

# The effects of Russian intervention in the Syria crisis

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## About this report

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## Contents

Executive Summary	1
Overview	3
Responses	5
Complications and Effects	10
Conclusions	16

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## Executive Summary

The linked Russian political-military initiative in Syria – with a bombing campaign from 30 September, support of Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian military ground offensives, and convening of international conferences to try and secure the Assad regime – has changed the dynamics of the 56-month Syrian conflict. The effects of the intervention are significant, and are both country-specific, inside and outside Syria, and in the relationship between countries, communities, and systems.

The Russian-supported offensives have made limited gains against both rebels and the Islamic State. However, the military effects of the intervention are unlikely to be decisive despite extensive bombing, the supply of advanced battlefield equipment and armour, and the deployment of troops as ‘advisors’ near the frontlines. Instead, Moscow is likely to face a choice as to whether it steps up its commitment, including additional bases further inside Syria, the use of more long-range bombers and cruise missiles, and the incursion of more ground forces.

Politically, the Russian initiative has achieved the immediate goal of a short-term international acceptance of President Assad’s stay in power and the removal of any reference to his future in plans for an 18-month transition. However, it is unlikely – despite a parallel, high-profile effort by the US – that a political resolution will be achieved, given the gap between the regime and Syrian opposition and rebel groups, as well as scepticism and countering moves by countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Given this lack of resolution, the most significant effects on countries in the region and beyond are likely to be ongoing political, economic, and social challenges and costs. These will vary according to the level of involvement in and proximity to the Syrian conflict.

The Russian intervention has already expanded Turkey’s front-line political involvement, particularly after the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane near the Turkish-Syrian border on November 24. Saudi Arabia is also stepping up its involvement as the supporter of Assad’s opponents, both publicly through the attempt to foster an opposition-rebel bloc, and privately through supplies to rebel factions. Iran’s investment in – and costs from – the conflict have accompanied Russia’s intervention, particularly through the injection of front-line commanders and troops, Iran’s leadership of Hezbollah units and foreign militias, and its diplomatic insistence on Assad’s retention of power.

Other countries have been more cautious in their political positioning. The Iraqi Government has hosted a 'coordinating centre' for Russian, Iranian, and Syrian officials, but is otherwise maintaining a concentration on the Islamic State inside Iraq. Jordan and Lebanon are constrained by concerns over further 'spillover' of the conflict, while Gulf States are both deferential to the Saudi lead and wary of any stance countering it.

This caution is compounded by economic and social priorities. Both Lebanon and Jordan face further challenges with large populations of Syrian refugees because of cuts in international funding, which are likely to continue into 2016, and – in Lebanon's case – local violence between security forces and factions near the Syrian border.

Despite a US Government effort for a political resolution by the end of March 2016, there is unlikely to be any change in this situation without substantial changes in the approach to interaction and negotiation. These include the recognition of territorial control by each side – the Assad regime, the opposition/rebels, and Kurdish groups – in the conflict. The de facto partition offers space for the consolidation of conditions for discussion, such as the development of capacity building in opposition-held areas for governance, judicial systems, reconstruction, and provision of services.

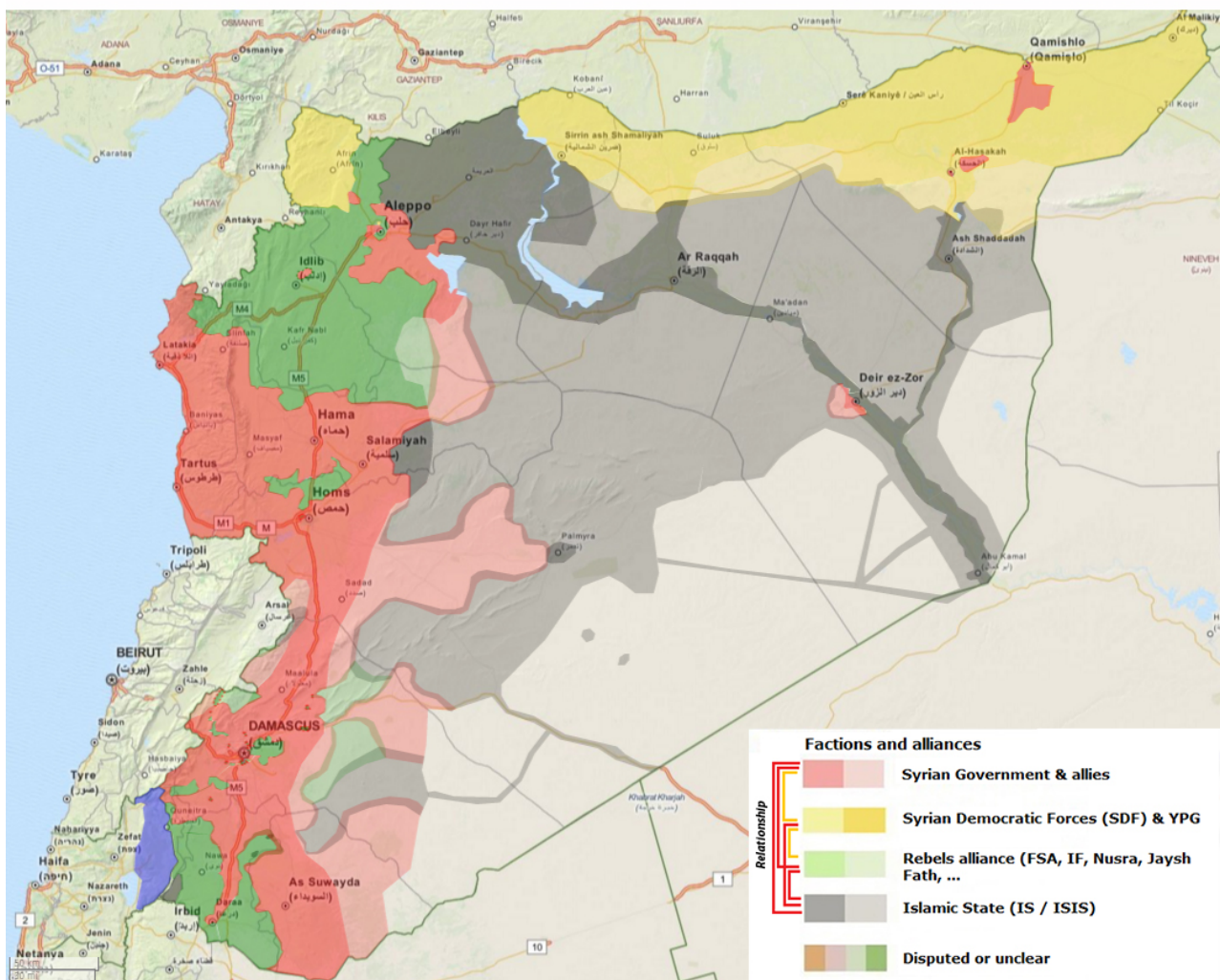
States and actors must confront humanitarian crises in the interim period, but humanitarian aid can be no more than a minimal palliative if it is not part of a political process which – at the least – leads to protected zones, guaranteed access for aid, and security for aid providers.

