



A mural in Idlib depicts Russian military actions in Ukraine. Image courtesy of Al-Jazeera.

# CRISIS IN UKRAINE: Impacts For Syria

March 2022

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## Executive Summary

What impacts and complications are being felt across Syria due to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine? To date, the most perceptible direct impact is the Government of Syria's imposition of harsh fiscal austerity measures predicated on global economic shock. Events in Ukraine also generate heightened risk of military escalation between Russia and its antagonists in Syria, increased space for Iranian influence, the recruitment of Syrians as foreign mercenaries, and profound complications for foreign diplomacy – a hurdle for the Syrian political process and renewal of the cross-border mechanism. With further effects anticipated, COAR is monitoring events as they unfold.

## Key Takeaways

- Syria's economic crisis is such that recent austerity measures taken in response to the turmoil produced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine were fundamentally unavoidable, irrespective of events in eastern Europe.
- After taking incremental steps towards regional diplomatic normalisation in 2021, the Syrian Government's alignment with Russia will reinforce its pariah status, limiting options for political, diplomatic, and financial support. Iran, which is battling for better relations with the West, may fill any voids left by Russia, including through capital-intensive investments.
- Evidence of increased violence between Russia and its adversaries on Ukraine is presently limited in Syria and there have been no consequences of any immediate significance for the Syria response to date.
- That said, fears that an impasse in Ukraine will have geostrategic spillover effects in Syria are warranted. In particular, Russia may seek to pressure Turkey, a NATO member and critical intermediary in Ukraine, with escalation in Idlib and the threat of a refugee influx.
- In addition, local armed actors are on heightened alert across Syria, and the risk of miscalculations, violent confrontations, and localised clashes is elevated.
- The longer the crisis in Ukraine drags on, the greater the likelihood that Syrians will be recruited and deployed as mercenaries by all sides in the conflict.
- Already moribund, the Syrian political process is likely to be deadlocked as long as the crisis in Ukraine consumes international attention.
- Meanwhile, the cross-border mechanism is now more imperilled than ever. As prospects for diplomacy shrink, Moscow is likely to leverage renewal in exchange for more sweeping cross-border concessions.
- Enthusiastic Western support for Ukrainians is admirable, but brings into sharp relief the mounting restrictions, waning support, and diminished financial support for many Syrians at home and abroad. Donor governments will be forced to contend with such factors as they seek to retain the trust of the Syrian populace in the long-term.

## Introduction

As with any event as significant as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, commentators are wont to speculate on the geopolitical chessboard. Russia experts now seemingly outnumber even Russian military personnel, yet few have considered the consequences for Syria beyond two issues of immediate concern. First, that the Russian bombs of Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta echo loudly on Ukrainian streets, and that the international community must reflect on the tragic example of these and other Syrian communities in their response to Russian aggression. And second, that Russia stands in direct opposition to (or uneasy alliance with) its rivals in Ukraine across a range of issues in Syria, thereby fuelling anxiety that confrontation between Russia and the pro-Ukrainian global coterie will bleed into Syria in ways which might reignite conflict, stymie the political process, and undermine the response to Syria's own multidimensional crisis.

To describe Syria's fate as entangled with that of Ukraine is only a starting point, however. If Syria again devolves into an arena for abrasive international competition, response actors must grapple with its origins and effects. Much is to be decided of course, and the true impacts of Putin's war will only be known with time. Yet key trends are already perceptible at this early stage, some of which will be familiar and others somewhat new. Among them are the threat of local, regional, and even national level violence riding a wave of shifting international alliances; accelerated Syrian Government adjustment in view of mounting and potentially catastrophic economic and political difficulties; and the prospect of reduced international support for the Syrian response. Importantly, all such issues have been aroused by the demise of a past era in global diplomacy. Response actors must adapt to the realities shaping Syria as it enters a new age of crisis if they are to insulate Syrians from its worst effects.

