

# SWP Comment

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## The War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Syria

**Humanitarian Deterioration and Risks of Disrupting a Volatile Status Quo**

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In Syria, the immediate effects of the war in Ukraine have made an already difficult humanitarian situation even worse. Protracted violence in Ukraine or an expansion of the Ukraine war into a larger NATO-Russia confrontation would endanger multilateral cooperation on conflict management, conflict resolution and humanitarian issues in Syria. Protracted conflict in Ukraine could also disrupt the volatile status quo in Syria, potentially endangering ceasefire agreements, tilting the power balance in favour of Iran and thereby increasing the risk of military escalation between Iran and its antagonists, complicating the fight against ISIS, and endangering cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries. Europeans should attempt to insulate the war in Ukraine from Syria as much as possible, double down on efforts to renew the UN Security Council resolution that allows for humanitarian access to northwest Syria and contribute to the long-term objective of an inclusive regional security architecture.

While large-scale military operations have been reduced significantly over the past few years, stability in Syria has remained fragile, and conflict resolution has witnessed a protracted stalemate. Five foreign states as well as a multitude of domestic and foreign militias have a military presence on the ground. Russia, Turkey, the US and Iran have each established zones of influence, whose boundaries remain contested.

### Immediate Effects of the War

The effects of the war in Ukraine were felt immediately in Syria. It has led to a worsen-

ing of an already grim humanitarian situation in this former lower-middle-income country. Syria's economy had already all but collapsed due to war damage, large-scale displacement, poor governance, sanctions, Covid-19 and repercussions of the financial meltdown in Lebanon. Even before the war in Ukraine, 90 per cent of Syria's population lived in poverty, two-thirds were dependent on humanitarian aid and 55 per cent were food insecure. In December 2021, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization warned of the risk of famine against the backdrop of severe drought and a steep decline in Syria's wheat harvest.



Early in the war, Russia announced that it would not keep its December 2021 commitment to deliver wheat to Syrian regime-controlled areas that were meant to fill the gap. Northwest Syria is also likely to suffer shortages as it procures wheat from Ukraine and Russia as well as Turkey, where production has been affected by drought. In addition, the World Food Programme, which largely depends on Ukrainian production, is set to come under strain due to supply loss, soaring food prices and an increase in the number of people in need worldwide. Starting May 2022, it will have to reduce life-saving food assistance to some 1.35 million people in northwestern Syria. While the Syrian regime has adopted austerity measures such as rationing, price controls and export restrictions, it has not been successful in preventing the spiralling of food and energy prices.

In contrast, direct effects of the war in Ukraine on the geopolitical dynamics in Syria seem to have been limited to date. The main external powers with a military presence on the ground in Syria have so far insulated their cooperation there from tensions over Ukraine: military deconfliction between Russia and the US as well as Russia and Israel continues; Russia and Turkey maintain joint patrols in the north of Syria based on the March 2020 ceasefire arrangements; and informal talks among Russia, Turkey, the US and European countries on humanitarian access have still taken place. At the same time, Israel-Iran relations have been tense ever since the killing of two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers in Syria in early March 2022; this has resulted in Iranian attacks on Israel-linked targets in Iraq as well as Israeli airstrikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria.

### Interests, Priorities and Capacities of External Actors

Yet, some players — in particular Russia and Iran — have started to adapt their presence in Syria. Accordingly, Syria would not necessarily be left unscathed even if

the war in Ukraine were to come to an end sooner rather than later. While the overall interests of the dominant external players are likely to remain the same, their priorities, approaches and capacities are likely to be affected, prompting further adaptations and risking renewed and heightened conflict in Syria. The extent of these changes will depend on the duration and evolution of the conflict in Ukraine and its potential escalation into a wider NATO-Russia confrontation.

### Russia – from pro-regime stabiliser to spoiler?

The war against Ukraine directly impacts the capacities available to Russia for its involvement in Syria. In addition, a shift in priorities in Russian foreign policy can already be observed. To what extent this will affect Russia's specific interests in the Syrian conflict will depend on the duration and trajectory of the conflict in and beyond Ukraine.

*Foreign policy priorities:* Overall, the order of Moscow's foreign policy priorities remains unchanged. Creating a zone of influence in the post-Soviet space and reshaping the European security order in Russia's favour have been the primary goals for decades. Yet, because the war against Ukraine and confrontation with the West bring about risks to regime stability in Russia itself, achieving success has become a matter of existential importance for the Kremlin. As a consequence, Ukraine has overtaken subordinate fields of Russian foreign policy, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in general and Syria in particular. At the same time, the Kremlin cannot afford to see its Syria policy fail. The military operation in Syria has become too much of a symbol for Russia's ambition to return to being a great power. Russia therefore now faces the challenge of securing its position in Syria and the MENA region with reduced capabilities.

*Capacities:* Russia has a strategic interest in maintaining its air and naval bases in Syria. They underpin Russia's military pres-