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### Research Report

## The Covid-19 pandemic and conflict dynamics in Syria: Neither a turning point nor an overall determinant

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# SWP Comment

NO. 21 MAY 2020

## The Covid-19 Pandemic and Conflict Dynamics in Syria

Neither a Turning Point Nor an Overall Determinant

*Muriel Asseburg, Hamidreza Azizi, Galip Dalay and Moritz Pieper*

Nine years into the (civil) war, Syria is in an extraordinarily poor position to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of the pandemic leading towards the uniting of local, regional, and international actors involved in Syria around a common purpose, conflict dynamics have hampered an effective response to Covid-19. Yet, the pandemic is unlikely to become a decisive turning point in conflict dynamics or an overall determinant of its future trajectory. Rather, in the mid-term, the relevant actors are likely to continue to follow their strategic interests in Syria, while some will have to adjust their operational priorities, as well as the strategies to pursue them, against the backdrop of the pandemic. Cooperation among external actors in solving the conflict is not set to get any easier. Trends of destabilisation and erosion of state capacity in the war-torn country are also likely to continue. Europeans should prioritise helping fight the pandemic in all areas of Syria and re-engage in diplomacy aimed at conflict settlement and the prevention of military escalation among involved actors.

At first glance, it seems as if Syria has not been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic as of today. According to official figures of the Syrian Ministry of Health, by 5 May 2020, there were 44 Syrians who had tested positive, 3 had died of the virus, and 27 had recovered. On 30 April, the Kurdish-dominated self-administration in the north-east of the country announced two more cases; the oppositional Syrian Interim Government, nominally in control of the north-west, reported no infections until 3 May. Yet, these numbers are unlikely to be reliable indicators of the pandemic's spread in Syria. Rather, they reflect the low level of

overall testing and the difficulties of confronting the pandemic and its fallout in the war-torn and fragmented country.

### Pandemic Hits a Country in Crisis

After nine years of (civil) war, Syria is in an extremely poor position to confront the pandemic, putting Syrians at very high risk. The country's health system as well as the energy, water, and sanitation infrastructure have been largely destroyed in nine years of fighting, in particular in former and current rebel-held areas. The Syrian Arab Army



and Russia's air force have both deliberately targeted hospitals, clinics, and health workers. According to the UN, at the outbreak of the pandemic, only 57 hospitals and clinics were fully operational in Syria. In early March 2020, there were an estimated 325 ICUs with ventilators available throughout the country. These were distributed very unevenly, with some two-thirds in Damascus and the provinces of Latakia and Tartous, i.e. the regime heartlands, and none in Deir ez-Zor. Even those hospitals and clinics that are operational lack equipment, trained personnel, and medicine.

Also, against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis in Syria — exacerbated by the financial crisis in Lebanon — state revenues have been severely reduced, leaving few resources for Damascus to upscale health capacities and cushion the impact of preventive measures on the population, thus further increasing dependency on international humanitarian aid. With an expected drop in the remittances on which many Syrians depend and the impact of lockdown measures, living conditions are set to worsen. Already before the epidemic hit the country, according to the UN, more than 80 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line, some 11 million Syrians were receiving humanitarian assistance, and some 8 million of them were dependent on food aid.

The risk of being affected by Covid-19 is highest for some 6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), around 130,000 detainees in regime prisons, and tens of thousands of suspected Islamic State (IS) fighters and their families detained by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in camps and detention facilities. Most of these vulnerable groups live in cramped conditions that do not allow for social distancing, they lack access to health services, suffer from catastrophic hygienic conditions, and often do not even have access to clean water. A spread of the virus among IDPs, prisoners, and detainees would be next to impossible to contain and lead to large numbers of fatalities.