# Syrian Government Policy Adjustment: Accelerated and Alternative Measures

## Austerity in Adversity

In anticipation of unavoidable shortages and price hikes across a range of commodities, the Syrian Cabinet held an emergency meeting in late-February to implement yet further austerity measures to cope with the domestic impact of Russia's attack on Ukraine. Food reserves and fossil fuel products have been rationed, several classes of exports have been restricted to service domestic demand, and foreign currency reserve spending has been limited for use on key commodity imports — primarily wheat — to offset the turmoil sweeping global markets, mounting shortages in the Syrian marketplace, and a drawdown in overall imports from Russian and Ukrainian producers.<sup>1</sup> Further measures aimed at micro-managing the Syrian economy remain on the table within financial services and domestic and international trade.

Sold as a package of temporary adjustments, the new action plan is a necessary response to an exogenous shock event. Its content is routine however, and extends the extreme prudence of a fiscally insolvent administration which has long failed to fulfil even the most basic functions of government. Latest figures indicate an estimated 90% of the Syrian population currently live below the poverty line, while chronic food insecurity persists for millions nationwide. With shrinking budgets, anaemic public spending, and sluggish foreign investment, the action plan was arguably an unavoidable option for a government battling to retain some semblance of equilibrium.

That Syria's regional reintegration was slowing prior to events in Ukraine suggests the diversity of diplomatic, economic, and political support it presently receives from abroad will be fundamentally unchanged. President al-Assad's statement that the "Russian Federation will give a lesson to the world...with respect for the law, high morals, and humanitarian principles" may be inflammatory for many of Syria's potential partners, but it is unlikely to diminish his country's isolation when other states have more pressing concerns. For its part, Russia appears to have all but

abandoned constructive investment. Hopes that it would service around a quarter of Syria's annual wheat consumption for 2022 were dashed late last year,<sup>2</sup> and Syria is currently on course for a worrying 75% wheat shortfall. Quite how the Government expected to meet such needs absent the measures observed this month is therefore a mystery. If anything, events in Ukraine partially absolve the Government from responsibility for the action plan and provide some justification for newly restrictive policy corrections.

Over time, however, the excuse of violence in Ukraine will offer precious little respite. As households exhaust coping mechanisms and discontent rises, crime, protests, and resort to the war economy will become more frequent.<sup>3</sup> Flashpoints between public and state may then increase in number, pointing once again to the importance of aid to help reduce the prospect of further disorder and catalyse recovery. If aid is to meaningfully contribute, project design and donor policy must recalibrate. The structural causes of vulnerability must be engaged more substantively than they have to date, the provisions of early recovery must be explored, and conflict sensitive programming which harnesses all available local resources must be deployed, including those under the Syrian Government, other regional authorities, the private sector, and civil society.

## The Return of Tehran?

Talk of Syria's return to the international fold gathered pace throughout 2021, but Syrian Government alignment with Russia on Ukraine means it is set to endure many of the same diplomatic and economic exclusions throughout 2022. Iran, however, may offer a lifeline. The past two weeks have witnessed a flurry of engagements between Syrian and Iranian officials, the most notable being a meeting between the Chairman of Syria's National Security Bureau, Ali Mam-louk, and the Iranian Supreme National Security Council

<sup>1</sup> COAR Global (2022) Syria Update: March 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lira Today (2021) Wheat stocks in Syria are about to run out, in the light of the disruption of import contract from Russia.

<sup>3</sup> COAR Global (2022) Syria Update: February 14.

