace. In 2019, she served as the Executive Director of the Syria Study Group which USIP was mandated by Congress to facilitate. Ms. Yacoubian joined the U.S. Institute of Peace after serving as deputy assistant administrator in the Middle East Bureau at USAID from 2014-2017 where she had responsibility for Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Prior to joining USAID, Ms. Yacoubian was a senior advisor at the Stimson Center where her work focused on the Arab uprisings with an emphasis on Syria. Prior to joining the Stimson Center, Ms. Yacoubian served as a special advisor on the Middle East at the U.S. Institute of Peace where her work focused on Lebanon and Syria as well as broader issues related to democratization in the Arab world. From 1990-1998, Ms. Yacoubian served as the North Africa analyst in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Ms. Yacoubian's research focuses on conflict analysis and prevention in the Middle East, with a specific focus on Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Her interests also include fragility and resilience. Ms. Yacoubian was a Fulbright scholar in Syria where she studied Arabic at the University of Damascus from 1985 to 1986. She has held an international affairs fellowship with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and is currently a CFR member. Ms. Yacoubian earned an MPA from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and a BA from Duke University.

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

Published in February 2021

All rights reserved to GCSP

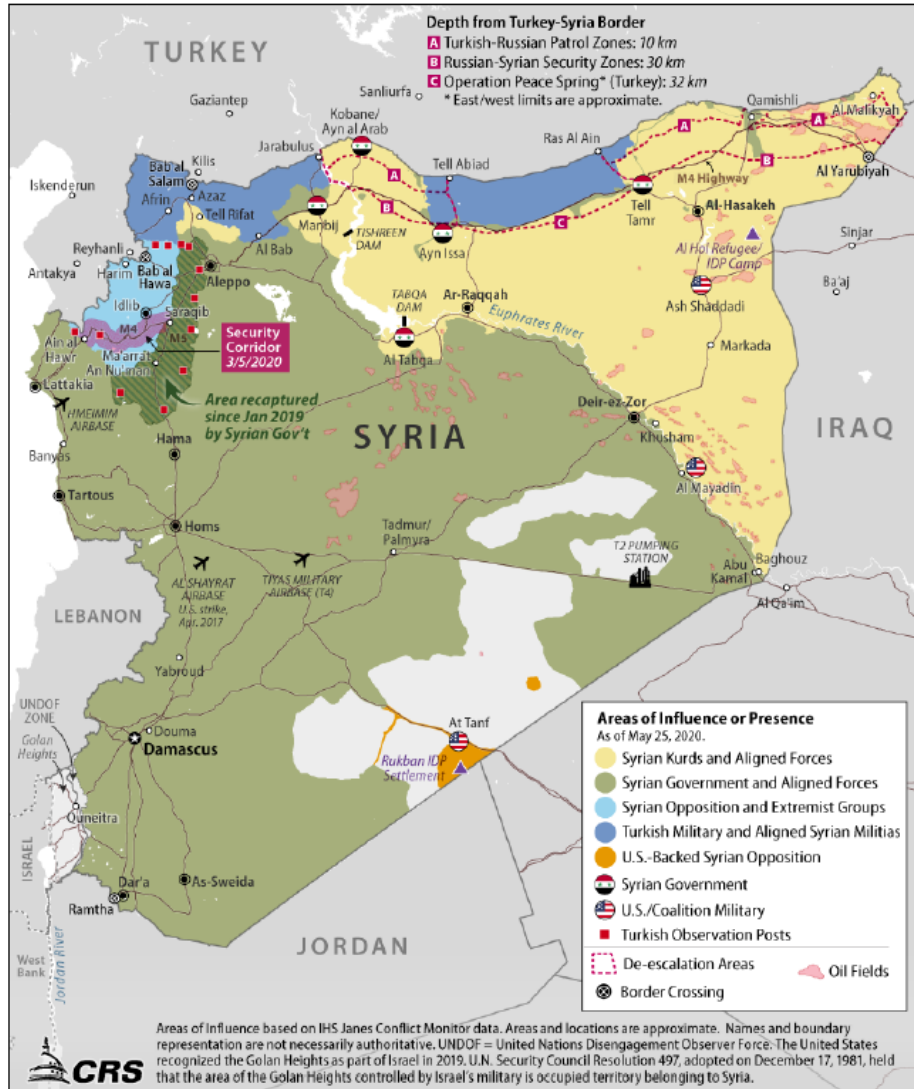
Executive Summary

- ***Lacking better options, Russia appears to be pursuing a “spheres of influence” model as its endgame in Syria.*** This model would entail a Syria divided into territorial spheres of influence under the tutelage of competing external patrons: Russia would hold sway in the west; Turkey in the north; and grudgingly for Russia, the United States in the east. Given the more covert nature of its power, Iran would not exert control over a specific territorial sphere of influence. Instead, Iran and its proxies would project influence in strategic areas under the Assad regime’s control.
- ***This endgame model emerges from a position of necessity rather than choice.*** Russian domestic constraints, especially a faltering economy, combined with the international opprobrium directed against the Assad regime, the Syrian conflict’s complexity, and the Syrian economy’s catastrophic meltdown underscore the stark difficulties facing Russia’s endgame strategy. Pragmatic and opportunistic, Russia’s “spheres of influence” endgame implicitly acknowledges Moscow’s many challenges in Syria while exploiting openings to consolidate its gains. In its ideal, this endgame strategy works in concert with partners with whom Russia can cooperate, while undermining rivals who threaten Moscow’s strategy. While Moscow professes the importance of restoring Syria’s full territorial integrity, the Russian endgame recognizes that powerful external actors will continue to exert control over important swathes of Syria.
- ***Elements of Russia’s “spheres of influence” endgame may serve as a template for Russia’s approach to the Middle East and possibly beyond.*** The specifics of Russia’s engagement in Syria are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere. Yet, elements of its endgame strategy might constitute a template for Russia’s foreign policy in an increasingly complex 21st century world. Some Russian analysts consider Syria as Russia’s “first post-Soviet success” and a test case for a multipolar “post-West” world marked by the erosion of the U.S.-led international order. Russia’s “spheres of influence” endgame aspires to this “post-West” vision for Syria where Russia would play the dominant role, alongside other regional powers (e.g., Turkey and Iran), while U.S. influence would be vastly diminished.
- ***Russia’s Syria strategy fits within its multipolar ideal for the Middle East.*** Russia will seek to leverage its dominant posture in Syria as a springboard for its engagement across the region. The interplay between Russia’s strategies in Syria and in the region features a

two-way dynamic: Moscow draws on its regional ties to bolster its position in Syria, while leveraging its posture in Syria to project influence across the region. From its perch in Syria, Moscow seeks to stake a claim in the eastern Mediterranean—a longstanding component of its great power ambitions—as well as cementing ties to autocratic leaders in the Gulf and Egypt.