## Syria conflict map - 2 December 2015

Overall situation

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## Overview

In spring-summer 2015, Russia and Iran pursued an initiative for high-level international talks, aimed at keeping President Bashar al-Assad – or at least elements of his regime – in place as part of a political transition in Syria. The effort was blocked by Saudi Arabia in mid-August, as its Foreign Minister said, at a press conference following talks in Moscow, that no negotiations could proceed while Assad was in power.<sup>1</sup>

Less than two weeks after the Saudi rejection, Russia and Iran began pursuit of an alternative strategy, discussed in Moscow in late July with the leading Iranian military commander General Qassem Soleimani.<sup>2</sup> A Russian build-up of aerial forces, armour, and ‘advisors’ at its base in western Syria was followed by the launch of a bombing campaign on 30 September.

By 3 November, 1,631 sorties had been carried out against 2,083 targets, according to the Russian Defence Ministry.<sup>3</sup> While Moscow officially stated that its campaign was against the Islamic State, first-hand reports and geolocation of satellite images, videos, and photographs established that more than 80% of airstrikes were against the Syrian rebels challenging the Assad regime.<sup>4</sup> Those airstrikes supported Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian military ground offensives on six fronts, five against the rebels, and one against the Islamic State.

The Russian strategy links military and political measures aimed at securing the short-term survival of President Assad and, in the longer term, the continuation of Assad’s rule or of government structures incorporating elements of the current regime. The intervention capitalised on the lack of political will in Western capitals to provide significant military support, beyond air strikes against IS forces, to rebels, and it was undertaken in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, with Moscow’s determination to reassert its influence after years of relative weakness. Russia is also presenting the operation as an attempt to check ‘terrorism’ at home, with warnings that thousands of fighters from the north Caucasus could return from Syria (an estimated 2,000 or more north Caucasus Islamist extremists are thought to be fighting in Syria), while declaring both that the operations have the sanction of Muslim religious authorities and that they are directed solely at Islamist terrorist groups.<sup>5</sup> Russian military operations in Syria appear generally to enjoy the support of a majority of the Russian population.<sup>6</sup>

Russian support is seeking to maintain regime positions in territories already held (the Latakia-Tartus region and the capital Damascus) and allow the regime to recover some areas of strategic importance in areas such as southern Aleppo Province and further to the south in Hama and Homs Provinces.<sup>7</sup> Leading

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1 Golubkova, K., & Baczynska, G. (2015, 11 August). Russia, Saudis Fail in Talks to Agree on Fate of Syria’s Assad. *Reuters*. , <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-meast-crisis-russia-assad-idUSKCN0QG13G20150811#W7tu8ixewoUOMoEe.97>

2 Bassam, L., & Perry, T. (2015, 7 October). Insight - How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow. *Reuters*. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUKKCN0S02BX20151007>

3 Russian Jets Destroyed Over 2,000 Terrorist Targets Since September 30. (2015, 3 November). *Sputnik News* <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20151103/1029540546/russian-airstrikes-syria-2000-terrorist-targets.html>

4 Stubbs, J. (2015, 21 October). Four-fifths of Russia’s Syria Strikes Don’t Target Islamic State. *Reuters*. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-strikes-idUSKCN0SF24L20151021#f3Qq3QK7ebl474IU.97>

5 MacFarquhar, N. (2015, 20 November) For Russia, Links Between Caucasus and ISIS Provoke Anxiety. *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/world/europe/for-russia-links-between-caucasus-and-isis-provoke-anxiety.html>;

Bender, J. (2015, 16 October) An Orthodox Bishop Blesses Russian Missiles for Airstrikes in Syria. *Business Insider* <http://uk.businessinsider.com/orthodox-priest-blesses-missiles-2015-10>

6 Anishchuk, A., (2015, 22 October) Putin Gains Record Support Among Russians Over Syria, Poll Shows. *Bloomberg*. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-22/putin-gains-record-support-among-russians-over-syria-poll-shows>

7 Lucas, S. (2015, 1 October). Why Putin Gambled on Airstrikes in Syria – and What Might Come Next. *The Conversation*.. <https://theconversation.com/why-putin-gambled-on-airstrikes-in-syria-and-what-might-come-next-48414>

Russian officials have suggested that Russia's military operation will last for 3-4 months but that any extension will depend on how the military command assesses its impact.

Russia also sought, with the military escalation as leverage, to press the US and European powers to accept high-level international talks and to urge their supporters, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to do the same. The discussions would be based on an initial acceptance of President Assad retaining power during the initial stages of negotiations with opposition groups, with the eventual aim of a 'transition' to a power-sharing 'inclusive' government. This would be accompanied by the declared establishment of a common front with the West to fight Islamist terrorist groups.<sup>8</sup>

The effort achieved initial success even before a conference was convened, with the acceptance of the US, Britain, Germany, and eventually Turkey that Assad could remain for up to six months. At two sets of talks in Vienna in October-November, Russia and Iran blocked an initial US-European-Saudi proposal of transition because it set a time limit of a year on Assad's stay in power. Instead, the conference agreed at its second session on 14 November to early elections, with no explicit bar on the participation of Assad or his inner circle, after ceasefires, opposition-regime discussions, and a new constitution.<sup>9</sup>

These developments were a diplomatic advance for Russia, which had failed to achieve its objectives in intensive negotiations with all the major regional powers in preceding months. However, both the political and military aspects of the initiative were complicated by Turkey's downing of a Russian SU-24 strike aircraft near the Turkish-Syrian border on 24 November.<sup>10</sup> Moscow has expanded airstrikes on opposition-held territory in northwest Syria near the border, destroying or damaging border crossings; infrastructure including water treatment plants and hospitals; and civilian sites such as bakeries, markets, and schools.<sup>11</sup>

The incident and subsequent rhetorical battle between Turkey and Russia, with threats of economic consequences, have overshadowed the international conferences. A date for a third meeting has not been set, although Saudi Arabia has convened discussions in Riyadh for a unified opposition-rebel bloc.<sup>12</sup>

The US, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, is declaring that it will seize the initiative for a political resolution by the end of March. This will include ceasefires, UN monitoring inside Syria, and regime-opposition talks. However, it is difficult to foresee any circumstances that will make this the basis of developments, given the wide gap between the Assad position, supported by Russia and Iran, and the opposition-rebel position, supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey.