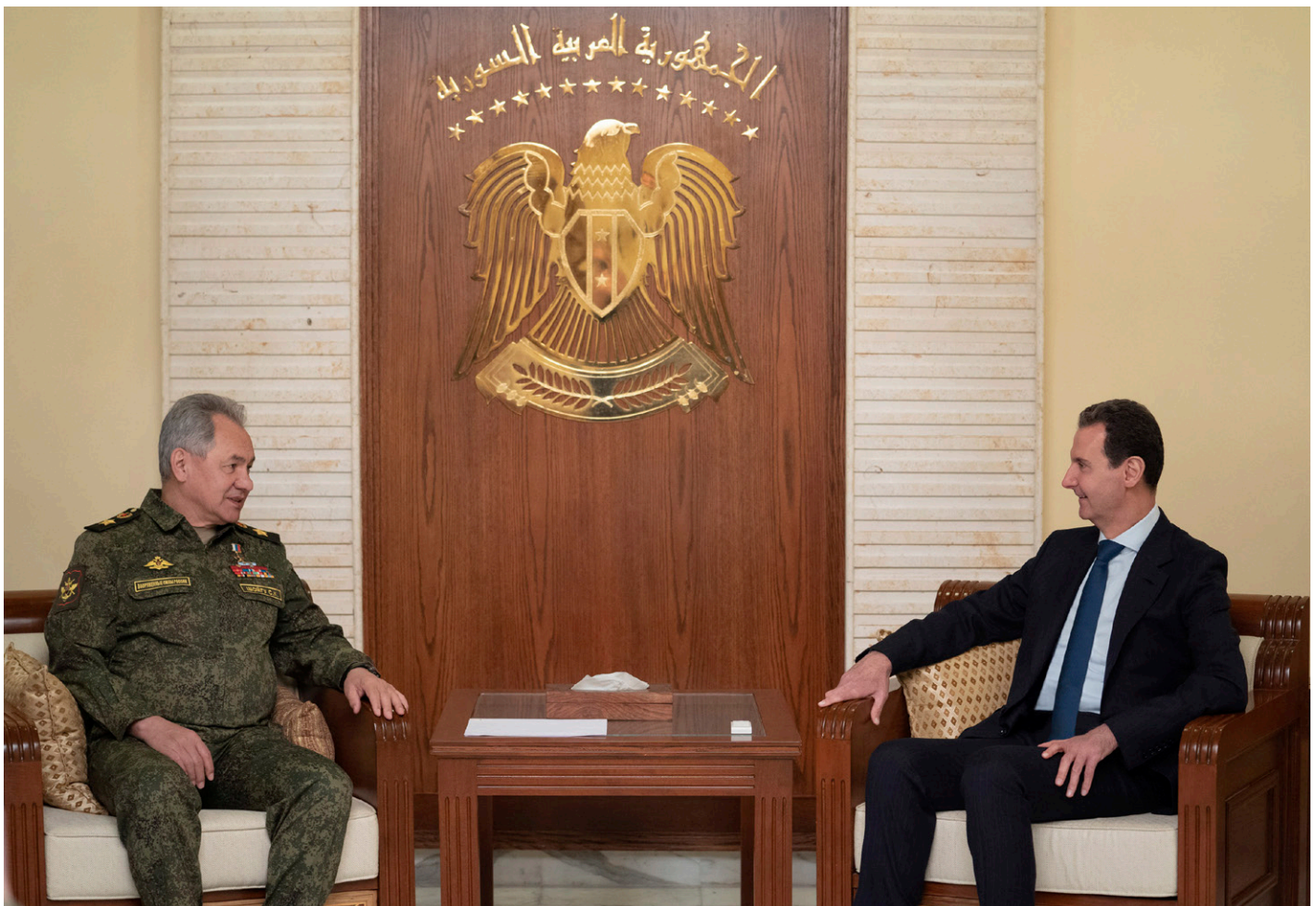


Secretary, Ali Shamkhani, on 27 February. Talks reportedly emphasised “coordination during the next stage”,<sup>4</sup> seemingly referring to deeper and more diverse economic cooperation.<sup>5</sup> President Bashar al-Assad also received Iranian Foreign Ministry representatives on 1 March in Damascus, an event which marked the culmination of a prolonged stay in Syria for an Iranian Foreign Ministry delegation which was emphatic on its country’s willingness to support Syria’s reconstruction.<sup>6</sup>

With many observers predicting the resurrection of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and a subsequent relaxation of the Iran sanctions, the Syrian Government may

be looking to Tehran to partially offset its lack of capacity under the global and domestic stresses produced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Progress on the JCPOA is by no means assured. But if Iran is freed from restrictions which have debilitated its own economy since cancellation of the nuclear deal in 2018, it would be an opportune moment to explore deeper Syrian-Iranian cooperation across a range of issues. These would range from capital-intensive infrastructure and private sector investment projects, an expansion of the Iranian militia presence, predominantly across Syria’s southern governorates, continued attempts at the shiafication of susceptible Syrian communities, and Iran’s continued facilitation of the Syrian narco-industry.

President Bashar al-Assad and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu meet in Damascus in February. Image courtesy of SANA.



