



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (32)

US-Russia interactions in Syria and the future of the conflict in 2021

Nikolay Surkov, IMEMO

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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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

Nikolay Surkov

Dr Nikolay Surkov is a Senior Research Fellow at the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), an Associate Professor at the Chair or Oriental Studies of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and a Middle East Expert at the Russian International Affairs Council. He was also a staff writer and an editor in various Russian newspapers covering foreign policy and military affairs. His fields of interest include foreign and domestic policy of the Arab States, security situation in the Middle East, Russian and US policy in this region.

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The future for Syria in 2021 looks bleak from the Russian perspective. Though the conflict entered a low-intensity phase of armed confrontations that characterised 2020 will likely continue in 2021. The temporary negotiated solution for north-western Syria reached in March 2020 is likely to hold but there exists a high probability of renewed fighting between the SAA and various Islamist groups. There will also be bickering between Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran due to their different visions for Idlib's future. Tensions will likely also continue to grow in northern and north-eastern Syria, where US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces sporadically clash with pro-Turkish groups. Occasional US-Russian encounters on the ground are also highly likely in the region. Additionally, confrontations between Israel and Iran/Hezbollah forces stationed in Syria will likely continue and might escalate.

As for the peace process within the framework of the Constitutional Committee, Russian officials do not expect any breakthrough in 2021, instead calling for a cautious step-by-step approach.¹ The mistrust between the opposition and the government will likely grow even stronger after the presidential elections which are expected to take place in May/June 2021. The upcoming elections also increase reluctance for any constitutional change by the government before the elections. Many Russian observers doubt that the Syrian government is ready to make any concessions at all because it does not expect any positive incentives from the West in return for its flexibility.

Russian officials and the community of Russian political and military experts maintain this pessimistic assessment as they view the impact of US policies under the former Trump administration and are sceptical about the potential impact of the Biden administration. This paper focuses on the impact of US policies in Syria from the Russian perspective, including considerations of cooperation in a future endgame for Syria.

Trump's troubling legacy

From the perspective of Russia's government and foreign policy elites, the Trump administration's Middle East policies left a very problematic legacy which will have a lasting impact on the situation in Syria, including US-Russia interactions in this country. Specifically, US policies led to an increase in Iranian influence, undermined Russia's stabilisation efforts, severely limited reconstruction perspectives, and opened pathways for the autonomy, under the auspices of Turkey, of the opposition-controlled northern Syria, thus inspiring renewed Kurdish quest for independence.

¹ Lavrov: RF i Siriya gotovyat bol'shuyu programmu strategicheskogo sotrudnichestva v ekonomike [Lavrov: Russia and Syria are preparing a large program of strategic cooperation in the economy], <https://tass.ru/politika/10282459>

The Trump administration's maximum pressure policies increased tensions in the Middle East, including a response of maximum resistance from Iran, consequently causing the Levant and Syria to become the fronts for confrontation. Tehran is thus motivated to strengthen its influence in Syria through various means, including financially supporting Shia groups. From the Russian perspective Iran's support for Shia groups, even in Sunni territories, is expected to continue and even increase, a move which will certainly enhance the division and religious strife between the Alawites and the Sunnis.

Iran's role goes beyond supporting Shia groups, however. As the US isolated and sanctioned Assad's government, Damascus became even more dependent on Iranian assistance, resulting in increased influence for Iran across Syria. This increased role for Iran makes lifting US sanctions nearly impossible, which means the supply of modern technologies and equipment vital for Syria's economic recovery will remain blocked and contribute to the cycle of instability and violence.

Russia is particularly concerned with Iran's increasing influence. Iran's influence was enhanced as a result of US policies which undermined Russia's existing efforts to stabilise Syria, rebuild basic infrastructure, revive basic state institutions, and bring Damascus back to the Arab League. Instead, with Iran's influence, tensions are likely to increase with Israel, the US, Turkey, and Arab countries. Furthermore, Tehran's vision for Syria's reforms and settlement process differs from Russia's and will pose obstacles for progress in these areas.