Instead, the consequences on the ground are primarily humanitarian. In the first four weeks of the Russian airstrikes and Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian offensives, at least 120,000 people fled their homes,

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8 Lucas, S. (2015, 30 October) As Powerbrokers Gather at Last, Russia Races Against Time to Save Assad. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/as-powerbrokers-gather-at-last-russia-races-against-time-to-save-assad-49910>

9 Lucas, S. (2015, 15 November). Syria Daily, Nov 15: Vienna Talks Propose Elections — But What Happens to Assad? *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-daily-vienna-talks-propose-elections-but-what-happens-to-assad/>

10 Lucas, S. (2015, 25 November) Syria Daily, Nov 25: Political Maneuvers Follow Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-daily-political-maneuvers-follow-turkeys-downing-of-russian-warplane/>

11 Lucas, S. (30 November 2015). Syria Feature: Russia's Latest Destruction — Bakery & Drinking Water in Idlib. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-feature-russias-latest-destruction-bakery-drinking-water-in-idlib/>

Lucas, S., (30 November 2015). Syria Daily, Nov 30: Russia Kills 44 in Market Bombing", *EA WorldView*.

<http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-daily-russia-kills-44-in-market-bombing/>; Lucas, S. (2015, 4 December). Syria Feature: Russia's Bombed 'ISIS Oil Refinery' is a Vital Water Treatment Plant. *EA WorldView*.

<http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/syria-feature-russias-bombed-isis-oil-refinery-is-a-vital-water-treatment-plant/>

12 Lucas, S. (11 December 2015). Syria Daily: Opposition-Rebel Bloc Prepares for Talks — But Assad Must Go. *EA WorldView* <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-daily-russia-kills-44-in-market-bombing/>



according to the UN.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian opposition and activists said the number was far higher. Because Turkey has declared saturation as it hosts more than two million Syrian refugees, the large majority of recent displaced had to seek shelter elsewhere within Syria.

While the refugee situations in Lebanon and Jordan have not been directly affected by the Russian intervention, the escalation in conflict has come as international agencies have warned of further cuts in assistance. At the same time, there have been signs of further instability in Lebanon, such as the renewal of suicide bombings in southern Beirut and fighting in the border town of Aarsal.<sup>14</sup>

## Responses

### Turkey

Ankara initially responded cautiously to the Russian approach, as it balanced animosity towards the Assad regime – particularly by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan – with concerns about the ‘Kurdish question’ in Iraq and Syria as well as in Turkey; the Islamic State’s threat in Turkey, which has been demonstrated by suicide bomb attacks; and the position of the US. In particular, it had to reconsider an emphasis on containment and even erosion of Kurdish influence in Syria, accompanying the overthrow of the regime, with the public call of others for a focus on the Islamic State.

Turkey acceded to Assad’s stay for up to six months in the preparations for the 30 October conference in Vienna. However, with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) securing a Parliamentary majority on November 1, Erdogan again broached the possibility of a more assertive policy. Despite US objections, he returned to the initiative of a protected/no-fly zone of 98 km in Aleppo Province along the Turkish border. Such a zone would not only constitute a de facto ‘independent’ area opposing the Assad regime but would also draw a line against extension of Kurdish-controlled territory to the east.<sup>15</sup>

This re-evaluation has been both bolstered and challenged by Turkey’s downing of a Russian Su-14 strike aircraft on 24 November, following Ankara’s warnings of action over both Russian incursions into Turkish airspace and Moscow’s bombing of Turkmen communities and militia in northwest Syria. Erdogan again promised pursuit of the ‘protected zone’, and Ankara is likely to remove limits on the supply of weapons across its border to Syrian rebels.

However, Turkey faces a triple challenge to the effort.

- 1) Russia immediately stepped up airstrikes on Turkish trucks carrying supplies into Syria, denouncing Ankara for aid to ‘terrorists’ and claiming that it was allied with the Islamic State through movement of IS oil production.<sup>16</sup>
- 2) As rebels faced the Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian military ground offensives, they also had to fend off

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13 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2015). *Developments in Northern Governorates* (Situation Report No. 1). New York: United Nations.

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/syria\\_northern\\_governorates\\_situation\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/syria_northern_governorates_situation_report_final.pdf)

14 Shaheen, K. (2015, 12 November). Isis Claims Responsibility as Suicide Bombers Kill Dozens in Beirut. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/12/beirut-bombings-kill-at-least-20-lebanon>

15 President Erdoğan Still Pursuing No-Fly Zone in Northern Syria. (2015, 19 November). *Hurriyet*. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-still-pursuing-no-fly-zone-in-northern-syria.aspx?pageID=238&nlD=91370&NewsCatID=352>

16 Lucas, S. (2015, 26 November). Syria Daily, Nov 26: Russia Hits Back With Bombing of Civilian Targets & Turkish Aid Trucks. *EA WorldView*, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-daily-russia-hits-back-with-bombing-of-turkish-aid-trucks/>

Islamic State attacks in northern Aleppo Province..<sup>17</sup>

- 3) The dissident faction Jaish al-Thuwar, claiming links with Syrian Kurdish forces, tried to seize villages near the Turkish border..<sup>18</sup>

## **Saudi Arabia**

Riyadh has offered vigorous rhetorical resistance to the Russian intervention, which it sees as a potential challenge to its influence in the Middle East, and it has threatened its own intervention to challenge any effort to keep Assad in power. However, Saudi Arabia – whose support, including weapons, assisted the rebel advance in spring and summer 2015 – was cautious about further military aid despite the Assad-Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah offensives, in part because of US pressure not to escalate the conflict while discussions are ongoing.

Since the 14 November conference in Vienna and rebel successes in checking and even countering regime offensives, Saudi Arabia has adjusted its line to try and seize the initiative. It has begun increasing military assistance to rebels. It has convened a conference in Riyadh of opposition and rebel groups, seeking a consensus on representation for any negotiations with the Assad regime and the international community.

The outcome of the Riyadh conference on December 10 was the first establishment of leadership and negotiating committees with both opposition and rebel delegates. Representatives of the Free Syrian Army and the leading faction Jaish al-Islam were included, although Ahrar al-Sham, the largest faction in the rebellion, hesitated about signing the final statement.

The conference statement insisted on the departure of President Assad amid a political transition. It supported a ‘democratic mechanism’ – using this term rather than ‘democracy’ because of the views of Islamist delegates – ‘through a pluralistic regime that represents all sectors of the Syrian people’, including women, which does not discriminate on religious, sectarian, or ethnic grounds..<sup>19</sup>

## **Qatar**

Doha is likely to support the Saudi line, while letting Riyadh take the public lead. Since 2014, Qatar – which had maintained an independent approach to the Syrian opposition and rebellion, often to the point of dispute with Riyadh – has lined up with the Saudis over political and military approaches, especially after the accession of King Salman to the Saudi throne in early 2015. That reconciliation bolstered military aid to the rebels during their successful spring and summer offensives.

At the same time, Qatar has maintained cordial relations with Iran, with Tehran’s ministers making several trips to Doha to discuss the Syrian conflict. Thus the Qataris will be careful in any public expression of the extent of their support for the Syrian opposition and rebels.

Qatar and other Gulf States will also be concerned about any escalation of Syria’s conflict spilling over into Lebanon and Jordan, jeopardizing investments and economic support of interests in those countries.