4 SANA (2022) As special envoy of President al-Assad, Ali Mamlouk visits Tehran and meets Shamkhani.

5 Syrian Observer (2022) High-level Syrian-Iranian intelligence meeting in Tehran.

6 Press TV (2022) Iran, Syria must continue consultations on regional issues: President Assad.

# Geostrategic Spill Over: Front-line Conflict and Prospects for Peace

## Strategic Russian Brinkmanship

Concern that protracted conflict in eastern Europe might devolve into a more globalised confrontation between Russia and Ukraine's supporters has naturally centred on Syria. From Idleb to Deir-ez-Zor, Russia stands before the interests of several parties which oppose it in Ukraine, generating concern that forces on both sides might intentionally (or inadvertently) ignite renewed violence along Syrian front-lines and throughout contested areas. These fears are not groundless. Russia has become increasingly assertive in Syria in recent months, notably committing an "increased number of violations of the deconfliction protocols it has with [US-led] Coalition forces".<sup>7</sup> Operating in close proximity in the northeast and with a history of direct confrontation, occasional run-ins, and diametrically opposed long-term aspirations for Syria, Russia clearly intends to up the stakes with the US in the region. Meanwhile, Russia announced its (hitherto non-existent) support for the participation of Kurdish representatives in Syria's constitutional committee process in mid-February.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, it cautioned against concerted Turkish support for Ukraine by inviting that which Ankara fears most on its southern border — recognised Kurdish political influence in Syria and the fortification of the PKK.

Brinkmanship of this kind is decidedly concerned with reminding the US and Turkey of the international consequences of interference in eastern Europe. For the time being, Russian threats against major nation state rivals in Syria serve as warning shots. However, Ukraine-related escalation is a profound challenge to Syria's near-term stability against the backdrop of an economically listless country riven with politico-military uncertainty. There is every possibility, for example, that Russia will pressure Turkey and its NATO allies by escalating in Idleb and driving a wave of refugees to the border.<sup>9</sup> Such sensitivities exist

nationwide and make for an increasingly tense context. This week, Russian troop movements created a short lived panic that Moscow was inviting Iran-linked groups to entrench themselves on the Syria-Israel border in order to warn Israel against geopolitical overreach in Ukraine. These fears were ultimately unfounded,<sup>10</sup> but the incident recalled how the Ukraine-related conduct of Russia's rivals might stimulate a Russian response which upends the Syrian status quo.

## Clamour and Pragmatism: Syrian Armed Actors React

War in Ukraine has been accompanied by some anxiety that Syrian armed actors might resume the fight in their respective theatres of conflict. Much of this concern has centred on Syria's northwest, where elements within the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Syrian National Army (SNA), and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have come out in near universal support of Ukraine owing to their enmity of the Russian military. Statements in support of Ukraine from these actors have been predictably unambiguous, with FSA commanders leading a chorus of voices in the northwest that are reportedly "overjoyed with news of Russian army losses".<sup>11</sup> Yet while the region's armed forces and their supporters might feel that any war against Putin is fundamentally their own, the likelihood of newly coordinated attacks against Russian and Syrian Government interests in Syria is presently low.

Notwithstanding the fact that renewed frontline violence would undermine the integrity of the Turkish-Russian de-escalation agreement and destabilise their own hard-earned fiefdoms, northwest opposition forces remain too

<sup>7</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve (2021) Lead Inspector General report to the US Congress (October 1 – December 31). When compared with prior review quarters.

<sup>8</sup> Syrian Observer (2022) AANES welcomes Bogdanov comments.

<sup>9</sup> Although doing so would also necessitate a joint Western-Turkish response that may be counterproductive to Moscow in the long-term.

<sup>10</sup> Local sources report Russian troops withdrew from Izra'a and areas in the vicinity of As-Sweida city. Iranian-linked militia have been present in Izra'a for some time however, and the Russian redeployment was ultimately regarded as unextraordinary.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Monitor (2022) Syrian opposition backs Ukraine.



fragmented to launch a meaningful southward advance. The SNA, for example, has been riddled with infighting since it was united under the Turkish umbrella, with clashes last month claiming the lives of several servicemembers and civilians.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, strident HTS-linked jihadis may have been forthright in their ambition for action against Russia, but they have been effectively silenced by the increasingly pragmatic decisions being made within the upper echelons of the organisation's political leadership. HTS continues to realise a range of reforms aimed at moderating its image and institutions and is presently unlikely to abandon these efforts in favour of an injudicious campaign in southern Idlib. Moreover, Russian aerial bombardment of Idlib may have slackened in February, but there are currently no signs that Russia has diluted its presence in the northwest since launching its campaign in Ukraine.