Additionally, ongoing push for economic reconstruction has been hampered by US sanctions. The US policies triggered economic crises in both Syria and Lebanon. Further, sanctions hinder finding alternative sources of funding needed to rebuild the country. Neither the Gulf states nor Russian companies can openly invest in Syria. A lack of investments will drastically slow down the reconstruction, making the return of refugees and even limited political reforms impossible.

The Trump administration's policies also had significant impact in the north. The US allowed Ankara to occupy the northern regions of Syria and establish Turkey-dependent administrations there, thus creating conditions for their annexation in the future. In 2021, Ankara is expected to continue its support of armed Islamist groups in Idlib, Afrin, and 'security belt' areas. Turkey's continued assistance and presence is likely to lead to the struggle for autonomy and future annexation by Turkey of northern Syria, as it happened in the 20th century with Hatay province. These moves are likely to also excite the Kurds' struggle for their own autonomy.²

² Sergey Chvarkov: Rossiya za pyat' let vosstanovila boyegotovnost' armii Sirii [Sergei Chvarkov: Russia has restored combat readiness of the Syrian army in five years], <https://ria.ru/20200930/siriya-1577948800.html>

Russian policy makers do not expect the new Biden administration to pursue a significantly improved and more pragmatic policy in Syria. On the contrary, the US position is expected to become more interventionist and ideologically driven, with a continued and potentially expanded military presence in Syria. The new administration is also expected to provide massive support to the Kurds, which will strengthen the Kurds' appetite for independence which could lead to open conflict in Turkey and a stand-off with the Syrian government in Damascus. Further, the White House could also renew demands for Bashar al-Assad's resignation and intensify criticism of human rights violations in Syria. Regardless of whether they officially push for Assad's resignation, the Americans will continue their political and economic pressure on the Assad government. This pressure will further the troubling increase of Iranian influence and will put severe limitations on the reconstruction.

US-Russia confrontation or cooperation in Syria?

Russian authorities believe and regularly make public statements that the United States is playing a destabilising role in Syria.³ This negative perception is enhanced by the apparent contradiction between the stated US policy and practical steps on the ground. According to Russia, the US has declared its respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria but is in fact pursuing regime change and partitioning of Syria. Both Russian military personnel and diplomats agree that the US is trying to "confuse all the cards" and undermine what Russia has achieved in Syria. Of particular concern for Russia is the Kurdish issue and economic reconstruction of Syria.

In 2020, Russia was particularly displeased with the deal between the Syrian Kurds and the American company Delta Crescent Energy to develop three oil fields and build an oil refinery in north-eastern Syria. This deal is considered to be proof that the United States is investing in a long-term influence in Syria. This suggests the US may be prepared to support the Kurdish quest for independence or significant autonomy – not just assisting an ally in the struggle against ISIS. The official statements about the American troops' withdrawal from Syria are perceived by the Russian authorities as a smokescreen for the plan to undermine the territorial integrity of Syria. Given this perception, Russia is prepared to oppose any US efforts to increase its military presence or to create a Kurdish quasi-state. This opposition suggests a high probability of a US-Russia confrontation in north-eastern Syria in 2021 unless both parties engage in an improved dialogue on both military and governmental levels.

³ MID obvinil SSHA v podderzhke kurdsckogo separatizma v Sirii [Foreign Ministry accuses US of supporting Kurdish separatism in Syria], <https://ria.ru/20201022/separatizm-1581028394.html>

On the other hand, focusing on an economic recovery in Syria might provide a more meaningful opportunity for US-Russia cooperation in Syria in the near to midterm future (2021-2022). The Russian authorities believe that the absence of economic recovery will lead to chronic instability in Syria, a reality which the US also recognises. While the Kremlin does not expect US to provide any direct reconstruction funds, it would like the United States not to prevent the foreign investments into Syria, including investments from US allies in the Gulf. However, the US sanctions and demands for immediate regime behaviour change make such a scenario highly unlikely.

Despite the negative attitude towards the US military presence in Syria, the Kremlin acknowledges that cooperation with the US in Syria is desirable at least because the Americans proved their ability to play a spoiler role. In particular, Russian officials believe that cooperation will be needed to end the Syrian war, ensure reconstruction, reduce Moscow's military engagement and economic burden, and maintain Russia's prestige in the Arab world and Europe. Given this, there is a basis for dialogue between the US and Russia and perhaps an opportunity to develop more compatible visions of a future Syria.