- ***The United States potentially poses the greatest threat to Russia's Syria endgame; thus the future U.S. posture in Syria will be consequential for both Russia and the region.*** A full U.S. withdrawal from Syria would prove counterproductive for Syria's stability, and a lost opportunity to develop new modalities mediating the roles of external actors in Syria's internationalised conflict. By contrast, maintaining—if not slightly bolstering—the small U.S. footprint in Syria is important not only to prevent the return of ISIS and as leverage in political negotiations, but also to shape the rules of the game for Russia's presence in the Middle East. Enhanced U.S. influence in Syria coupled with a reinvigoration of U.S.-led regional diplomacy could be instrumental to progress toward a more lasting political settlement to the Syria conflict and a powerful rebuke of Russia's "post-West" order.

Figure 1, Areas of Influence in Syria as of May 2020



Sources: Reprint of CRS map. CRS using area of influence data from Janes Conflict Monitor, last revised May 25, 2020. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports. Permission was granted to the GCSP by Janes in February 2021.

Introduction

Five years into Russia's military intervention in Syria, understanding Moscow's endgame could provide critical insights into the decade-long conflict's trajectory, as well as Russia's posture in the Middle East and beyond. Although still evolving and subject to internal debates, Moscow's Syria strategy appears to be centred on a "spheres of influence" model. In this model, Syria is divided into distinct realms under the sway of competing external patrons. This approach accepts a complex interplay of military, political, and economic power between external actors Russia, Turkey, the United States, and Iran within the dynamic Syrian context. While this model seeks to maximise Russia's advantages and provide some stability in a volatile conflict scenario, its success remains a longshot with challenges from the United States, domestic Russian constraints, regional dynamics, and the complex Syrian context

Nevertheless, this "spheres of influence" model points to one potential outcome of the Syrian conflict and more significantly illuminates a potential Russian approach for both the region and, what some Russian strategists' term, a "post-West" order. This order centres on a multipolar, competitive world characterised by a diminished role of the United States and an elevated Russian status. Thus, understanding Russia's endgame in Syria may unlock insights into Moscow's strategic posture in a complex 21st century world, with important implications for the United States. This analysis was based on numerous encounters with Russian experts in dialogues held by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), and other institutions from 2018-2021. The analysis and conclusions that follow stem from the many discussions that occurred over more than two years and are solely those of the author. This paper does not represent the views of the GCSP or the U.S. Institute of Peace where the author is a Senior Advisor.

Part I. Background and Strategic Framing

By most accounts, Moscow's 2015 decision to intervene militarily in Syria turned the tide of the war in favour of the Assad regime. Russian airpower combined with Iranian-backed militias on the ground played a decisive role in preventing the Assad regime's collapse by neutralising a large segment of armed opposition and brutally reasserting regime control over much of Syria.

As of early 2021, the conflict appears to be entering a period of stalemate marked by more static conflict lines. However, the conflict is not entirely "frozen" as Syria remains inherently volatile.

Some areas—notably Idlib and parts of northeast Syria—still hold the potential for major contestation. Yet, most regions will not be subject to large-scale military offensives, shifting frontlines, or massive displacement.

Russia's motivations, goals, and strategy are increasingly discernible against this backdrop of a “stable-unstable” Syria. Having achieved its primary objective of rescuing the regime and bolstering its grip on power, Russia now appears focused on developing its endgame strategy.

Specifically, Russia's endgame in Syria seeks to promote Moscow's interests in three concentric arenas: (1) Syria's multi-layered conflict; (2) Russia's role in regional/Middle East dynamics; and (3) Moscow's broader conception of an evolving global order. These elements are loosely inter-connected. Russia's dominant posture in Syria serves as a platform for its engagement across the Middle East, while also advancing a worldview that seeks to further erode the U.S.-led, rules-based international order.