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17 Lucas, S. (2015, 22 November). Syria Daily, Nov 22: Rebels Push Back Islamic State Along Turkish Border. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-daily-rebels-push-back-islamic-state-along-turkish-border/>

18 Lucas, S. (2015, 27 November). Syria Feature: Kurds Clash With Rebels in North. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/syria-feature-kurds-clash-with-rebels-in-north/>

19 Lucas, S. (2015, 11 December) Syria Daily, Dec 11: Opposition-Rebel Bloc Prepares for Talks — But Assad Must Go. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/syria-daily-opposition-rebel-bloc-prepares-for-talks-but-assad-must-go/>



## Iran

The main supporter of the Assad regime since the 2011 uprising, Tehran has been even firmer than the Russians in continued backing of the President since the start of the Russian bombing and the Syrian military's offensives. In a nuanced contrast to Moscow's position, Iran has insisted that President Assad's personal future must not be debated in the political discussions. Since early December, Iranian officials have further declared that Assad must be able to stand in elections.<sup>20</sup> That position has led to some friction with Russia, which is keeping open the possibility of an Assad departure while the regime is maintained; however, it is unlikely to lead to a division jeopardizing the military intervention.

Instead, Iran is escalating its military involvement, including the command of frontline forces and the leadership of the most successful offensive, which is south of Aleppo city. Since September, hundreds and possibly thousands of Revolutionary Guards troops and Basij fighters have joined the offensives, while Iranian commanders have overseen Hezbollah units and Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani militias. From October 7 to December 12, at least eight Iranian commanders and almost 90 fighters were killed, most of them on the southern Aleppo front, with an undetermined but significant toll among Hezbollah and the foreign militias.<sup>21</sup>

## Lebanon

Despite some scepticism among its leadership about the Syrian military strategy and losses of personnel throughout 2015, Hezbollah has put in more fighters after the Russian intervention. The forces have been especially important on the front south of Aleppo city.

For now, Hezbollah's escalation has not shaken its position inside Lebanon, although it may have contributed to the renewal of Islamic State suicide bombing in southern Beirut, with a 12 November double attack killing 43 people.<sup>22</sup> Unless that bombing is protracted, the leading Syria-related issues inside Lebanon are likely to continue to be the hosting of refugees, with almost 1.2 million in a country of 4.5 million people, and clashes in the border town of Aarsal between Lebanese security forces, the Islamic State, and Jabhat al-Nusra.

## Iraq

Baghdad's role in the Russian escalation is mainly linked with a 'coordinating centre' including Russian, Iranian, Syrian government, and Iraqi representatives for operations against 'terrorism'.<sup>23</sup> Russian and Iranian media have also eagerly recycled comments from the Iraqi officials promoting that mission.

However, the al-Abadi Government has had no more than a PR role in Syrian developments, including the Vienna discussions. The most significant intervention on the ground has been that of Iraqi militias, organized and led by Iranian officers.

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20 Lucas, S. (2015, 6 December). Iran Daily, Dec 6: Supreme Leader's Aide 'We Have Common Stance with Russia on Syria'. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/iran-daily-supreme-leaders-aide-we-have-common-stance-with-russia-on-syria/>

21 Iranian Casualties in Syria Megathread. (n. d.). *Reddit Iran Politics*.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/iranpolitics/comments/3pgwp1/iranian\\_casualties\\_in\\_syria\\_megathread/](https://www.reddit.com/r/iranpolitics/comments/3pgwp1/iranian_casualties_in_syria_megathread/)

22 Lucas, S. (2015, 13 November). Lebanon Feature: Islamic State Claims Deadly South Beirut Bombings. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/lebanon-feature-islamic-state-claims-deadly-south-beirut-bombings/>

23 Russia, Iran, Iraq & Syria Setting Up 'Joint Information Center' to Coordinate anti-ISIS Operations. (2015, 26 September). *RT*. <https://www.rt.com/news/316592-russia-syria-islamic-state/>; Iraq Ready to Share Daesh Intel with Iran, Russia, Syria. (2015, 3 October). *Press TV*. <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2015/10/03/431865/Iraq-Daesh-Iran-Russia-Syria-Abadi-Rogachev-Barzani-UN>

Meanwhile, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government must consider the impact of the Russian intervention. The Syrian Kurdish movement PYD and its YPG militia are likely to be strengthened by the combination of belated Russian airstrikes on the Islamic State, US support for Kurdish-led forces, and Kurdish attacks on rebels facing multiple enemies. The KRG, which is wary of the ascendancy of the PYD-YPG over other Syrian Kurdish factions, has so far been reserved about developments.<sup>24</sup>

## **Jordan**

Amman has a significant supporting role in discussions of foreign actors, notably through its hosting of an operations centre including US, European, Saudi, and Qatar personnel. However, the monarchy has been cautious in any public statements. The Amman operating centre, which had already put constraints on rebel operations to the point of undermining the advance in southern Syria, has continued to oppose any counter-offensive to challenge the Russian intervention.

As with Lebanon, the front-line issue for Jordan is likely to be refugees, with more than 630,000 displaced Syrians in the country. This intersects with economic concerns, given the conflict's effect on trade with Syria and wariness about returning fighters undermining internal security.<sup>25</sup>

## **Egypt**

Cairo moved closer to the Assad regime this summer, renewing security contacts, although President Sisi stopped short of restoring diplomatic relations.<sup>26</sup>

Egypt's shift has been reinforced by fears over attacks on its armed forces and civilians in the Sinai Peninsula, with the insurgency Ansar Bait al-Maqdis pledging allegiance to the Islamic State and renaming itself Wilayat Sinai.

Wilayat Sinai claimed responsibility for the bombing of a Russian civilian jet over the Sinai on 31 October. Even if the attack was prompted by Moscow's escalation in Syria, it will likely bolster Egyptian acceptance of Russia's nominal intervention against ISIS and may spur further moves towards cooperation with Damascus.

## **Israel**

Before Russia's bombing, the Netanyahu Government struck an arrangement with President Putin in which it would accept the Russian operations under certain conditions. Israel insisted that Russian warplanes must not operate inside Syria near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and that Moscow must also ensure that Hezbollah and Iranian-supported forces did not move into the area. The Israelis may also have agreed to sharing of information with Russia, with leaders of the military and intelligence services accompanying Netanyahu on his trip to Moscow.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Çevik, İ. (2015, 5 October). Barzani has a Message for the Russians: I'm a Friend. *Daily Sabah*.