## Conflict Dynamics Impede Confronting Covid-19 Challenges

Rather than the pandemic uniting local, regional, and international actors around a common purpose, conflict dynamics have hampered an effective response to Covid-19. The fragmentation of territorial control in Syria — between Damascus and its backers (Russia, Iran, Iran-backed militias); the Kurdish dominated self-administration and its supporters (mainly a reduced number of US troops); Turkey and allied militias; as well as the Syrian Salvation Government linked to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an al-Qaida offshoot of Salafist jihadis — and continued conflict between the players have rendered a joint or coordinated approach to Covid-19 impossible. Also, none of the crucial external actors has changed course so as to allow for an effective tackling of the humanitarian needs resulting from the pandemic.

In addition, interventions by international humanitarian actors have been severely hampered by the lack of access to territories outside the control of Damascus. This problem has been compounded by restrictions on mobility imposed by Damascus and de facto authorities to contain the pandemic as well as by the closure of two border crossings (al-Ya'rubiya on the border with Iraq, al-Ramtha on the border with Jordan, both formerly used for international cross-border aid to circumvent Damascus) based on Security Council Resolution 2504 of January 2020. It has also been magnified by international actors such as the WHO relying on Damascus as their main counterpart in addressing the Covid-19 challenge while avoiding to deal with de facto authorities in the north-west and north-east of the country. The problem has been especially stark east of the Euphrates, where the WHO shunned contacts and refrained from aid deliveries until mid-April 2020. What is more, Damascus and Ankara have both used the denial of access to north-east Syria for humanitarian actors and aid deliveries as a means of putting pressure on the Kurdish-dominated self-administration to, re-

spectively, agree to a deal on terms set by Damascus or respect Turkey's red lines. Turkey has also repeatedly withheld drinking water to areas in the north-east. In the same vein, humanitarian access to the Rukban Camp on the Jordanian border has been denied by Damascus (and by Russian troops stationed in the area) to increase the pressure on US-backed rebels in the enclave to surrender. In the wake of the pandemic, Jordan also no longer allows direct cross-border aid deliveries to the camp.

Measures adopted by local actors to contain the spread of the virus and prepare for dealing with infections have also been undermined by conflict dynamics. The government of Syria and de facto authorities in other parts of the country have each adopted similar, yet uncoordinated measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic, such as: a partial closure of borders, mobility restrictions, curfews, the suspension of non-essential economic activities, the introduction of part-time hours for the public sector, and the closure of schools and universities. Two communities that turned out to be hotspots of infections (Manin and al-Sayyada Zainab) have been quarantined to prevent the spread of the virus. Damascus has also granted amnesty to criminals and defectors (although to date no meaningful release of prisoners has been registered) and postponed parliamentary elections that had been scheduled for mid-April. Damascus and the SDF apparently have suspended military recruitment, and the SDF declared a unilateral cease-fire. Yet, border closures and travel restrictions have been undermined by the continued movement of fighters, in particular between Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Also, incentives to engage in smuggling activities have increased further against the backdrop of scarcity and enormous price hikes, in particular for medicine and food. Last but not least, the so-called IS has tried to exploit a situation — in which it sees its local, regional, and international enemies focused on fighting the pandemic — to raise its profile and reinvigorate its networks, leading to an upsurge in attacks across the country as well as mutinies and

(attempted) prison outbreaks, in particular from the SDF's detention facilities.

## **Covid-19 Impacts the Military Balance of Power**

Actors involved in the Syrian conflict have been impacted differently by the pandemic, depending on how much they have been afflicted by Covid-19, the repercussions on available resources (e.g. state revenues), and the manner of involvement in the conflict (e.g. reliance on ground troops vs. air force). The respective impacts have reflected on actors' military capabilities, and thus on the overall military power balance. In contrast, the pandemic has not had a pacifying effect.