Russia's endgame strategy is still somewhat inchoate. Several factors—some potentially insurmountable—inhibit Moscow's ability to develop a coherent and sustainable vision that translates its military gains into a political settlement favourable to Russia and the Assad regime. These factors include: divisions within Russia's national security apparatus (especially between the ministries of defence and foreign affairs); strong international opposition to the Assad regime; the Syrian conflict's complexity including its many foreign stakeholders; and major constraints on Russia's power projection and ability to shape Syria's conflict dynamics.

Largely pragmatic and opportunistic, Russia's Syria endgame nonetheless contains elements of a broader “grand strategy.” For Russia, Syria's strategic importance resonates beyond the Middle East as a test case for Russia's desired “post-West” world. This multipolar, competitive “post-West” world features Russia's elevated status at the expense of diminished U.S. power. Nowhere is this vision more apparent for Russia than in the Middle East where Moscow seeks to exploit the perception of a U.S. withdrawal from the region to project its own influence.

Russia's Endgame in Syria: A “Spheres of Influence” Model

Russia's endgame emerges from a position of weakness rather than strength. Cognizant of its limitations in Syria, Russia appears to be constructing a pragmatic endgame strategy that implicitly acknowledges Moscow's many shortfalls in Syria, while exploiting openings to consolidate its

military gains. Russia looks to be settling for an endgame in Syria that stakes its claim on key strategic assets, while ceding power and influence in areas beyond its control. In its ideal, this endgame strategy works in concert with partners with whom Russia can cooperate, while undermining rivals who threaten Moscow's strategy.

Moscow's Syria strategy is informed by the so-called "Primakov Doctrine." As Eugene Rumer asserts in a [2019 paper](#), "Named after former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, the Primakov doctrine posits that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is unacceptable to Russia." The doctrine's key elements include the push for a multipolar world with major powers seeking to counterbalance the United States, and Russia playing an essential role in that effort. Rumer notes, "The Syrian operation is a perfect example of the Primakov doctrine in action."

In Syria, Russia's "spheres of influence" model references nineteenth and twentieth century geopolitics, but also reflects an updated view that recognises the limits of Russian power. It is defined by a malleable approach in Syria where Russia shapeshifts depending on the imperatives of different subregions in Syria's complex conflict. Bound by Syria's complex conflict dynamics, Moscow's strategy acquiesces to Syria's de facto zones of control that essentially translate into three major spheres of influence: Russia in the west, particularly along Syria's strategic spine; Turkey in the north; and begrudgingly for Moscow, the United States in the east. Though within this crude schema, several nuances exist.

While a consequential player in Syria, Iran does not exert control over a specific territorial sphere of influence, given the more covert nature of its power in Syria. Instead, Iran and its proxies will project influence in strategic areas under regime/Russian control. These areas include southern Damascus, pockets in the southwest and the southeast – particularly around the Abu Kamal border crossing and the Deir Zor countryside, and micro-areas in and around Aleppo and Hama governorates.

Turkey's sphere of influence will be defined by its current zones of control: Euphrates Shield, Afrin, and Peace Spring. The March 5th ceasefire negotiated with Russia will roughly delineates a fourth zone in northern Idlib governorate stretching north from the M4 highway, although these lines have yet to be solidified.

While the United States is the primary power in eastern Syria, the area remains less stable characterised by continued power competition with Russia. Though limited, Russian influence in the northeast is exercised through its joint patrols with the Turks in some border areas, cooperation with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in others, and being embedded with the regime in limited spaces such as the Qamishli airport. Russian influence is also projected in attempts to encroach on areas where U.S. forces are the dominant external player, including around Hasakeh and the middle and lower Euphrates valley.

Moscow's "spheres of influence" model adheres to the many constraints Russia faces, both in Syria as well as domestically, necessarily inhibiting its ability to project maximum power. While Moscow professes the importance of restoring Syria's full territorial integrity (and the Assad regime demands nothing less), the Russian endgame recognises that powerful external actors will continue to exert control over important swathes of Syria. Rather than bearing the risks and undertaking the significant investment necessary to oust these foreign powers from Syria, Russia instead has developed a synergistic partnership with one – Turkey – while limiting its opposition to provocative probes of the other – the United States.

Russian Domestic Constraints

Russian domestic considerations also play a role in defining its endgame in Syria. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian economic growth had been anaemic. With the pandemic's onset, Russia's [economy contracted by 4% in 2020](#), partly fuelled by the crash in oil prices which plummeted 53% between January and May 2020. Vastly diminished oil and gas sales have cut into budget revenue, [forcing Moscow to dip into its reserves](#). Meanwhile, real household incomes are [slated to fall by 5%](#), remaining far below peak levels in 2013.

Addressing domestic economic decline is a top priority for Russians, while the public remains sceptical about foreign engagements. Reflecting this dynamic, popular support for Russia's engagement in Syria has dropped significantly, [with 55% of Russians](#) favouring an end to Russia's intervention in Syria, according to a May 2019 poll by the independent Levada Centre.

Global Implications of the Endgame: Syria a Test Case for the "Post-West World"

Some Russian analysts assert that Syria serves as the test case for a "post-West" world, a new era marked by the erosion of the U.S.-led international order. In this view, Russia's "spheres of

influence” endgame aspires to this “post-West” vision for Syria where Russia would play the dominant role, alongside other regional powers (e.g., Turkey and Iran), while the U.S. influence would be vastly diminished.