<http://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ilnur-cevik/2015/10/05/barzani-has-a-message-for-the-russians-im-a-friend>

25 See UNHCR. (2015, 8 December). 12,000 People Stranded at Syria-Jordan Border in Deteriorating Conditions. *Briefing Notes*. <http://www.unhcr.org/5666d4816.html>

26 Russia, Egypt Support Forming anti-IS Coalition with Syria's Assad. (2015, 27 August). *The New Arab*.

<http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2015/8/27/Russia-Egypt-support-forming-anti-IS-coalition-with-Syrias-Assad>

27 Aronson, G. (2015, 4 December). Putin and Netanyahu: Minds Alike over Syrian Skies. *Al Jazeera English*.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/12/putin-netanyahu-minds-alike-syrian-skies-151203134525140.html>

Evidence of implementation of the arrangement includes Israel's recent message to a Russian jet entering its airspace through the use of a newly-established 'communication channel' between Moscow and Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup>

On November 9, Netanyahu reaffirmed a position of neutrality towards Assad's future while restating his conditions about Israeli security: 'When two of your enemies are fighting each other, I don't say strengthen one or the other, I say weaken both, or at least don't intervene – which is what I've done. I have not intervened.'<sup>29</sup>

Rumors of Israeli air attacks inside Syria have been persistent since the escalation of the Russian intervention. While none of the claims have been confirmed, support for them has come in the statements of Israeli officials of 'business as usual' towards the movement of missiles which may wind up in the hands of Hezbollah.

### United States

The Obama administration has generally accepted the Russian airstrikes, even though the majority have been against Syrian rebels – including factions which have received American support – rather than the Islamic State. The American military has liaised with Russian counterparts to establish rules for aerial operations to reduce the chance of accidental confrontation as both countries carry out sorties.<sup>30</sup>

Statements from Administration officials have urged the Russians to switch the focus of their operations to ISIS. On November 17, President Obama said, 'The problem has been in their initial military incursion into Syria, they have been more focused on propping up President Assad.'<sup>31</sup>

Still, Washington has pulled back from an explicit commitment to the President Assad's departure within a defined period of time. To back its declaration that the fight against the Islamic State is now the primary concern, the US has all but suspended support to Syrian rebels who are focused on opposition to the Assad regime as well as to the Islamic State, and it has pressed other countries to limit their assistance.

Instead, the US is investing political and military resources into support of a Kurdish-led offensive in northeast Syria against the Islamic State, through the creation of the 'Syrian Democratic Forces', a coalition in which the Kurdish military YPG has the dominant role. Washington has provided 50 tons of ammunition and promised more weapons if offensives are successful. The US would like the SDF to move on the Islamic State's centre of Raqqa, but this is not a priority for the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the YPG.<sup>32</sup>

### European Powers

The initial reaction of powers such as Britain, France, and Germany to the Russian intervention was generally in line with that of Washington, although the French maintained a harder rhetorical line about the need for Assad to leave power.

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28 Associated Press. (2015, 29 November). Israel Says It Averts Shooting Russian Planes with Communication. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/29/russian-plane-breached-israeli-airspace-returned-syria>

29 American Enterprise Institute. (Producer). (2015, 10 November) A Conversation with Benjamin Netanyahu [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AapKG8YgjY>

30 Hodge, N., & McCain Nelson, C. (2015, 16 October). U.S., Russia Reach Agreement Over Syrian Airspace. *Wall Street Journal* <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-russia-reach-agreement-over-syrian-airspace-1445009988>

31 Spetalnick, M., & Dyomkin, D. (2015, 17 November). Obama Calls on Russia to Focus on War Against IS in Syria. *Reuters*. <http://www.reuters.com/article/apec-summit-obama-is-idUSL3N13D18520151118#u3hMZrps8DhCiXLE.97>

32 Syrian Democratic Forces to Extend anti-ISIS Operations. (2015, 18 November). *ARA News*. <http://aranews.net/2015/11/syrian-democratic-forces-to-extend-anti-isis-operations/>

These positions were reshaped by the further catalyst of the Islamic State's attacks in Paris on November 13, which killed at least 130 people. The French have begun a series of airstrikes on the Islamic State and are discussing coordination with Russia after President Hollande's visit to Moscow on 26 November. The British Government, checked by a Parliamentary committee in early November from joining the air campaign, has been able to use the Paris attacks and obtain Commons assent to attacks which began on 3 December. The German Cabinet has asked the Bundestag to approve the deployment of 1,200 support troops, 4-6 jet fighters for surveillance, tankers, and a frigate in the eastern Mediterranean. Berlin may also reassess its position to encourage acceptance of the Assad regime in the anti-ISIS campaign..<sup>33</sup>

## Complications and Effects

### The Russian Offensive

While the Russian intervention has had some political success in bolstering the Assad regime, it has been far from conclusive in assuring that regime's future. Only two of the six Russian-supported offensives by the Iranian-Hezbollah-Syrian military have had success in capturing territory: 1) the one front against the Islamic State, east of Aleppo; 2) the front against rebels south of Aleppo city. Only one major objective, the lifting of the ISIS siege on Kuweires airbase, has been secured, with the rebels checking the southern Aleppo advance and regaining territory in late November. Rebels have also been able to stage counter-offensives, including victories in northern Hama Province that reached the Hama-to-Aleppo highway.

The initial stage of the Russian political strategy succeeded with the de facto acceptance of Assad in power for the short-term and the convening of the Vienna conferences. However, it is unclear how Russia can move the process to the next stage of a cease-fire with UN-supported monitoring and discussions between the regime and the opposition.

In practice, any cease-fire must apply across Syria, not just in regime-controlled area, which would effectively institute the no-fly zone sought by the opposition and rebels for years. That in turn would give a de facto security, and thus space for the exercise of authority, in rebel-controlled areas which include much of northwest Syria, parts of the south, and suburbs of Damascus.

As with the case in 2012, when the Geneva Communique and the UN sought cease-fires and when the UN briefly attempted monitoring, the Assad regime is unlikely to accept such a cease-fire. Conversely, the rebels and opposition – apart from a group of selected figures nominally held up as the 'opposition' by Damascus and Moscow – will not accept a partial cease-fire which allows the Syrian military, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia to continue operations.

The next diplomatic dispute will likely occur in mid-December after the proposal, from a conference in Saudi Arabia, of a bloc of opposition and rebel figures for negotiations. Russia and Iran, representing the Assad regime, will likely respond that some of the proposed figures are 'terrorists' and thus cannot be accepted. Thus, meaningful opposition-regime talks are unlikely to take place.

The US and European campaign against the Islamic State is unlikely to alter this situation and may exacerbate the difficulty by diverting attention from the continued regime-rebel conflict and the detailed steps needed for a political resolution. Russia will continue to exploit the IS-first approach by portraying leading Syrian opposition and rebel factions as 'terrorist', resisting any efforts to curb its bombing of

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33 Hauch, L. (2015, 2 December). Syria & Iraq Analysis: Germany Steps Up Its Military Presence. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/syria-iraq-analysis-germany-steps-up-its-military-presence/>

opposition-held territory.<sup>34</sup> It will resist an expansive view of an 'acceptable' opposition for political negotiations, rejecting groups that are not considered suitable by the Assad regime. That Russian position in turn is likely to sustain the support of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar for the rebels.

The Turkish-Russian tension after Turkey's downing of the Su-24 warplane has raised a further barrier to reconciliation. Moscow's strategy is to split other powers from Ankara by portraying Turkey as a destabilizing supporter of the Islamic State, but this is unlikely – at least in the short-term – to extend to public recognition by the US and the European powers of the legitimacy of the Assad regime. Instead, the more assertive Russian rhetoric is likely to provoke Saudi resistance and possibly a Turkish-Saudi embrace of further assistance to the Syrian rebellion, despite American concerns.