Static frontlines are by no means indicative of calm in areas outside of Syrian Government control, however. Looking to the northeast, last week witnessed deadly clashes between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian Government in Tel Tamr, Al-Hasakeh Governorate, as well as an assault on the Government-held security square in Quamishli.<sup>13</sup> Neither incident is especially novel, and each has been resolved without major political consequence. As per usual, blame for the former incident has been apportioned to both sides, while the latter represents yet another instance of state-held asset seizure by the SDF. Importantly, however, the incidents recall the numerous potential flashpoints scattered throughout even the most 'stable' parts of Syria which could precipitate local, regional and even nationwide armed conflict at a time of heightened alert, shifting geopolitical alliances, and the potential degeneration of conflict in Ukraine.

Russian musicians perform in Tadmor (Palmyra), a community which has feature prominently in Russian initiatives to demonstrate a positive impact for culture, heritage, and stability in Syria. Image courtesy of Russia Today.



<sup>12</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2022) *Infighting between Islamist, Turkish-backed armed groups continues in north Syria*.

<sup>13</sup> COAR Global (2022) *Syria Update: March 7*. Syrian Government forces maintain a number of checkpoints in the northeast pursuant to an agreement with the SDF aimed at preventing the advance of the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield Operation in 2019.

## Syrian Mercenary Recruitment

Domestic armed actor alignment on the Ukraine issue has reinvigorated discussion of Syrian mercenary recruitment. Early on, several well-publicised examples suggested a wave of Syrian opposition volunteerism in support of Ukraine might be forthcoming.<sup>14</sup> There have since been reports from Russian officials that Idlib-based Albanian and Chechen fighters are heading to Ukraine to confront Russian forces.<sup>15</sup> To date, however, few opposition fighters are thought to have journeyed to eastern Europe as their respective commanders and international allies seek to minimise the potential for Russian retaliation. HTS, for instance, has resisted calls from prominent ideologues that Muslims must carry the fight to the Russians<sup>16</sup> and is unlikely to permit any systematic recruitment from its own ranks. Whether opposition groups can ensure compliance with such orders is an open question, however. President Erdoğan has been forthright that Turkish objectives in Syria and abroad must not be compromised,<sup>17</sup> effectively ordering Turkish-linked SNA groups to refrain from participation in Ukraine. Reports that SNA fighters are preparing to travel to Ukraine with direct Turkish government facilitation have nevertheless emerged, producing a delicate and potentially explosive matter for Russia-Turkey relations.<sup>18</sup>

Reports that Russian forces are seeking potential recruits for its war in Ukraine are also gathering steam in government-held areas. According to local sources, interlocutors responsible for the recruitment of Syrian fighters to Libya and other foreign sites of Russian military engagement have been tasked with registering interest from Syrians in Dar'a, Deir-ez-Zor, and Rural Damascus. In Dar'a these reports emerged a full month before the Russian invasion of Ukraine,<sup>19</sup> likely because of the concentration of Syrian combatants with experience under Russian command. Available information describes an initial registration process which scrutinises combat experience and, in the Dar'a example, forwards approved applicants for training at Syria-based Russian military facilities. Recruitment processes in other areas appear to be several weeks behind Dar'a, but some reports claim the Russian military will offer thousands of Syrians the opportunity of reconciliation with the Syrian Government, favourable basic salaries, and other financial benefits.<sup>20</sup>

Still in its early stages, it is unclear whether any Syrian recruits have yet deployed to Ukraine on behalf of the Russian Armed Forces. If reports regarding the first batch of recruits from Dar'a are accurate, it may not be long before they arrive. Over time, they may be followed by many more. For Syrians with no hostility towards Moscow, the paucity of alternative livelihood options is likely to drive their continued interest in military service. For Russia, the addition of experienced Syrian fighters to its ranks represents yet another dimension to its increasingly well-publicised and extensive recruitment practices. The longer the crisis in Ukraine drags on, the greater the likelihood that Syrians will be recruited and deployed as mercenaries by all sides in the conflict.

