

Syria's Uncertain Future

Lina Khatib

Associate fellow

Middle East and North Africa Programme

Chatham House, London

Thirteen years since the start of the Syrian conflict and Syria continues to struggle with political turmoil, economic devastation and security concerns. As the conflict enters its second decade, the future trajectory of Syria remains highly uncertain, with profound implications not only for its citizens but also for the broader region. Equally, Syria itself is affected by geopolitical developments that are only adding to this uncertainty.

Political Uncertainty

The political landscape of Syria is deeply fractured, with power dynamics continuing to be shaped by competing interests both domestically and internationally. The Assad regime, led by President Bashar al-Assad, has managed to cling to power despite facing widespread opposition and international condemnation.

Efforts to reach a political settlement through diplomatic means, such as the Geneva peace process, have thus far yielded limited results. Divisions between the Assad regime and opposition groups, as well as disagreements among regional and international stakeholders, continue to hinder progress towards a comprehensive resolution of the conflict. The main hurdle remains the intransigence of the Assad regime, which has never taken the Geneva peace process seriously. Almost every initiative taken by the UN in the Geneva process has not yielded results. The “steps for steps” process has been go-

ing on since 2021, with no concrete steps taken by the Assad regime that would trigger reciprocity from the international community. The constitutional committee created by the UN has not made any progress in 21 months. The ceasefire commission is unable to prevent fighting from continuing in Syria. No cross-line humanitarian missions have been successful. The civil society support room has grown to include 950 Syrians but its effectiveness in the peace process remains weak.

This bleak picture is exacerbated by feeble international commitment to the political transition in Syria stated in UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Neither the US nor European countries have developed comprehensive strategies to deal with Syria. Instead, they have chosen to focus on immediate threats from terrorism, especially after the emergence of ISIS ten years ago. With the international community declaring ISIS militarily defeated in Syria, resolving the Syrian conflict has slipped down the list of foreign policy priorities.

Without serious pressure on the Assad regime, it is not going to voluntarily give up power. It remains to be seen if the new US administration will pursue a different track from its predecessors, but the likelihood of such a shift is small. Despite great divergence between the Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations, all three have offered more continuity than change with regards to Syria. Domestically, the Assad regime continues to benefit from divisions within the Syrian opposition.

Geopolitical Influences

The regime's continuation remains dependent on military support from its allies, Russia and Iran. Syria's future is therefore largely determined by the rela-

tionship between Iran and Russia. While the two countries are allies in Syria and Ukraine, they also compete for influence in Syria. It is in Russia's interest that Iran's presence there be continued yet weakened. Russia is unlikely to give up its military assets in Syria: its airbase and port, while Iran seeks to retain long-term influence through soft power as well as political and military power.

With the international community declaring ISIS militarily defeated in Syria, resolving the Syrian conflict has slipped down the list of foreign policy priorities

Syria's future is directly connected to Western foreign policy towards Iran, particularly US policy. Although the Barack Obama and Joe Biden administrations have been aligned on prioritizing the nuclear deal with Iran while Donald Trump's administration implemented US withdrawal from the agreement, none of those administrations have developed a comprehensive policy towards Iran. Such a policy would link the nuclear file with that of Iran's regional interventions in the Middle East. This policy gap has benefited Iran, which over the years has consolidated its influence in Syria through deployment of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as well as Iran-backed armed groups like Hezbollah.

Syria has been affected by the spillover of the war in Gaza, with Israel striking Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Damascus and elsewhere in the country. And yet there are no clear signs that there is international appetite to address the Iranian elephant in the room, which leaves Syria facing the unknown in the long run, with the Assad regime looking to remain in power in the meantime.

Bleak Economic Prospects

The Syrian economy has been decimated by years of conflict, resulting in widespread destruction of infrastructure, displacement of populations, and collapse of essential services. The country faces staggering

humanitarian needs, with millions of Syrians relying on humanitarian assistance for survival. The economic devastation has been exacerbated by the rise of regime profiteers who are making considerable profit from the trade of drugs, especially Captagon, widening the economic gap between them and the Syrian population at large. The proliferation of informal economic networks and illicit activities, including smuggling and corruption, further undermines prospects for sustainable development.