A Russian analyst characterised Russia’s involvement in Syria as “Russia’s first ‘post-Soviet’ success.” In this view, Moscow prevented regime change in Syria, at relatively low cost, inflicting a first-time defeat on the United States in an era of Arab Spring uprisings and colour revolutions. Moreover, Russia demonstrated to other autocrats in the region that unlike the United States, Russia was a reliable partner upon which they could depend.

Indeed, for Russia, Syria is one among many arenas of competition with the United States in the Middle East. Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan are often cited as negative occurrences of U.S. military intervention in the region. In the Russian view, these examples reflect a U.S. grand strategy that seeks to expand America’s global footprint and spheres of influence at Russia’s expense.

Stark differences between Russia and the United States shape their engagement in Syria. From the Russian analysts’ perspective, the United States and Russia have fundamentally different and mutually exclusive understandings of the conflict’s origins, dynamics, and potential endgame. In Russia’s narrative of the Syrian conflict:

- The United States played a deliberate role in escalating the conflict by arming extremist groups. U.S.-backed interference was the primary driver of conflict.
- Regime change was the principal objective of the United States, not defeating ISIS.
- The United States erred in assuming Russia would “get a bloody nose in Syria and leave.”
- The United States is a spoiler in Syria with no positive role to play in Russia’s endgame.

Moscow’s great power competition approach to Syria extends to its diplomatic efforts. Establishing the Astana process in 2017 was a key element of Russia’s overarching push for creating a “post-West” Syria. The Astana process is a parallel, Russia-centric alternative to the U.N.-led Geneva process, in which the United States plays a leading role. It formally groups Russia, Iran, and Turkey into an alternative diplomatic architecture, challenging Geneva’s primacy by exploiting the three parties’ collective power on the ground. Mounting tensions between the

United States and Turkey over the Kurdish issue further facilitated Moscow's creation of the Astana process.

Beyond its role as a Russian-led diplomatic alternative to the Geneva process, Astana also facilitated Russia's expanding military intervention in Syria. Through so-called "de-escalation zones," negotiated via the Astana process, Russia and the Assad regime leveraged this diplomatic construct to claw back most opposition-held territories in a series of brutal offensives.

Regional Implications of Russia's Syria Strategy

Moscow's ideal for the Middle East tracks closely to its vision of multipolarity where powers—both great and regional—divvy up the region in a patchwork of competing spheres of influence, naturally decreasing the United States' predominant power. Russia's strategies in Syria and the region are mutually reinforcing: Moscow draws on its regional ties to bolster its position in Syria, while leveraging its posture in Syria to project influence across the region.

According to Russian analysts, Moscow views itself as the indispensable player in Syria, given its ties with the conflict's key protagonists. Russia is the only foreign power in Syria that maintains open lines of communication with all key players: the Assad regime, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Israel.

By the same token, Russian analysts stress that Moscow views Syria's normalisation and economic reintegration as a *regional* rather than global undertaking. It seeks to promote Syria's diplomatic acceptance—a key component of Russia's endgame—primarily with regional states, especially in the Gulf. Gulf engagement is prioritised both as a source of reconstruction funding and a hedge against Iran. Russia will also push for Syria's readmission into the Arab League. Moscow may pursue deeper ties with Egypt and Saudi Arabia—exploiting any emerging tensions between these autocratic regimes and the Biden administration—in pursuit of this goal.

Russia views its relative success in Syria coupled with a perception of a U.S. withdrawal from the region as bolstering Russian influence across the Middle East. Moscow—leveraging its naval base in Tartus—will look to deepen its influence in the eastern Mediterranean, a longstanding component of its great power ambitions. It will seek to exploit its ties to Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf to position itself as a key power in a multipolar Middle East.

Russia has also effectively exploited its posture in Syria as a launchpad for its broader military and security ambitions across the region. Russia's involvement in Libya is the most prominent example, marked by the Kremlin's decision to support rebel commander Khalifa Haftar. Moscow has leveraged its assets in Syria to aid its involvement in Libya, recruiting Syrian mercenaries to fight and [reportedly supplying aircraft to Haftar](#) from Syria.

Diplomatically, Russia's rising influence in the region is evidenced by visits to Moscow in recent years by the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, among others. Russian President Putin also has increased his visibility in the region, traveling to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in October 2019 for the first time in a decade and visiting Israel in early 2020.

Syria also serves as an important testbed and showcase for Russian armaments.¹ Russia is the world's second biggest arms exporter, after the United States, and the Middle East is an important market for Russian arms, second only to Asia. Russia's defence ministry has claimed that [600 new weapons were tested](#) in Syria, underscoring the inherent strategic value the Syrian conflict arena plays in promoting Russian weapons. Moreover, Russian weapons sales come with no conditions, further appealing to non-democratic governments in the region. Indeed, Russia often leverages arms sales to build ties and cultivate influence, including in the Middle East.