## Frozen Political Process

Blocked by every turn by the Syrian Government, subject to frequent (and often Russian-orchestrated) delays, and hosting Syrian stakeholders with irreconcilable political differences, the UN-led Syrian peace process established by UNSC Resolution 2254 has yet to deliver any meaningful results on the ground. Regarded by many as the only way to resolve the Syria crisis, the constructive diplomacy required to advance the process has only become more difficult subsequent to events in Ukraine. Speaking at the UN Security Council ahead of a forthcoming meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in mid-March, UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, nevertheless remained resolute, emphasising that global diplomacy on the contents of UNSC 2254 remains essential “however hard that is, and especially right now”.<sup>21</sup> Pedersen cannot be blamed for his steadfastness, but optimism around the political process has been low for some time. Given Russia's crucial role in the engagement of the Syrian Government with the various strands of diplomacy contained within UNSC 2254, progress now appears wholly unfeasible until conflict in Ukraine nears its own bitter outcome.

<sup>14</sup> The most prominent example being claims from the notorious opposition fighter, ‘Abu TOW’.

<sup>15</sup> RIA Novosti (2022) Defence Ministry says militants from Idlib heading to Ukraine.

<sup>16</sup> Prominent HTS cleric, Maysara Ali Al-Kahtani, otherwise known as a Sheikh Abu Mariyya, effectively issued a fatwa against Russian forces in Ukraine with this tweet on February 25.

<sup>17</sup> Al Arabiya (2022) Erdogan says Turkey cannot abandon its ties with Russia and Ukraine.

<sup>18</sup> Syrians for Truth and Justice (2022) Has the recruitment of Syrian fighters towards Ukraine begun?

<sup>19</sup> Dar'a 24 (2022) Russia plans to use local Syrian forces in its war in Ukraine [Arabic].

<sup>20</sup> Damascus Voice (2022) Russia begins recruiting Syrian mercenaries to fight in Ukraine [Arabic].

<sup>21</sup> UNSC 14087/February 22, 2022. Amid stalemate, acute suffering in Syria, Special Envoy tells Security Council political solution ‘only way out’.



## Aid After Ukraine: What of Syria?

### Future of the Cross-border Mechanism

Syria's cross-border mechanism is again shortly up for renewal. In all probability, the longstanding channel for international assistance will be subject to negotiations that are even more arduous than those witnessed during last year's last-minute renewal. Then, the extension of cross-border permissions was granted following a bilateral arrangement orchestrated by the US and Russia. As a result of this deal, Western states agreed to furnish their ongoing cross-border operations with new information sharing protocols, an increase in cross-line convoys, and a commitment to early recovery programming. Progress on these points

has been slow, however, meaning that Russia will have been disinclined to countenance the re-authorisation of UNSC 2585 even before its attack on Ukraine. Continued Western-Russian opposition in international political and economic arenas is only likely to further harden Russia's position when the cross-border vote returns to the table in June this year.

All signs indicate the prospects for cross-border renewal are now dimmer than before, a perspective endorsed by many analysts. Western negotiators were already on the back foot at the last round of talks, and do not appear to have any substantial leverage that they can bring to bear this time around either. Even so, the consequences of a more intransigent Russian position are by no means clear-cut. If

Russian military personnel sweep Tadmor, in Homs. The community has featured prominently in Russian initiatives to demonstrate positive impacts for stability in Syria. Image courtesy of Syria TV.



UNSC 2585 can be salvaged, it will arguably be saved by the necessity to ensure that a weakened Syrian Government does not fall further into ruin, in addition to Russia's own interest in reserving the negotiations as a source of perpetual leverage. Were Damascus to lose control as a result of its spiralling economic crisis, Russian interests in the country may be threatened to an extent that could undermine both its position in Syria and its more pressing strategic interests abroad. Russian officials may therefore look to retain the deal and its existing physical and technical infrastructure, yet press for even greater demands which lock the West into the concessions enshrined by the last re-authorisation deal, require more cross-line support, and chart a seemingly inescapable 'return to Damascus'. Their Western counterparts may ultimately consider this is an acceptable price to ensure that the Syria crisis is contained and that a valuable channel for assistance is sustained.