As a case in point, some observers have held that one effect of the pandemic is that a cease-fire in Idlib province has lasted longer than originally expected. Yet, it seems that the relative calm in the area agreed upon is less a direct effect of involved actors adjusting to Covid-19 than an expression of the main parties — in particular, Turkey, HTS, and Damascus and its backers — preparing for the next round of fighting so as to defend what each sees as vital interests. The limited ceasefire arrangement agreed upon by Russia and Turkey on 5 March 2020 was to establish a secure corridor along the M4 motorway connecting Latakia on the coast and Aleppo, Syria's commercial centre. Although it stopped the regime's offensive aimed at re-conquering the whole of the former de-escalation zone, it did not provide lasting arrangements for any of the points of contention. As was the case with previous Turkish-Russian agreements, this one also put the responsibility of separating HTS from moderate Syrian rebels on Turkey's shoulders — an impossible task given the grip of HTS over the area and its rejection of the deal. Accordingly, joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the M4 motorway, a central provision of the agreement, have faced local protests and attacks instigated by HTS. At the same time, Turkey has used the lull in fighting to forestall Damascus from re-conquering further territory north

of the M4 by increasing the number of its troops there to some 20,000. In the same vein, Turkey has also been trying to consolidate Syrian rebels under one umbrella – the Syrian National Army – and beef up their ranks. Yet, given the fact that Russia controls the airspace in north-west Syria, Turkey’s military build-up there will remain vulnerable. Finally, yet importantly, the pandemic has prompted Ankara to further tighten its control over the Syrian-Turkish border and to toughen up its measures against refugee inflows.

What is more, the pandemic has had an effect on the military power balance in the country, to the benefit of those (mainly) engaged with air power and to the detriment of those engaged with ground forces. In this vein, Covid-19 has led to a redeployment of Russian troops in north-west Syria, reducing their presence among local allies. Yet, Moscow’s primary engagement, i.e. the Russian air force’s sorties in support of Syrian ground troops and allied militias, is hardly being affected by the pandemic. In the same vein, Israel’s military engagement in Syria has not only continued unimpeded by Covid-19, with the Israeli air force continuing to carry out airstrikes against Iranian and Iran-backed militia targets in Syria. Israel has even stepped up these attacks this spring, seizing the opportunity to increase the pressure on Iran and its non-state allies in Syria during a difficult time for the Islamic Republic.

In contrast, Iran – the country hit the hardest by the pandemic in the Middle East – has had to adjust its presence and activities. The pandemic has forced almost all parts of the Iranian government, including the Army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to focus on curbing the crisis inside the country. It has also worsened Iran’s economic difficulties due to lockdown measures and a significant drop in global oil prices, thus compounding the impact of US sanctions. As a result, Iran’s financial resources to support its allies and proxy groups in Syria have been considerably restricted. In the Idlib theatre, this has mainly affected the mercenary Afghan and Paki-

stani fighters of the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun brigades, which have seen reduced levels of funding. In addition, the Corona crisis has prompted a significant number of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units forces operating in Syria to return home to help fight the virus outbreak, thus affecting Iran’s overall posture in the country.

## **Crucial Actors Likely to Adapt Priorities and Approaches**

In the mid-term (i.e. for the next 2–3 years), the relevant local, regional, and global actors are unlikely to alter their pursuit of strategic interests in Syria due to Covid-19, as they overwhelmingly perceive them to be vital. Yet, actors might adapt their operational priorities, as well as the strategies to pursue them, due to the effects that the pandemic is having on available resources.

### **Russia**

Although the impacts of the pandemic, in particular the drop in global oil prices and demand, have increased the pressure on an already strained Russian budget, Moscow’s aims in Syria – preventing Western-led regime change and reintroducing itself as a central player that cannot be ignored in conflict settlement – are unlikely to change due to Covid-19. Yet, seeking material compensation for its war effort through resource extraction in Syria might become more of an operational priority. Russia is therefore likely to continue to support Damascus in re-asserting territorial control over the whole of Syria. This includes not only Idlib province and adjacent areas, but also oil-rich areas east of the Euphrates, the control of which would increase revenues also for Russia, as Moscow has obtained long-term agreements securing a significant share in Syria’s energy sector. Russia is also likely to remain engaged with regard to political and military reform in Syria, increasing the pressure on the heads of the

regime to take steps that would ensure long-term stability and decrease the number of obstacles to reconstruction, such as pervasive corruption.