Rebuilding Syria's economy presents a monumental challenge, requiring not only substantial financial resources but also political stability and security. The reconstruction efforts are complicated by issues of governance and accountability, as well as the need to address the grievances and inequalities that fuelled the conflict in the first place. Moreover, any influx of foreign aid and investment would be conditional on political concessions. With no such concessions on the horizon, this adds another layer of complexity to Syria's economic recovery. Despite the Assad regime's hopes that normalization with the Arab League will translate into funding for its hoped-for reconstruction projects, there is little appetite among wealthy Arab countries to divert resources to Syria.

The Syrian regime has sought to assert control over areas reclaimed from opposition forces, prioritizing reconstruction projects in loyalist strongholds. However, the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities risks exacerbating social tensions and perpetuating grievances among marginalized communities. Inequality and political repression as well as economic grievances are leading some of those communities, like the Druze in Sweida, to continue to protest against the regime.

Insecurity Rather than Security

The presence of multiple armed actors, including government forces, Russian and Iranian-backed groups, rebel groups, and extremist organizations, perpetuates cycles of violence and insecurity. Civilians continue to bear the brunt of the conflict, facing indiscriminate attacks, displacement and human rights abuses.

The emergence of non-state actors, including jihadist groups like ISIS and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),

complicates the security landscape. These groups not only pose a threat to stability within Syria but also have broader implications for regional security. Recently, ISIS has been trying to increase its activities in Syria and elsewhere to regain relevance, while HTS is trying to rebrand itself as a political actor, with its sights set on long-term rule in northwest Syria. The challenge of addressing these extremist groups while navigating complex related geopolitical dynamics remains a central concern in Syria's future. Northwest Syria remains under attack by Russian and Syrian regime forces, while on the ground, HTS is trying to present itself as a legitimate political alternative to the Syrian opposition. However, there is wide popular resistance to HTS in Idlib and the group itself is mired with divisions. There are also thousands of ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq and they continue to try to regain authority through both military attacks on various opponents from both the regime and rebel groups. All this is making the security situation in the area unsettling for the civilian population. The security landscape in Syria is further complicated by the involvement of regional and international actors, each pursuing their own strategic objectives. Russia's military intervention in support of the Assad regime is set to continue, while Turkey's incursions into northern Syria have sparked tensions with Kurdish forces, raising fears of escalation.

Efforts to de-escalate tensions and establish sustainable ceasefires have had limited success, undermined by mistrust, violations and competing agendas. The absence of a comprehensive security framework exacerbates the risk of renewed heightened conflict and further fragmentation of the country. Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis continues to deepen, with millions of Syrians facing acute food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, and inadequate shelter. Tensions are rising in Lebanon regarding Syrian refugees, with several Lebanese political camps casting the refugees as a security and economic burden on Lebanon. And yet there is no clarity

regarding where those refugees could go considering the insecurity they would face inside Syria.

Uncertain Future

Syria's uncertain future is shaped by a complex interplay of political, geopolitical, economic and security challenges. The protracted conflict has exacted a heavy toll on Syria's population, leaving deep scars that will take generations to heal. Achieving a sustainable and inclusive resolution to the conflict will require concerted efforts by all stakeholders, both domestic and international, aimed at addressing root causes, promoting reconciliation, and implementing the UN-mandated political transition.

The Syrian regime has sought to assert control over areas reclaimed from opposition forces, prioritizing reconstruction projects in loyalist strongholds

However, the path to peace remains fraught with obstacles, including entrenched power dynamics, external interference, and deep-seated grievances coupled with enduring ambivalence and incompetence on the part of the international community. As Syria navigates its uncertain future, the need for political transition and accountability cannot be overstated. Only through a collective commitment to peace and justice through the implementation of UNSCR 2254 can Syria hope to emerge from the shadows of conflict and embark on a path towards stability, prosperity and reconciliation. But Syria cannot be stable unless the wider regional geopolitical picture also heads in the same direction.