The escalation on the Turkish border – including Russian attacks on border crossings, infrastructure, and civilian areas as well as Russian deployment of S-400 anti-aircraft missiles systems and air-to-air missiles on its warplanes – has also hindered Moscow's tactic of promoting, often through false and distorted information, contacts with the Free Syrian Army and a 'healthy' Syrian opposition.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the post-November 24 airstrikes have caused more problems for the Russian PR line, which denied all reports – including from international groups such as *Medicins Sans Frontieres* and *Physicians for Human Rights* – of assaults on hospitals, schools, mosques, and other civilian facilities.

## Iran

So far, Tehran has borne the cost, in resource and lives, of its military escalation. However, continued difficulties could add to regime in-fighting, ahead of February elections for Parliament and the Assembly of Experts, the body which chooses and nominally can remove the Supreme Leader.

The Rouhani Government is being accused by hardline critics of appeasing and even furthering 'sedition' with its foreign policy of engagement. In particular, the Revolutionary Guards are accusing Government officials of weakness with their embrace of 'liberalism and the West'. The Supreme Leader has supported the pressure with his repeated warnings that the US is trying to 'infiltrate' the Islamic Republic since the July 14 nuclear deal between Iran and the 5+1 Powers.<sup>36</sup>

While no faction inside Iran has opposed the military escalation, the forthright position of the Guards in promoting the intervention could put Rouhani and other Ministers in a difficult situation, especially if the death toll mounts. The Government will be unable to maintain its current position that there are no Iranian ground troops inside Syria. It may have to decide between its acquiescence in the military campaign or – risking more accusations over 'sedition' – questioning the extent of the intervention.

Continued escalation will also add to the pressure on an Iranian economy already crippled by years of mismanagement and sanctions. The Government, facing a large budget deficit in 2016-2017, warned on 16 November that it can no longer promise a recovery and that recession is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. While the removal of sanctions with the completion of the nuclear deal could ease the difficulty, that prospect is in jeopardy with hardline objections to Iran's implementation of its nuclear

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34 Lucas, L. (2015, 12 December). Syria Daily, Dec 12: Kerry to Visit Moscow, Hoping for A Breakthrough with Putin. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/syria-daily-kerry-to-visit-moscow-hoping-for-a-breakthrough-with-putin/>

35 Lucas, S. (2015, 11 December). Syria Feature: Putin — We Are Supporting the Free Syrian Army. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/syria-feature-putin-we-are-supporting-the-free-syrian-army/>

36 Lucas, S. (2015, 3 November). Iran Feature: Supreme Leader — US is a 'Den of Espionage' Conspiring Against Us. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/iran-feature-supreme-leader-us-is-a-den-of-espionage-conspiring-against-us/>; Lucas, S. (2015, 12 December). Iran Daily: Rouhani Refuses to Back Down Over 'Free' Elections. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/iran-daily-rouhani-refuses-to-back-down-over-free-elections/>

deal with the 5+1 Powers (US, Britain, France, China, Russia, and the US) by a target date of 15 December..<sup>37</sup>

## Turkey

President Erdogan and the ruling AKP have had some leeway for a more assertive position because of their victory in the 1 November elections. The Turkish Government can also counter US and European pressure for a focus on the Islamic State by presenting its essential role in dealing with the flow of Syrian refugees.

Ankara can now take advantage of the downing of the Russian warplane to vindicate their assertive position as effective. However, Erdogan is likely to soon face the challenge of backing up his rhetoric with action, for example, fulfilling the promise of a 'protected zone' through security provided by Turkish forces. A decision to provide enforcement on the air and troops on the grounds could face domestic resistance, and it will certainly be opposed by the US and face the threat of a Russian response.

The AKP, having ended the ceasefire with the Turkish Kurdish insurgency in July, also faces the strengthening Syrian Kurdish movement. The PYD and YPG are now beginning to challenge Erdogan's declared safe zone, for example, by stating claims on Jarablus in northern Syria..<sup>38</sup>

While unlikely to take unilateral action to establish the zone, Erdogan is likely to maintain some support for Syria's opposition and rebellion while cracking down on any domestic opposition. Journalists and activists have been detained, and newspapers and broadcasters have been shut down. On 26 November, the editor and Ankara bureau chief of the daily Cumhuriyet were arrested over their reporting of Turkish arms supplies to Syrian rebels..<sup>39</sup>

## Saudi Arabia

Having taken a more assertive line after its accession in January 2015 – not only over the Syrian crisis but also intervention in Yemen's civil war – the regime of King Salman is unlikely to step back from support for the rebellion. Despite sustained US pressure, it has only gone so far as to attend the Vienna conference and to accept the omission of a reference to Assad's future in the proposed 18-month transition. Any further concessions would be construed as a climbdown forced not only by the Russian intervention but by the Iranian escalation.

Riyadh has already crafted a political response with its mediation in the formation of a Syrian opposition-rebel bloc. However, its military backing of the rebels is complicated by its intervention in Yemen, with no foreseeable resolution and criticism of Riyadh over the human toll from its bombing of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) movement, which has taken control of the capital Sanaa and much of the country. There are also signs of international pressure over perceived Saudi intransigence and obstruction in negotiation,

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37 Lucas, S. (2015, 17 November). Iran Daily, Nov 17: Fight Within Regime Surges as Prominent Cartoonist Arrested. *EA WorldView*. <http://eaworldview.com/2015/11/iran-daily-prominent-cartoonist-arrested-in-latest-crackdown-by-revolutionary-guards/>

38 Cuskan, O. (2015, 13 October). Turkey warns U.S., Russia against backing Kurdish militia in Syria. *Reuters*.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKCN0S71BF20151013#K6xkj1y0mHcMOdVg.97>

39 Karataş, Z. (2015, 26 November). Cumhuriyet daily's Dündar, Gül Arrested Over Report on Syria Arms Transfer. *Today's Zaman*. [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_cumhuriyet-dailys-dundar-gul-arrested-over-report-on-syria-arms-transfer\\_405352.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_cumhuriyet-dailys-dundar-gul-arrested-over-report-on-syria-arms-transfer_405352.html)

expressed through criticism of Riyadh's repression and abuse of human rights, and some Saudi groups' support of the Islamic State.<sup>40</sup>

While the Saudi monarchy does not appear to face a domestic challenge, it will probably respond to the international context by playing for time. While giving the appearance of shaping a Syrian opposition for the political transition, it will try to bolster the rebels to at least maintain their current control of territory, if not to renew the offensive against the Syrian military and its allies.

### **Other Gulf States**

Other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are likely to play a marginal role in the foreseeable future. Qatar, while backing Syria's rebels, will not want any public exposure. Other States – including some who were stung earlier in the Syrian crisis by exposure of donors' support for 'extremist' groups – will concentrate on internal security, including the countering of the threat from the Islamic State.