Russian endgame for Syria

In the long term, the Kremlin is not focused on the specific characteristics of a future political system in Syria. Instead, Russia is focused on preserving the state and its institutions. However, keeping Bashar al-Assad in power is not a *sine qua non* for the Kremlin, rather, it acknowledges that Assad is currently essential for the survival of the political system. Moscow is careful not to push publicly for any political solutions, instead emphasising the need for reconstruction and refugee return.⁴ At the same time, Russian policymakers believe that gradual changes and greater inclusivity are needed to stabilise the country. This resonates with the US approach, but the parties clearly are not able to agree on the scale and pace of changes.

Russia is keen to support the intra-Syrian negotiations between the government and the opposition as part of the constitutional process. While the Kremlin is cautious not to lay out any 'Russian' initiatives or settlement plans, its endgame vision is still based on the constitutional draft proposed in 2017 and rejected by the Syrians. The transfer of certain authorities from Damascus to the provincial level is considered to be a useful step which will help to accommodate new realities that erupted during the conflict. Thus, Moscow views future Syria as a less centralised

⁴ Interv'y u zamestitelya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V.Vershinina mezhdunarodnomu informatsionnomu agentstvu «Rossiya segodnya», 4 yanvarya 2021 goda [Interview of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Vershinin to the international news agency "Russia Today", January 4, 2021], https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/sy/-/asset_publisher/9fcjSOWMERcf/content/id/4516892

state that has close friendly relations with Russia and takes into account its interests, including the maintenance of Russian military bases. Russian officials avoid openly talking about 'federalisation' because this notion is extremely unpopular in Damascus, but they point out that Russia 'supports the rights of Kurds and all other ethnic and religious groups' that live in Syria.⁵

De-facto federalisation or rather extensive decentralisation might be a logical choice in a situation when the central government is relatively weak and several regions, primarily the Kurdish-populated North-East, already have their own security and administrative structures. Russian officials and expert community admit that the return to pre-2011 Syria is highly unlikely; thus, the pragmatic solution from Moscow's point of view is to find a flexible political system that will accommodate some crisis-driven changes, while keeping as much power as possible in Damascus. However, in Russian view federalisation or decentralisation does not mean simple recognition of the quasi-independence of a Kurdish entity, as it happened in neighbouring Iraq. In exchange for autonomy, SDF-led areas are supposed to accept the supremacy of the central government, agree to the deployment of the SAA units on the borders and in key towns, and become an integral part of the Syrian economy.

Another focus in Russia's endgame for Syria includes normalising relations between Turkey and Syria. This would require a solution of the border security issue and Kurdish concerns, along with addressing the future status of the 'Peace Shield' and other similar areas. Decentralisation is viewed as an option that may not only satisfy the Kurdish aspirations for autonomy, but to also address Turkish security demands. Hypothetically, in the long-term some form of federalisation might become a useful tool that will help to normalise the relations between Damascus and the Turkish-controlled areas, thus restoring, albeit formally, the territorial integrity of Syria.

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, Russia was disappointed by the policies of the Trump administration and remains very sceptical about continued US involvement in Syria under Biden's leadership. The previous administration has created serious grievances for Russia. Russia views US policies as undermining both the territorial integrity of Syria and the prospects for economic recovery. Russia sees the US as a spoiler which cannot ultimately change the situation on the ground yet continues to undermine other players' constructive efforts. Nevertheless, the US and Russia still share the desire to stabilise

⁵ Vystupleniye i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V.Lavrova v khode sovmestnoy press-konferentsii s Ministrom inostrannykh del Korolevstva Bakhreyn KH.Al' Khalifoy, Moskva, 20 noyabrya 2019 goda [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain H. Al Khalifa, Moscow, November 20, 2019], https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3906941

Syria and to prevent it from once again becoming a heaven for the jihadists, and if they were able to identify pathways for cooperation, the future may improve for all involved.