Part II. A Deeper Understanding of Russia's "Spheres of Influence" Endgame in Syria

Russia's endgame in Syria appears to epitomise its "spheres of influence" doctrine, featuring a Syria that while nominally whole would in essence be divided into regions under the tutelage of various external powers. Russia would be the pre-eminent powerbroker, exercising its influence over the Assad regime and significant portions of what has been termed "useful Syria."² Turkey and the United States would remain in territorial control of important regions in the north and east respectively. Iran would operate at times in tandem with Russia and at others in competition with Moscow across regions under the Assad regime and Russian control.

¹ The CSIS [Babel](#) Podcast series on Russia in the Middle East, Part Two, provides useful insights into Russia's strategic calculus on Syria and its role in arms sales to the Middle East.

² This area stretches from Lattakia on the coast, down Syria's strategic spine through Aleppo, Homs and Damascus, to the Jordanian border.

Russian pragmatism and opportunism will animate this model. Moscow will seek to consolidate the gains of its relatively low cost/high return intervention in Syria. It will leverage its power to dominate its sphere of influence, while seeking to shape the trajectory of those spheres not under its direct influence. If played well, Moscow's "spheres of influence" endgame in Syria could yield important additional benefits to Russia, while relieving it of the significant downside costs and risks that a traditional occupation (such as the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan) entails.

Still, the strategic challenges will be significant. Moscow will need to be deft in its handling of Turkey, arguably its most important counterpart in this endeavour. It must also balance its role with that of Iran, the Assad regime's other key ally. At times provoking Israeli strikes, Iran's presence has proven increasingly difficult for Moscow to manage. The United States will pose the greatest threat to the Russian "spheres of influence" endgame in Syria, especially should the Biden administration opt to bolster the U.S. presence on the ground in eastern Syria.

The Russian Sphere of Influence

With the reassertion of Assad's control and the elimination of much of the armed opposition, Moscow will look to consolidate its military posture and pivot toward a greater emphasis on diplomatic, political, and economic engagement. Russia's aspirations in Syria will increasingly centre on normalisation and reconstruction. To this end, Moscow will seek to promote a political settlement to the conflict that legitimises the status quo.

Politically, Russia will look to Syria's 2021 presidential elections as a key capstone in this endeavour. In the interim, Russia will continue to engage in the constitutional reform process, albeit on the Assad regime's terms. From Moscow's perspective, participation in the UN-sponsored Constitutional Committee allows the Assad regime to appear engaged in a reform process without making any real concessions. Moscow will look to manipulate this perception of Damascus's engagement to influence favourably European decisions on the question of normalisation with Syria – a key objective of Russia and the regime.

Russia's diplomatic pursuit of normalisation will be dogged, simultaneously seeking to position Moscow as the indispensable negotiator on Syria while elevating its global stature. Not only will Moscow look to entice Arab countries to normalise diplomatic relations, but Russia will work assiduously to create the illusion of peace and stability in Syria.

Boosting refugee returns is a key component of Russia's normalisation strategy. A controversial [Russian-organised conference](#) dedicated to encouraging mass refugee returns epitomises these efforts. Yet, this attempt fell flat, underscoring the significant shortcomings of the Russian approach. The United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and most refugee-hosting countries (except for Lebanon) boycotted the event. They cited Syria's hostile conditions inhibiting the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrian refugees.

On the economic front, Russia's focus will turn increasingly to attracting reconstruction funding and foreign investment in Syria. A Russian delegation's September 2020 visit to Damascus, headed by Foreign Minister Lavrov—his first trip to Syria since 2012—[previewed a bilateral economic agreement](#). The pact will include energy sector projects, signalling Russia's intent to circumvent U.S. sanctions.

Yet, the challenges are significant given Syria's dire economic situation, war-related losses,³ and the plethora of U.S. and EU sanctions that inhibit any investment. Syria's economic meltdown⁴—marked by growing impoverishment and shortages of basic necessities—is a paramount challenge. Without providing details, Russian analysts suggest that Russia will seek to mitigate the negative social and political impacts of Syria's mounting economic catastrophe. Sanctions—including the [U.S. designation](#) of Syria's Central Bank—will continue to pose a significant barrier to reconstruction, with little prospect of their lifting in the short to medium term.

Russia's pivot to the diplomatic, political, and economic spheres is evident in several developments. In May 2020, Russian President Putin appointed a third special envoy to Syria, designating Moscow's current ambassador in Damascus, Alexander Efimov. Some analysts note that [Efimov's appointment](#) signals greater priority on diplomatic and economic issues as opposed to Russia's earlier emphasis in the military sphere. Efimov previously served as Russia's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As Russia prioritises reconstruction in Syria, Moscow will be courting the UAE and other Gulf countries to play a pivotal role.

At the same time, Moscow will fortify its military infrastructure centred on its Tartus naval base and Hmeimim air base. Moscow is leasing these bases for 49 years with the possibility of a further

³ In 2017, the [World Bank](#) estimated that from 2011 to 2016, cumulative GDP losses were US\$226 billion.

⁴ In 2020, the Syrian pound lost 2/3 of its value, 80% of Syrians fell into extreme poverty and 9.5 million Syrians became food insecure according to the [World Food Program](#).

25-year extension, underscoring Russia's long-term ambitions in Syria. Both bases are [slated for expansion](#) to improve operability and performance. Russia has also deepened its military presence at the Qamishli airport, reportedly [establishing a helicopter base](#) there. Russia also maintains its sophisticated S-400 air defence system in Syria, while supplying the S-300 system to the Syrian government.

