

The Not So Frozen Crisis

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The eleven-year conflict in Syria has shifted away from large-scale military hostilities along major frontlines to localized clashes between armed groups and government forces. By March 2022, it had been two years since the last major military offensive, when the Syrian regime took further bites out of Syria's Idlib province, displacing a million people. In spite of the reduction in large-scale offensives, ongoing protection concerns and a devastated economy continue to prevent large-scale refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) returns. Half the pre-war population are refugees or internally displaced and some data shows that the rate of return is continuing to decrease.¹

While the frontlines remain frozen, the status quo is fragile, with five foreign armies – Russia, Turkey, Iran, the US and Israel – operating on different sides of the conflict, and no progress in political negotiations. Continued Russian and Syrian government shelling and airstrikes, Turkish drone attacks in northeastern Syria, suspected Iranian proxy fire on US troops in Deir ez-Zor, and ongoing local clashes and ISIS attacks are all potential flashpoints. Heightened geopolitical tensions outside of Syria – culminating in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – have exacerbated uncertainty in Syria. By April 2022, Geir Pederson, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, emphasized that “Syria is a hot conflict, not a frozen one” to the UN Security Council.

A Shift from Conflict Resolution to Crisis Management

Struggling international negotiations have come to a halt over the course of the year, signalling that while violence is muted, the drivers of the conflict are ever-present and increasingly entrenched. The lack of progress on the UN Special Envoy's “step for step” process or the Constitutional Committee have pushed regional and international stakeholders into crisis management. As Western donor countries deliberate over aid approaches, some regional states have taken steps towards normalizing relations with the regime.

The increased humanitarian need has led Western donors to focus on aid to manage the crisis. Throughout Syria, 14.6 million¹ people need assistance and protection, up by 1.2 million people compared to the previous year. In 2022, fuel and food costs have soared as the crisis in Ukraine, a major wheat exporter, impacts food security globally and the Middle East, in particular. Though donor fatigue is on the rise especially as other crises have emerged, aid continues to be a priority for donor governments invested in Syria.

Regionally, the trend towards normalization with the regime has accelerated as Arab countries also try to move towards crisis management. Eager to shore up a struggling economy and curb security issues on its border, Jordan's King Abdullah had his first phone call with President Bashar Al Assad since 2011 and developed a plan for renewed cooperation with the regime, getting buy-in from the Biden Administration. The King advocated for an electricity and gas deal that would allow Jordan to transfer gas and

¹ www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14870.doc.htm

electricity to energy-deprived Lebanon through Syria. Such a deal, while technically and logistically difficult, would benefit the Syrian government economically and politically. Some Arab League members are also beginning to advocate for Syria's return to the fold. While the United Arab Emirates paved the way for other states to begin the process of normalization in 2018, the leadership made a significant symbolic push this year, making preliminary agreements to begin small infrastructure projects in Syria. The trend was capped off with President Bashar al Assad's first trip outside Syria, Russia or Iran since 2011 to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed's palace in Abu Dhabi, a significant public show of support for the isolated leader during the anniversary of the Syrian revolution.

However, moves towards normalization have, thus far, not provoked regime behavioural change. No headway has been made on political negotiations and drug trafficking largely attributable to regime allies and institutions actually skyrocketed in the past year. More Captagon,² a cheap amphetamine mostly produced in Syria, was seized in the first few months of 2022 than all of 2021. Rather than this political and economic opening towards the regime or humanitarian aid, securitization of borders, the US presence in the northeast and the Turkish military presence in the northwest continue to be the primary factors in containing the crisis.

Consolidation of Power: Government-Controlled Areas

The Assad government – along with Russia, Iran and aligned militia forces – controls about two thirds of Syria's territory. However, the regime and its allies continue to battle a low-level insurgency with rebels in the south and Islamic State elements in the central desert areas. At the same time, the Assad government has further consolidated power amongst an increasingly tight group of regime allies since capturing major pockets of formerly opposition-controlled areas from the south to the northwest.

In southern Syria, particularly in the Daraa governorate,³ clashes have been ongoing since July 2021 between government forces and armed opposition groups. A ceasefire was reached on 1 September, but quickly unravelled as Syrian government forces continued to launch raids, airstrikes and missile attacks. Violent clashes resulted in dozens of civilian deaths in January 2022 alone. The government has also besieged towns and imposed heavy restrictions on civilians attempting to flee and on the delivery of humanitarian aid.

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The southeast of the country, where US forces and US-backed local forces called Maghawir al-Thawra maintain a presence at Al-Tanf base, is still contentious. Iran-backed militias have targeted US forces at Al-Tanf with armed drones. In one attack, operatives appear to have been able to enter the base to plant explosive devices. The regime's ally, Russia, continues to prohibit any aid convoys to the 10,000 people stranded in Rukban camp, a makeshift desert settlement on the Jordanian border near Al-Tanf, where UNICEF estimates all children are suffering from malnutrition. To the west of the Euphrates River, the regime and its allies continue to suffer casualties at the hands of ISIS elements.

Overall, the regime has used this period of a relative lull in violence and regional goodwill to consolidate power. The regime's inner circle continues to contract, with Maher al Assad, Asma al Assad, Bashar al Assad and their close allies and business partners at the locus of political and economic power. As the Assads continue to rout out any elements of opposition in recently conquered areas, aid access remains limited, especially in areas taken by the regime since 2017.