## **Iran and Israel**

Iran is another case in point. Against the backdrop of the economic impact and the domestic needs resulting from the Corona crisis in the Islamic Republic, a considerable reduction of Iran's military activities in Syria is to be expected, at least until the end of the pandemic at home. In addition, in the wake of the January 2020 assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, by the US, Iran's primary regional focus had shifted from Syria to Iraq with the aim of securing its influence there. Yet, these adaptations do not imply that Iran's main interests in Syria will change. Rather, Iran's top priorities are likely to continue to be the return of all Syrian territory to the control of the central government as well as keeping Bashar al-Assad in power. In addition, the goal of ending the US military presence in Syria (and the region), which was added to Iran's list of objectives after the assassination of Soleimani, is also likely to remain a top priority.

Tehran will also probably seek to maintain its hold on strategically important parts of Syria. This is especially the case with regard to the Syrian-Iraqi border areas in Deir ez-Zor province, as control over these areas is crucial for Iran's long-term plans to secure a land bridge to the Mediterranean. Yet, against the backdrop of dwindling revenues in Iran, this endeavour is likely to become more challenging. In this vein, a reduction of financial incentives for local tribes in Deir ez-Zor is likely to weaken the loyalty of those tribes. Also, difficulties in paying salaries to mercenaries, such as the Fatemiyoun brigade, will weaken Iran's network of allied militias. Declining economic resources also overshadow Iran's plans to play a role in Syria's economic reconstruction and thus gain a long-term foothold through investments.

Israel, by contrast, is neither likely to pursue different interests in Syria than it has to date, nor dramatically change its modus operandi. The Israeli government has largely refrained from taking a position in the civil war, but it has increasingly been concerned about the growing Iranian presence in its immediate neighbourhood. Signs that Iran and its ally, the Lebanese Hezbollah, were about to establish a permanent presence near the border – and from there open another front against Israel – prompted the Israeli government to step up its diplomatic activities in 2017. As that did not yield the intended results, Israel switched to an approach of active military containment of Iran and its allies in Syria and, increasingly, in Iraq. Ever since, Israeli air strikes have aimed at preventing the establishment of Iranian and Iranian proxies' military bases and arms factories as well as the transfer of strategic weapons to Hezbollah.

## **Turkey**

Although it will have to partially adapt its approach in Syria to its own economic and financing needs, Turkey is also likely to maintain its strategic interests in Syria. In this context, even though the March 2020 Idlib ceasefire agreement has temporarily lessened the immediate pressure posed by IDPs on Turkey's border, Ankara remains first and foremost concerned about the close to one million IDPs in north-west Syria's border region – their future remains uncertain, in particular in view of another potential regime offensive backed by Russia. Turkey will therefore continue to pursue the objective of creating some form of safe or buffer zone in Idlib – in which IDPs would remain on the Syrian side of the border – and try to enlist European and US support for that effort.

Second, Ankara will continue to try leveraging its military presence in the political process in order to safeguard its interests in the future order of Syria. It is therefore safe to assume that Turkey will not downsize its military engagement

before a political process is underway that would protect Ankara's interest. In the same vein, it will continue trying to shape and empower its local Syrian allies.

Third, Ankara will continue to seek capitalising on its military might in Syria in order to minimise the Syrian Kurdish position. Its main interests are to prevent a territory along its border that is controlled by authorities which Ankara deems hostile, in particular the SDF – which is dominated by the Democratic Union Party, which is seen by Ankara as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – as well as keeping the SDF from attaining any political status or constitutional recognition.