Understanding Iran's Role in the Russian Sphere of Influence

Iran does not control a specific territorial sphere of influence, but rather projects its power through predominantly informal channels. Whether through cooperation or competition, Russia and Iran appear to maintain a mutual understanding that facilitates their joint engagement in Syria. Iran and Russia's relationship in Syria has been somewhat symbiotic, with Iran's network of foreign Shia fighters and local militias on the ground complementing Russia's airpower. Iranian-backed militias were essential to enabling the Assad regime's retaking of Aleppo and parts of Deir Zor governorate, west of the Euphrates River.

Iranian-backed fighters have been deployed in various pockets across regime-held Syria. Specifically, Iran maintains a strategic presence near the Syrian-Iraqi border at Abu Kamal, filling in a vacuum left by the defeat of ISIS. Working in tandem with Iraqi Shia militias on the other side of the border, Iranian backed forces in eastern Syria have staked a [strategic foothold](#) in Deir Zor governorate, west of the Euphrates River. Iran also appears to maintain a presence through allied militias in southwest Syria, an increasingly unstable area of the Russian sphere of influence. These areas, as well as Damascus, hold critical importance for Iran and will likely remain key areas of Iranian influence for the foreseeable future.

The Turkish Sphere of Influence

Two significant national security priorities drive Turkey's policy in Syria: (1) preventing any further Syrian refugee inflows;⁵ and (2) obstructing the creation of a Kurdish statelet on Turkey's southern border.

Turkey's engagement in Syria has expanded significantly since its first military incursion in 2016. Turkey now controls three significant, albeit non-contiguous, zones inside Syria along the

⁵ Turkey hosts 3.6 million Syrian refugees, the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world according to the [UNHCR](#).

Turkish border: the Euphrates Shield Zone, Afrin, and the Operation Peace Spring Zone. In addition, Turkey has extended its control into significant portions of Idlib, where a fragile ceasefire remains in place. Together these areas comprise an estimated four million Syrians and five percent of Syrian territory.⁶

Turkey's sphere of influence holds enormous strategic significance in Russia's endgame as Ankara has evolved from Moscow's one-time adversary to a key stakeholder and principal partner. Russia believes that Turkey's presence in Syria will be indefinite and that harmonising their positions in Syria is both desirable and achievable. As a result, Russia has invested significant political capital in preserving the partnership.

Idlib remains a key outstanding issue. Turkey's posture in Idlib is still somewhat fluid, but the final contours of an agreement with Russia are increasingly evident. Russia is not necessarily committed to retaking the entire governorate. Its primary objectives centre on controlling the M4 highway, viewed as a strategic imperative, and ensuring that extremist elements on the ground refrain from attacking Russian or regime targets. Russia has indicated that it is willing to allow for Turkish control of Idlib north of the M4 highway.⁷

Turkey envisions controlling a safe enclave for Syrians in Idlib that would forestall any additional refugee flows by stabilising and rebuilding a significant portion of Idlib. Turkey has reportedly constructed eighteen new military outposts, primarily (although not exclusively) north of the M4 highway which will likely serve as the boundary delineating Turkey's sphere of influence in Idlib.⁸ Estimates of the number of Turkish troops in Idlib range between 10,000 and 20,000. Ankara reportedly is also planning to build 20,000 homes in Idlib to house some of the many internally displaced Syrians in the region.

⁶ Turkish control of these areas ranges from indirect administration through supplicant governance structures to projecting influence as the predominant power broker through local proxies. In some instances, Turkish control is exerted through direct rule over local administrative bodies via Turkish governors. Turkey pays local salaries, provides electricity through connection to the Turkish grid, and has even opened Turkish post office branches in some towns. Turkish universities have also opened satellite campuses in these areas, and Ankara has invested heavily in local hospitals and schools. Increasingly, the [Turkish lira has replaced Syrian currency](#), with some businesses only accepting Turkish lira.

⁷ If Russia can assert hegemony over the M4 highway—something Turkey and rebel forces thus far appear unwilling to concede—it will have secured, together with its retaking of the M5 highway in February 2020, the notable objective of re-establishing the Syrian regime's dominance over these key economic and strategic arteries.

⁸ This discussion is informed in part by GCSP online workshop, "COVID-19 and Humanitarian, Military, Economic and Political Dynamics of the Syrian Crisis," May 28-29, 2020.

Of course, challenges persist. Turkey has fortified other positions south of the M4, a stark reminder that the conflict remains unsettled. Stabilising Idlib's frontline will require further understandings between Turkey and Russia, perhaps including the resumption of regular joint patrols along the M4. The disposition of Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) also remains a thorny issue. Russia has largely ceded to Turkey responsibility for addressing the threat posed by the extremist group. Ankara remains engaged in a delicate dance with HTS, seeking to channel cooperation from more pragmatic elements, while isolating hardliners. Turkey's ultimate success in this endeavour, the extent of HTS pushback, and whether Russia will be satisfied with the results all remain in question.

Moscow appears to value the preservation of its partnership with Turkey over the marginal benefit (and arguably liability) of regaining control over the entirety of Idlib governorate despite the Assad regime's vocal preferences. Neither Turkey nor Russia appears interested in engaging in another all-out offensive. For Russia, Turkey is far more valuable as a partner, helping to secure and stabilise northern Syria.