## Intervention and Injustice: Syrian Reactions to the International Response in Ukraine

It has been argued that Syria was falling into "irrelevance" even before Putin's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> To suggest that this view is even more valid now that a substantial amount of the world's energy is mobilised behind Ukraine would be to underplay the profound ways in which the Syrian crisis is still relevant. Indeed, for many Syrians, reactions to the two crises represent an unseemly double standard which could affect how they perceive Western actors over the long-term. For them, Russian attacks and Ukrainian deprivations will be all too familiar. Yet unlike in Ukraine, the international response to state violence in Syria was piecemeal, noncommittal, and arguably hobbled from the outset for fear of overreach. From Deir-ez-Zor to Damascus, Syrians have witnessed approaches predicated largely on political and military containment, while humanitarian assistance has been scattered and often disconnected from strategic messaging and long-term thinking. Where direct Western intervention has occurred, it has almost exclusively been in service of primarily Western interests and produced comparatively few decisive steps to halt even the most brutal threats facing the Syrian population.

Looking to Ukraine now, many Syrians therefore express a sense of confliction. While sympathetic to the plight of Ukrainians, feelings of injustice, anger, and frustration will be common to those most affected by Russia's ferocity and those complicit in its concession.<sup>23</sup> After seven years of war crimes, indiscriminate attacks, and callous occupation at the hands of the Russians and the al-Assad government, those feelings may turn to resentment given the united front the West has displayed for Ukraine. Deflated opinion of the West is not helped by media coverage portraying Ukrainians as somehow more "civilised" and therefore more deserving of Western assistance.<sup>24</sup> It may be that aid programmes and donor governments will have to work harder to regain the trust of Syrians after Ukraine, a feat made all the more difficult by the prospect that war in eastern Europe is far more likely to attract more sustained international attention and investment over time.

## Forgotten Crises within a Crisis

Should Syria avoid acute catastrophe, global attention on Ukraine could submerge numerous aspects of its own crisis. For instance, international pressure to improve conditions for Syrian refugees is already low and may become even more flaccid if Ukrainian dislocation becomes the most prominent displacement issue for Western governments. This represents a significant problem given the scale of need amongst Syrian refugee populations in regional host states in particular. Turkey and Lebanon, for example, have absorbed considerable numbers but have been unable (and increasingly unwilling) to accommodate their needs. In Lebanon, 70 percent of Syrian refugees have received no humanitarian assistance since the beginning of 2021, while half the total number of Syrian child refugees in the country are out of school.<sup>25</sup> Much the same is found in Turkey, where some commentators worry about the consequences of an "isolated and alienated underclass prone to criminal and radicalisation in later generations".<sup>26</sup>

More concerted support for refugees is therefore necessary, but the current financial constraints and political insecurities of regional host countries make it unlikely that sufficient assistance will come from within. Away from the international spotlight, host countries might therefore be

<sup>22</sup> Shaar, K. (2022) How Syria fell into irrelevance for the West

<sup>23</sup> Swehat, Y. (2022) Ukraine in Syria, Syria in Ukraine [Arabic].

<sup>24</sup> Such references were frequent in the first week of the war in Ukraine, including this example.

<sup>25</sup> The New Humanitarian (2022) Syrian refugees in Lebanon need more help, not more pressure to leave.

<sup>26</sup> Karasapan, O. (2019) Turkey's Syrian refugees - the welcome fades. In Turkey, around a million Syrians work without proper documentation and 40 percent of children do not receive an education.

freer to take unilateral measures to deal with the issue, potentially testing the legal and moral obligations which regulate a host country's duty of care. This becomes all the more likely given there is little evidence to suggest that large-scale voluntary returns are likely without considerable – and presently unforeseeable – political change in Syria. In the meantime, host countries might therefore look to deepen their politicisation of the Syrian refugee issue, seeking to extract more finance from the West with a promise that Europe is not forced to deal with another influx of Syrians at a time when it is handling those from Ukraine. Integration may subsequently come to replace returns as the long-term goal, but this will be fraught with even greater complexities if foreign assistance fails to penetrate the immediate and longer-term challenges this presents.



The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). WPCS will provide operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a mid-conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers who will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

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