At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic will force adjustments in Turkey's approach to global actors in Syria, prompting it to pay more attention to US concerns than it had prior to the pandemic. Covid-19 hit Turkey at a moment when it was already suffering from economic difficulties, a high budget deficit, a rapidly weakening currency, and a low level of foreign exchange reserves. It has increased Ankara's need to gain access to international finances, which in turn requires it to improve its relations with the US. In line with this interest, Ankara announced in April 2020 that it would delay the activation of the S-400 missile systems it had purchased from Russia, thus removing a major irritant in bilateral relations with Washington, at least for the time being. Turkey will also have to adapt its approach in Syria to make it less confrontational for the US. In practical terms, this makes it rather implausible that Turkey will undertake further military advances vis-à-vis the US-backed SDF east of the Euphrates any time soon. Rather, Turkey is likely to pursue an indirect approach to weakening and destabilising the administrative and security structures there by encouraging local resistance.

## US

As Washington has sent contradictory signals regarding its interests, allies (first the rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA),

then the SDF), and level of military and political engagement during both the Obama and Trump presidencies, the US is the actor whose priorities and concrete involvement are the most difficult to predict in the mid-term. As with other relevant actors, the strategic interests of the US are also likely to remain stable in the wake of the pandemic. They concern, primarily, preventing a resurgence of the IS – for which the pandemic provides an auspicious opportunity – and countering Iranian influence. The US is also likely to remain involved in Syria against the backdrop of the great power competition there and to protect its allies in the Middle East – Israel, above all. Yet, it is unclear how much these interests will be undermined by the promise of withdrawing troops from the region and by having to adapt the US posture (and fight against the IS) in neighbouring Iraq following the Soleimani assassination. Therefore, the (already reduced) US military presence should not be taken for granted, neither in the north-east in support of the SDF, nor in the al-Tanf enclave on the motorway linking Baghdad to Damascus. Although it is safe to assume that, in the case of a Democratic Party election victory in late 2020, US strategic interests would remain the same, it is unclear how a future President Joe Biden would adjust the level of ambition and the US military presence in Syria. Still, some policy elements are already set, as the Trump Administration's approach in Syria has been backed up by a comprehensive set of sanctions (so-called Caesar sanctions), adopted with bipartisan consensus in the US Congress in December 2019. This sanctions package is unlikely to be revoked or significantly softened any time soon.

## Covid-19: Another Intervening Factor in the Syrian Theatre

Concerning mid-term conflict dynamics in Syria, the Corona pandemic is unlikely to become either a turning point, a catalyst propelling the conflict in a clear direction,



or an overall determinant. Rather, it will most likely turn out to be one intervening factor among a variety of factors affecting cooperation formats, military strength, power balance, and prospects for stabilisation.

Cooperation between the guarantors of the Astana process (Russia, Turkey, and Iran), which was launched in January 2017 to jointly resolve the conflict in Syria, is not set to get any easier. In the beginning, the Astana approach of de-escalation zones and reconciliation agreements had proved highly effective in restructuring Syria's conflict dynamics in a way that benefitted the regime and diminished the opposition, while safeguarding the interests of the Astana-3. However, an agreement on the endgame along the Turkish-Syrian border will be difficult to achieve, and renewed fighting in the province of Idlib will once more increase the risk of direct confrontations between them.

Although the conflict over Idlib has at times been a hard test for Turkish-Russian relations, mutual accommodation has so far prevailed. Yet, an ever greater level of involvement by Russia and Turkey on opposing sides of the civil war in Libya, which started well before the pandemic and has turned Syria into a theatre for the recruitment of mercenaries for the war effort in Libya, is likely to increase the intensity of the confrontation between the two – and reflect negatively on cooperation in the Astana format.

In addition, with regard to the conflict in Idlib, Turkey and Russia have preferred to cut deals bilaterally, without involving Iran. That has raised concerns in Tehran about being sidelined when it comes to decisions on Syria's future order. Should Tehran fail to keep the Astana framework alive, it might turn to undermining Russian-Turkish agreements on the ground. What is more, unlike in the 2016 battle of Aleppo, in which Russia and Iran fought in unison, the conflict over Idlib is likely to continue to drive the wedge between Iran and Russia. Despite a likely decrease in Iran's direct military involvement in Syria in the years to come,

Iran's political rivalry with Turkey will continue, and its relations with Russia will become more strained.