In past conflicts, Gulf States such as Oman have taken on a role of political broker, but this is unlikely for now in the Syrian case. An attempt by Russia and the Assad regime this summer to forge a 'counter-terrorism' alliance, including Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem's visit to Oman, did not yield results. The effort was then superseded by Moscow's arrangement of the international conferences in Vienna.

The Arab League attended the Vienna conference, but had little visibility in the proceedings.

### **Iraq**

On the surface, Russian pressure on the Islamic State, even if that is not the priority of Moscow's operations, benefits the Iraqi Government. The strength of ISIS will take a blow with the loss of fighters and equipment, and its finances will be affected by both Russian and American attacks on the militants' production and distribution of oil. The impact is compounded both by ongoing Kurdish-led advances in northeast Syria and by the concurrent loss of ISIS territory in northwest Iraq, including the town of Sinjar, and pressure upon it near Ramadi in Anbar Province in the west of the country.

The apparent success also could bring problems, however. Claims of Syrian Kurdish attacks on the homes of Arabs, displacing residents, complement reports of Kurdish seizures of property in northwest Iraq, leading to clashes with Turkmen Arabs. The situation is further complicated by the differing positions of Iraqi Shia militias in the two countries: in Syria, they have been fighting rebels, while in Iraq they have been allied with Kurdish and Iraqi State forces. Moreover, the perception of Kurdish success on both sides of the border could bolster the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government in any negotiations with central authorities over autonomy, security, and economic matters.

Given the priority of dealing with the Islamic State inside Iraq and the political complexities of that objective, Baghdad is likely to remain detached from the Syrian crisis – albeit while providing rhetorical support for the fight against 'terrorism' – while watching for any repercussions from a weakening ISIS position or strengthening Kurdish forces.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) also reaps benefits from the setbacks to the Islamic State. However, Masoud Barzani and the leadership will be cautious about the strengthening position of the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its YPG militia. With the effective demise of the 2012

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40 Room for Debate: Is Saudi Arabia a Unique Generator of Extremism? (2015, 8 December). *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/12/08/is-saudi-arabia-a-unique-generator-of-extremism>



Hawler agreement to unite Kurdish factions and the eclipse of the KCK coalition – including groups favoured by the KRG – the Iraqi Kurds will have to consider the course of their negotiations with the PYD. That consideration is further complicated by the position of the Turkish Kurdish insurgency PKK, with its presence both in northern Syria and in its camps in northwest Iraq.

## **Lebanon**

The country's long-term political paralysis, with the failure to name a President and the effective suspension of Parliament for more than a year, has been exacerbated by the paradox of being both inside and outside the Syrian crisis.

Lebanese authorities have striven to keep the country's affairs separate from the turmoil of its neighbour. Hezbollah's leaders, including Hassan Nasrullah, had shared that goal, but the force was drawn into Syria's fighting into 2013 and that involvement has deepened this year with the crisis of the Syrian military.

Hezbollah gambled both prestige and authority in summer 2015 when it led the Assad regime's attempt to recapture the town of Zabadani in Damascus Province, held since January 2012 by rebels. The group portrayed both its dedication and its sacrifice in the operation, but after almost three months, it was unable to vanquish resistance and had to accept a cease-fire brokered by Iranian and Turkish officials.

Inside Lebanon, Hezbollah is facing the renewal of bombing in south Beirut, with a double suicide bomb in November killing 43 people. The attack was the first in the area since a series of bombings in summer 2013. Reacting to the event, the organization emphasized the killing of innocents by the Islamic State while pledging not to give way to 'terrorism'.

For now, Hezbollah is maintaining support through its position as the best-organized force in Lebanon, willing to put the lives of its members on the line for resistance against Western-supported opponents at home and abroad. However, that support could be shaken by setbacks in Syria and continued violence and instability inside Lebanon.

For Lebanese forces, the high-priority issue continues to be tension in and near the border town of Aarsal, with recurrent clashes with armed factions and occasional intervention by the Syrian air force. This year's fighting did not approach the level of summer 2014, when more than 50 militants were killed, scores of Lebanese security personnel were slain or abducted, and a nearby refugee camp was burned, but continued fighting in southern Syria – involving regime forces, rebels, and the Islamic State – and the flow of men across the border indicate that the situation will not stabilize for the foreseeable future.

The greatest challenge to Lebanon – and the main reason it cannot be detached from the Syrian conflict – will continue to be the hosting of Syrian refugees, now close to 1.2 million in a country with a population of 4.5 million. International support for the refugees has receded, with food aid cut in summer 2015, and there is no prospect of a long-term settlement, either through return to Syria or through established housing, infrastructure, and provisions in Lebanon.

That ongoing issue could intersect with the Lebanese political situation which has nominally been kept separate from the Syrian conflict. The 'You Stink' protests of autumn 2015, highlighting the political paralysis, corruption, and failure to deliver public services, have quieted for the moment, but the ongoing concerns over accountability could be magnified with a perceived worsening of the refugee situation and its impact on the Lebanese economy and social system.

## **Jordan**

While also hosting a large number of refugees – more than 600,000 among a population of 6.5 million – Jordan has not been as exposed as Lebanon to the Syrian conflict. Clashes in southern Syria have not crossed the borders, and the movement of rebels and arms has not caused as much instability.

However, both the Kingdom and its allies continue to fear that prospect. That concern was one reason why the Amman operations room forced rebels to pull back from an offensive which reached the border of Suweida Province, with its large Druze population, in summer 2015. It was also a factor in the withdrawal of support from a rebel offensive to claim all of Daraa city, although it was probably secondary to fear of a regime collapse if the opposition held the Daraa-to-Damascus line.

While the refugee problem is not as great as in Lebanon, it is still a significant burden on the Jordanian economy, and the international community has slashed assistance since the summer, with no prospect of revival.

Wanting to avoid domestic tension and facing the differing positions of its allies – from the US reservations about assistance to rebels to the Saudi desire for the overthrow of the Assad regime – the Jordanian leadership will maintain a cautious approach, with no direct intervention in the conflict.

## **Israel**

The priorities of the Netanyahu Government and the Israeli military will continue to be Israel's security in and near the Golan Heights and limits to any strengthening of Hezbollah.

The recent agreement with Russia, accepting Moscow's military intervention, supports these aims with the expectation that the Russians will deter any movement by Hezbollah and Iranian forces into southwestern Syria. However, Israel will remain on guard about transfers of military equipment, especially missiles, to Hezbollah and will carry out more airstrikes if it believes these are occurring.

In this context, the Netanyahu Government is non-committal about President Assad remaining in power. While Israel maintains a long-standing distrust and dislike of the Syrian regime, it sees no benefits at this point from Syria's opposition and rebels.

## **US**

Washington's political task has been to escape the dilemma between a Russian intervention with the clear priority of keeping the Assad regime in power, and the stated US position that Assad cannot be part of a political resolution.