More broadly, Russia's interests in deepening ties to Turkey, a NATO ally, extend beyond Syria-centric goals. In its relationship with Turkey, Moscow is also pursuing geostrategic aims centred on disrupting the post-World War II international order and sowing divisions within NATO. As a Russian analyst noted in a workshop in December 2020, "The damage that Turkey brings to Western coherence outweighs any negatives or difficulties in the bilateral relationship."

Alternative theories of Ankara's interventionist foreign policy, in Syria and elsewhere, are posed either as a nostalgic "neo-Ottoman" drive to regain the past glory of the Ottoman Empire or a forward-looking "post-modern" foreign policy that seeks to exploit the new regional and world disorder. This latter view coincides well with Russia's "post-West" posture. While Turkey and Russia are on opposite sides in conflicts such as in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, their deepening strategic ties are notable.

Ankara's decision to purchase and test the Russian S-400 air defence system underscores this tectonic shift as a NATO ally drifts toward Russia's orbit. One [Russian analyst noted](#) that Turkey's S-400 purchase symbolized "Turkey joining the multipolar world." The December 2020 U.S. [decision to sanction Turkey over the S-400 purchase](#) could further deepen this dynamic.

As Russian analyst Maxim Suchkov [noted in an October 2020 podcast](#), “Turkey sees Russia as a multiplier of its ambitions, and Russia sees Turkey as an enabler of its global power. Putin and Erdogan see the world through the same lens.” Their growing partnership in Syria—grounded in Russia’s “spheres of influence” model—may be yet another indicator that for Russia, Turkey has a key role to play in its “post-West” order.

The U.S. Sphere of Influence

The U.S. sphere of influence encompasses parts of eastern Syria, centred in Hasakeh governorate and ranging down the middle and lower Euphrates Valley. U.S. forces withdrew from the Turkish border in October 2019, precipitating the Turkish incursion dubbed Operation Peace Spring. This U.S. pullback enabled Turkish occupation of a 120-kilometer strip along the border and facilitated the entry of Russian forces into areas previously under U.S. control.

This region may be the most volatile and contested sphere of influence. It includes four foreign militaries on the ground in addition to a regime presence. The area also [draws occasional Israeli airstrikes](#) on Iranian targets. Moscow adamantly opposes the U.S. presence in northeast Syria and reportedly considers any deepening of U.S. military involvement in Syria to be a redline.

As of early 2021, the U.S. presence is relatively small—estimated at 900 special operations forces—but the United States partners with a significantly larger Kurdish-led force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprising some 60,000 fighters. The region under U.S.-Kurdish dominance includes strategic oil resources and valuable agricultural land.

In 2020, the United States appeared to deepen its involvement in northeast Syria. It initiated an intra-Kurdish dialogue aimed at brokering differences between Syrian Kurdish factions. Later, in July 2020, Delta Crescent Energy, a U.S. oil company, [signed a 25-year deal](#) with the Kurdish authorities to modernise oil production, prompting the Syrian regime and [Russia](#) to accuse the United States of stealing the oil.

As Russian forces engage deeper into northeast Syria, tensions with the United States have escalated. The U.S. Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) [noted](#) the region has evolved into a “complex operating environment” with Russian, regime, and pro-regime forces operating near U.S. and SDF forces. A quarterly inspector general [report](#) highlighted mounting tensions between Russian and U.S. forces, speculating that the escalation coincided with

the Delta Crescent oil deal. The inspector general report further hypothesised that Russia's actions aimed to pressure the United States to withdraw from Syria.

While Russia begrudgingly accepts a minimal U.S. role in Syria as part of its “spheres of influence” endgame of the conflict, Russia's ultimate “post -West” success in Syria demands the complete withdrawal of the United States. Moscow perceives the U.S. presence as an obstacle to its ideal end state in Syria which would entail the return of valuable oil resources to the regime (enabling investment by Russian oligarchs), an absorption of Kurdish-led governance and military structures, and the return of the nearly 30% of Syrian territory currently under U.S.-backed Kurdish control.

Turkey also opposes the U.S. presence in northeast Syria. Ankara has long viewed the U.S.-SDF partnership with alarm, given links between the SDF's core Kurdish component and the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), stoking fears that the United States was facilitating the creation of a pro-PKK statelet in northeast Syria. Further, Ankara is threatened by U.S. stabilisation assistance to Kurdish-led local councils and its investment in Kurdish control of Syria's oil resources. Turkey also opposes the U.S.-led intra-Kurdish dialogue, concerned it might lead to including SDF-affiliated Kurds in the U.N.-led Geneva peace process.

Russia and Turkey thus may share the objectives of undermining Kurdish forces and expelling the United States from northeast Syria. For both, the U.S. presence in northeast Syria is a complicating factor. A Russian analyst underscored the U.S. presence impedes Moscow's ability to pressure the Kurds, undermining Russian efforts to assuage Turkey: “Moscow can't get what it wants with the Kurds until the United States leaves Syria.”

The future U.S. posture in Syria stands as a key unknown. The Biden administration will face important decisions on Syria that will have direct implications for the Russian endgame and by extension Moscow's posture in the region and its attempts to realise its “post-West” vision. A U.S. decision to withdraw entirely from Syria would facilitate Russia's entrenchment in the region. By contrast, a re-commitment by the United States to maintain its small presence in Syria, fortified by a strong SDF partnership, would impede Russia's ultimate vision for Syria. While the underlying logic of such a decision would centre on the continuing counter-ISIS campaign—the legal rationale for the U.S. presence—complicating Russia's strategic posture in Syria should also play a role in that calculus.