There are at least three more arenas that will continue to bear (or increasingly bear) a high risk of military escalation. This is, first, the north-east, with its high concentration of local, regional, and international troops and militias – an area where, similar to Idlib, interim agreements have frozen the lines of conflict rather than resolved any points of contention. Second, it concerns the antagonism between Israel and the US, on the one hand, and Iran and its allies on the other. An increasingly assertive Israeli posture had already brought the antagonists to the brink of direct military confrontation in February 2018, and the US and Iran have clashed repeatedly in the Persian Gulf. Third, it applies to endeavours by the IS to profit from the chaos and contested control in many parts of Syria, allowing it to conduct operations as well as regroup and recruit.

Although the Syrian regime will remain set on re-conquering the remaining territory, that process might take longer than envisioned due to increasingly strained resources in Damascus and Tehran. At the same time, a trend of destabilisation in territories nominally under the control of Damascus is likely to continue. Even before the pandemic, protests against bad governance and the lack of services had been on the rise in several parts of the country, including traditional strongholds of the regime. Armed confrontations between remnants of rebel formations and regime forces had escalated in so-called reconciled areas, especially in the southern Deraa province. It is safe to assume that the level of popular unrest will rise in the case of continued lockdown measures that prevent income-generating activities, against the background of a continued decline in remittances, and a trend of erosion of state functions due to the precarious fiscal situation of Damascus.

A reversal of the destabilisation trend is unlikely to come through agreement in the UN-facilitated constitutional committee or a



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strong reconstruction drive. Damascus has not shown any interest in political compromise, and it has neither funds to invest nor has it been successful in repatriating diaspora capital. In addition, already before the economic effects of the Corona pandemic became a factor, Russia and Iran were not in a position to provide money for a comprehensive, countrywide reconstruction. Other potential supporters have either categorically rejected involvement without seeing progress in conflict resolution or political openings (US), or they have been hesitant to engage (the Arab States of the Persian Gulf), positioned themselves for involvement at a later stage (China), or focussed on areas controlled by them and their local proxies (Turkey). The economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the sharp fall in the price of oil, are further reducing the availability of resources, in particular those of the Arab Gulf States. The pending enactment of comprehensive secondary sanctions on Syria by the US (so-called Caesar sanctions) will further deter international engagement in Syria's reconstruction.

In this vein, even though the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has stepped up its normalisation with Damascus in the wake of the Corona crisis and pledged support for fighting the virus, it seems that the move was motivated more by an interest to have the regime increase military pressure on the Emirates' regional rival Turkey through a renewal of military operations in Idlib than an interest to assist in the long-term stabilisation and reconstruction of Syria. The UAE's main aim seems to be to get Turkey bogged down in the Levant so that Ankara can devote less attention and fewer resources to Libya.

## Policy Recommendations

The EU and its member states have little influence on the conflict dynamics in Syria. In the short term, they should prioritise helping fight the pandemic there, rather than treating it through the prism of conflict dynamics, as other actors do. This implies at least two core elements: first, insisting on maintaining – or rather expanding – access to humanitarian aid and health support in all areas of Syria, and in this vein preparing a follow-up to Security Council Resolution 2504, which will expire in July 2020, so as to allow for cross-border aid operations. Second, Europe should encourage the cooperation of the WHO and other international bodies with the de facto authorities in the north-east and north-west of the country to fight the pandemic, and, in particular, to address the challenges in detention centres and IDP camps.

Europeans should then focus on diplomacy and work towards arrangements that make the protection of the civilian population a priority, as well as promote a negotiated conflict settlement that achieves a balance between local, regional, and international interests based on international law. In this context, it would also make sense to interlink the various multilateral processes – the Astana process, the so-called Small Group, and the Geneva process – more closely. A first meeting between the heads of state and government of Germany, France, Russia, and Turkey in October 2018 marked the start of such an endeavour, but it has lacked follow-up. Europeans should also facilitate talks that would contribute to a modus vivendi between Turkey and the SDF as well as Iran and the US/Israel.

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