As in September 2013, when the Obama Administration pulled back from military intervention following the regime's chemical attacks near Damascus, Washington chose cooperation with Russia. It accepted Moscow's military operations, even though they were primarily directed at Syrian rebels, and it supported the Russian initiative for international meetings.

However, the US now faces the difficulty that this process will not yield an outcome, in part because of the Turkish-Russian confrontation, in part because of Saudi Arabia's alternative approach to the opposition and rebels, and in part because of Washington's limited capacity – by choice or by a lack of assets – for military leverage in the conflict.

Rather than giving way to these difficulties, the Administration has chosen to redouble efforts to push them aside in its declaration of a quest for a quick political resolution. The timetable of a settlement by 31 March is driven more by domestic than regional dynamics, with the Obama Administration nearing the end of its term and US politics caught up in the Presidential and Congressional elections.

However, because of this dynamic, it appears that Washington has set out this vision without detailed consultation with European allies, let alone the Syrian opposition, rebels, or the Assad regime. Thus, it is questionable if the American approach is firmly grounded in diplomatic, political, and military conditions at this point.

## Conclusions

As has been true for years, any shift in the Syrian situation is likely to be driven at first on the battlefield rather in political discussions. The most important catalyst in 2015, up to September, was rebel victories against the Syrian military in northwest and southern Syria. In addition, there were Kurdish advances against the Islamic State in the northeast and ISIS success over the regime in areas such as Palmyra in central Syria.

The Russian intervention reflects this logic. Political advantage depends upon an advance by the Syrian military – alongside Hezbollah and Iranian forces – in operations covered by Moscow's airstrikes. However, so far, a decisive opening has not been achieved. Rebels are on the defensive on only one front, south of Aleppo city, and even there the foreign-led offensive has not yet achieved a decisive victory.

Russia now also faces the complication that it must devote some of its effort to combating the Islamic State. One reason for this is to maintain the original stated objective of a campaign to defeat terrorist groups; another is the need to confront the 'threat' displayed by an ISIS faction's bombing of the Russian passenger aircraft over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula on 31 October.

Given both the continuing differences over the terms of a political transition between external actors and the wide gap between the opposition/rebels and the Assad regime, no political resolution is foreseeable in the near future. Nor is a 'grand alliance' between Russia and other powers likely, due to disputes over the future of Assad and the legitimacy of the various opposition and rebel factions.

Without a significant change in the situation, Russia is likely to face a choice of either further escalation – entailing considerable risk – or a step back from their investment in the survival of President Assad and his circle.

Iran's next steps will likely rest on the Russian decision. Even Iranian hardliners will not be able to continue intervention, let alone escalate it, if Russia retreats from aerial operations and support of the ground offensives.

Any assessments that Moscow and Tehran may be prepared to countenance Assad's departure must be seen in the context of their insistence that the current State political and security structures, in which the Alawite minority is predominant, remain intact in an 'inclusive' political transition.

Difficulties for the Russians and Iranians, and thus the Assad regime, do not necessarily translate into opportunities for other powers. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey may wish to take advantage with more support to rebels, but that willingness will likely be curbed by the US and European 'ISIS-first' approach and their desire for an end to hostilities and instability in Syria and the wider region.

The likely outcome is an unstable de facto partition of Syria into regime, rebel, and Kurdish areas, with a continued Islamic State presence in locations such as Raqqa and probably Palmyra. The partition will be unstable due to the likelihood of ongoing military operations, unless external actors can broker a meaningful cease-fire, and due to key areas outside the 'partition', such as the divided city of Aleppo and the opposition-held suburbs of Damascus, continuing to be contested.

The escape from this ongoing, uncertain military-first situation can only be attempted once there is an acceptance by all sides that they cannot seek victory via the battlefield.

That position could be reached with the failure of the Russian initiative. Russia, elements in Iran, and the Assad regime could envisage that their best position is the holding of a defence line – again, one that significantly excludes Aleppo. The opposition and rebels could accept that they will not get support to break out beyond the areas that they could currently control, leaving the best short-term option as de facto security for these parts of northwest and southern Syria.

At that point, there may be a window for political negotiations, however, this must stem from conditions that give some immediate and lasting measure of security to each side in the conflict.

It is unlikely that this measure can be provided by a statement about the future of President Assad and his inner circle. The regime will not see any security in an immediate commitment to Assad's departure; conversely, the opposition and rebels will see the acceptance of Assad, even in the short term, as a retreat from the long-held goal of a 'transitional governing authority'.

Instead, the confidence-building measure for negotiation could lie in the recognition of territorial control by each side. The Assad regime already claims that recognition in the form of sovereignty but may see a relief from military and political pressure that it is still the effective leadership in Damascus. The opposition and rebels will have to set aside their goal of Assad's removal but could accept the starting point of acknowledgement – for the first time – of their governance of parts of Syria. This would be buttressed, again for the first time, with an injunction against any regime attacks including airstrikes on opposition-held territory.

This partition is not a long-term solution. Rather, it is the starting point for discussions. In return for its immediate security in Damascus, the Assad regime would have to accept an opposition which is not its token representatives that have been displayed in previous negotiations in Moscow. In return for immediate security in their areas of control, the opposition and rebels would have to accept negotiations which include Russia and Iran as well as the US, European powers, Turkey, and Gulf States.

These negotiations are unlikely – given long-standing grievances reinforced by the heavy toll of conflict – to yield any immediate advance on a road map to 'transition'. Instead, they should be seen as offering space for the consolidation of conditions for discussion. These include the development of capacity building in opposition-held areas, including governance, judicial systems, reconstruction, and provision of services. The opposition would thus enter talks as a governing authority, giving it a standing comparable to the regime that it is challenging.

External actors must address the ongoing humanitarian crises inside and outside Syria, especially in light of 1) the cuts in international support this year for refugees, leading to critical situations in areas such as Lebanon and Jordan and 2) the continuing toll on civilians, largely from sieges and bombing by the Syrian military and now exacerbated by Russian attacks on infrastructure and civilian areas.

However, such efforts should not be presented as a solution, diverting from the central political and military issues. They will be little more than minimal palliatives if they are not part of a political process which – at the least – leads to protected zones, guaranteed access for aid, and security for aid providers. Confidence-building must come both through the assurance of aid and the guarantee that it will not be impeded by any side in the conflict.

Priority for military operations against the Islamic State, instead of a recognising and addressing the central issues of the Assad regime's legitimacy and actions, and of security and governance in opposition-held areas, is at best a diversion and at worst a further contribution to instability and violence.

From a military point of view, airstrikes on the Islamic State – now being pursued by Russia, the US, France, and Britain – will have little effect unless they are coordinated with operations by local ground forces. Even if there is cooperation with some local units, such as Kurdish militia, the operations are unlikely to have success beyond a limited area, challenging the Islamic State's central position in the city of Raqqa. Politically, the focus on ISIS will do nothing to assure the opposition/rebels of a process for resolution, although it is likely to be supported by the Assad regime and Russia as both a stigmatizing of most opposition/rebels as 'terrorists' and as a relief from military pressure by rebels.