Conclusion

Inherently unstable, Russia's "spheres of influence" endgame strategy will result in a fractured and volatile Syria. Neither Russia nor Turkey appears likely to withdraw from Syria in the near term. Iran will remain an important player, albeit without holding a territorial sphere of influence. Balancing against Moscow, Tehran will exploit opportunities where possible, deepening its influence through informal and covert efforts.

In this endgame, Russia's prickly partnership with Turkey in Syria likely will endure. As a Russian analyst noted, "Turkey and Russia need each other strategically." While Moscow may acknowledge that Turkey's presence in Syria is a long-term problem, Russia's "spheres of influence" endgame strategy nonetheless accommodates the reality of a lasting Turkish presence.

Russia is consolidating and expanding its military assets, while pivoting its focus to the diplomatic, political, and economic realms. It will seek to cement the status quo following the 2021 Syrian presidential elections. Moscow likely will intensify its diplomatic efforts to gain broader legitimacy for a political settlement that legitimises Assad's hold on power. To that end, Russia may pressure Assad to undertake limited reforms, post-election. Moscow will also accelerate initiatives aimed at attracting reconstruction funding.

Yet, despite these concerted efforts, Russia will face enormous obstacles to achieving its objectives in Syria. Both the United States and the European Union will remain adamant in their opposition to normalisation and reconstruction, barring significant behaviour change by the Assad regime. Sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the West will endure, and possibly deepen.

Russia does not appear to have a clear strategy for how to surmount obstacles to normalisation and reconstruction. To date, it has relied on misguided efforts, dependent in part on propaganda and disinformation, that have yielded paltry results. The November 2020 refugee returns conference is but the latest and most prominent example of such failed efforts.

Unfortunately, the Syria of Russia's endgame will remain broken, splintered into territorial spheres of influence. Its complex social fabric rent by fissures across religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. Nevertheless, this unstable, divided Syria may comport with Russia's interests in the absence of better options. Moscow could exploit a weakened Syria, off its balance and somewhat dependent on Russia, to exert its control. Russia does not aspire to classic nation-

building in Syria. Rather, Moscow's preference appears closer to that of the Assad regime, placing the survival of a corrupt clique above the well-being of the Syrian people, inured to their suffering and the attendant humanitarian catastrophe.

Russia's successful pursuit of its endgame in Syria would also establish a long-term Russian presence in the Middle East. Moscow will continue to view the Middle East as a region for competition with the United States, not cooperation. From the Russian perspective, the Middle East represents a "zero sum" proposition, with Russia increasing its influence at the expense of the United States. Russia will seek to exploit any emerging U.S. tensions with traditional allies such as Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

More broadly, Moscow will continue to leverage its posture in Syria to project influence across the region, particularly the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf. It will not seek to replicate its pre-eminent role in Syria elsewhere in the Middle East, as such ambitions are well beyond Moscow's capacity. Instead, Russia will engage opportunistically, exploiting perceptions of a U.S. withdrawal from the region, while promoting its vision of a "post-West" world.

The Biden administration has an important opportunity to push back against Russia's endgame strategy. A reassertion of U.S. influence on the ground in Syria would bolster important leverage eroded via the U.S. downsizing and pullback in October 2019, not to mention years of erratic decision-making under the Trump administration. This enhanced leverage alongside a reinvigoration of U.S.-led regional diplomacy could be seminal to reaching a realistic political settlement in Syria, one that acknowledges Russia's role without conferring preeminent status on it.

Indeed, embedded in Russia's "spheres of influence" endgame are the implicit weaknesses of each of its key stakeholders, as well as potential entry points for U.S.-led diplomacy. Both Russia and Turkey face financial constraints to their long-term ambitions in Syria. Both also must contend with significant, if not growing, insurgencies in their respective spheres of influence. A resurgent ISIS constitutes another mounting threat. Yet Russian military resources are limited, and there is no political will for deeper Russian military intervention. Both also face critical obstacles to their legitimacy on the ground and the viability of this end state.

Seizing on these deficiencies, the United States, its hand strengthened by an enhanced position on the ground in Syria, could double down on diplomacy to search for a more sustainable political settlement. Rejuvenated U.S. diplomacy necessarily would be grounded in the strengthening of its multilateral alliances, both transatlantic and in the region. This diplomatic renewal in turn could usher in a new era of diplomacy focused not only on the Syria conflict, but also on broader regional concerns, from Iran's hegemonic ambitions to the fragility of Iraq and Lebanon, as well as the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the war in Yemen.

All these crises are interlinked. Ultimately, their resolution will require an integrated approach. By reasserting itself diplomatically, the United States could spearhead efforts to put the region on more solid footing. It would demand the creation of a regional security architecture that acknowledges the legitimate role of each regional stakeholder while asserting clear limits to any broader ambitions. Ideally, this regional security architecture would serve to diminish the disorder long plaguing the region. This vision of U.S. diplomatic renewal and leadership in the region is admittedly grandiose, but its pursuit offers the most powerful rebuke of Russia's "post-West" order that begins in Syria.