² KNELL, Yolande, "Captagon: Jordan's undeclared war against Syria drug traffickers." *BBC News*, 18 April 2022. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61040359

³ www.globalr2p.org/countries/syria/

Backed into a Corner: Opposition-Controlled Areas in Northwest Syria

Around four million people, two-thirds of whom have been displaced from other parts of the country, remain in Syria's northwest pocket. Insecurity continues to plague areas controlled by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). Regime shelling and bombardment adds to the instability of prolonged displacement and local skirmishes. In Idlib, HTS has essentially defeated or co-opted all its Syrian armed opposition rivals in Idlib, including those from the Turkish-backed SNA and al-Qaeda-linked fighters such as Hurras al-Din (HAD). In February 2022, a US military operation in Idlib resulted in the death of IS leader Abu Ibrahim al Qurashi. Levels of violence are still far lower than they have been for years. The static frontlines continue to be contingent upon the maintenance of a good working relationship between Russia and Turkey.

The lower levels of violence have not contributed significantly to an improvement in living conditions in the area. Having lost much of its arable land, the northwest enclave is especially dependent on foreign assistance. Though aid continues to be delivered and implemented relatively unimpeded across the border from Turkey, this assistance remains under threat. As a result of ongoing extensions of UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR)2165 (2014) and subsequent renewals, UN agencies have been able to coordinate, implement and deliver assistance across borders to those in need in non-government controlled areas, without the approval of the Damascus-based government. However, over the course of three years, Russia, Assad's key ally and permanent member of the Security Council, has vetoed three of the original four UN border crossings at the Security Council. Russia hopes to extract concessions from Western governments in favour of the Damascus-based government. In July 2021, the final crossing, Bab al-Hawa, was extended with UNSCR 2585 after intense negotiations. Russia's ongoing military invasion of Ukraine has thoroughly skewered Russia's relationship with Western Security Council mem-

bers, intimating even more intense negotiations this year when UNSCR 2585 expires in July 2022. Uncertainty over life-saving assistance, protracted displacement, ongoing instability and an economic downturn threaten to exacerbate already dire living conditions for civilians in the area.

Reluctant Unity with an Uncertain Future: The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controls a demographically heterogeneous region in northeastern and eastern Syria. In coordination with the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, the SDF managed to retake control of the 30 percent of Syrian territory that the Islamic State captured in 2014. Since then, the associated civilian local governance structure, the Autonomous Administration of Northeast and East Syria (AANES), and the SDF are governing areas as far south as Hajin where Arab tribes hold great power. Though the SDF is diverse, the high command continues to draw from, and be associated with, the Kurdish-majority Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), allies of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

There has been relative calm in the region for the past year. However, ongoing insecurity stemming from remaining ISIS elements, tensions with the AANES and a limited Syrian regime presence, ongoing Turkish and Turkish proxy attacks on the SDF and its affiliates, and an extended drought are a constant reminder that stability is fragile.

In spite of losing all territory in 2019, ISIS elements continue to intimidate and extort locals, helping the group obtain new funds and recruits while discouraging people from joining the SDF. The enduring threat of the group gained international attention with an attack on one of the prisons in northeast Syria holding ISIS members. In January 2022, Islamic State fighters seized Sinaa prison. US forces joined SDF partner forces in a lengthy battle to retake the prison. The incident⁴ highlighted the ongoing dangers that ISIS poses with hundreds of casualties and

⁴ HASSAN, Mohammed and AL-AHMED, Samer. *A closer look at the ISIS attack on Syria's al-Sina Prison*. Middle East Institute, Washington, 14 February 2022. www.mei.edu/publications/closer-look-isis-attack-syrias-al-sina-prison

potentially dozens of escapees. About 10,000 IS fighters are held in detention facilities across northern Syria. The SDF also still retains custody of about 57,000 people allegedly linked to ISIS (mostly women and children) at the Al Hol IDP camp where conditions are grim.

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Ongoing Turkish attacks against SDF and PKK figures in the area continue, as the Turkish government sees the PKK as a national security threat. As a result, SDF clashes continue with the Turkish-backed SNA factions from Operation Peace Spring – a strip of territory Turkey and its proxies captured in north-eastern Syria in 2019. These dynamics have added to other regional and internal tensions, hindering greater stability in the area.

Other vulnerabilities have limited the ability of local and international actors to capitalize on the relative calm to improve conditions for residents. In particular, unprecedented water shortages in 2021 have hit communities hard. The drought threatened the agriculturally dependent economy, potable water for three million people and hydroelectricity to over five million people. Water scarcity and the need to improve regular humanitarian access and trade flows have added to the region's challenges.

In the meantime, Russia and the Syrian regime are attempting to capitalize on these issues through highly publicized “reconciliation campaigns” in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo. These campaigns are aimed at gaining the trust of those outside regime-controlled territory with only limited success.

As SDF-controlled areas still contain around 70 per cent of Syria's oil and wheat resources, the region will continue to be a strategic territory for stakeholders in Syria's future.

Tensions Seethe and Conditions Deteriorate as Syrians Remain in Limbo

The war has entered a new phase as de facto governing bodies and armed actors have consolidated and entrenched their power. However, the current status quo remains so primarily as a result of foreign powers freezing the lines of control. These same foreign powers provide protection and support to de facto local authorities. Therefore, the immediate future of Syria continues to depend on the commitment of Turkey, the US, Russia and Iran to hold the house of cards together.

The failure to resolve the main drivers of the conflict and the further entrenchment of a war economy engenders new local tensions and heightened geopolitical competition

In the meantime, the failure to resolve the main drivers of the conflict and the further entrenchment of a war economy engenders new local tensions and heightened geopolitical competition. As a result, economic deterioration, individual protection concerns and prolonged displacement continue to impede more sustainable stability. Such an environment will test the limits of international aid as needs rise, in spite of a relative lull in violence and large infusions of assistance. These endemic issues threaten to keep Syria on an uncertain and destructive trajectory for the foreseeable future.