

OASIS

# THREE CONCEPTS TO UNDERSTAND THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

BY EUGENIO DACREMA



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A Syrian boy in the rubble of so-called 'moderate' jihad  
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After eight years of war in Syria it is possible to envisage the future of the country. The conflict is not likely to simply end, but it will be downsized.

The 8 year-long conflict has transformed deeply the Syrian society, its composition, its institutions, and even the population's self-perception. Such transformations will be reflected strongly in the post-war configuration of the country.

The first factor to be considered is the very nature of the confrontation between the Assad regime and the opposition, which, since the beginning, emerged as a zero-sum game. The goal of the regime and most armed rebels has always been the complete annihilation of the enemy, with no possibility for a negotiated process of political transition and/or cooptation. The enemies never recognized each other as legitimate actors with legitimate demands and interests. This has had crucial consequences on the evolution of the conflict and, especially from the regime's perspective, made a military solution the only acceptable scenario. The lack of any realistic prospective for a political solution caused the indefinite extension of the crisis and magnified the suffering of the Syrian population.

Furthermore, this militaristic, zero-sum-game approach is deemed to deeply affect and reverberate within the post-war order. To better understand this point, this article explores three main concepts regarding the future layout of post-war Syria: the concept of conflict downsizing (as opposed to a complete conflict resolution); the concept of "permanent-temporary" arrangements; and the concept of social fragmentation.



View from above of the city of Homs after a bombing [Shutterstock.com]

# 1 DOWNSIZING AN IRRESOLVABLE WAR

If you cannot really solve it, manage and downsize it. This short sentence sums up the concept of “conflict management”, which emerged as the main strategy Russia has applied to the conflicts in which it has been involved over **its recent history**.

It is a concept that is directly opposed to another one, that of “conflict resolution”, which has constituted the main framework used over the last decades by Western powers, often with scarce success. The two are different in both ideological approach and means utilized.

While the latter is values-based – aiming to impose comprehensive resolutions on local conflict based on Western values and interests – and exploits the military and economic hegemonic position that the US and NATO have held over much of the world since the end of the Cold War, the former is non-ideological and based on a tactical, flexible approach typical of powers that do not have the means to project hegemonic dominance on the other actors involved.

The gradual fading of the American **hegemonic projection in the Middle East** – initiated under the Obama administration and continued under current president Donald Trump

– gave Russia the chance to return to the Middle East political arena after a long absence. Syria has been the stage of Russia’s comeback and since its direct military intervention in 2015 Moscow has held the upper hand in the diplomatic efforts to end the crisis. This gave the Russian government the chance to test its own brand of conflict management which affected the late developments of the war and is deemed to shape greatly the post-conflict configuration of the country.

For instance, the inherent lack of strategic vision characterizing its approach means that the end of the war is going to emerge out of a chain of tactical decisions influenced more by contingent interests and forces than by any long-term design, aside from the Assad regime’s preservation.

Moreover, such an approach is not well suited to address any of the root causes of the conflict – namely Assad’s prewar disastrous socioeconomic management and the growing calls for political cooptation from vast parts of the society, especially in the rural areas. During the conflict, this has led to the use of over-simplified narratives – depicting all rebels and their supporters as foreign-backed terrorists.



Meeting between Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin in Sochi, 2018 [©Kremlin]

However, the issues that the military solution adopted by the regime and its allies could not solve are going to resurface once Assad's victory consolidates. In the areas once occupied by the opposition – and in many regime-held territories – social tensions today are kept under the iron fist of the regime's security forces but they are likely to resurface in the medium term if a **new crisis** leads once again the regime's security apparatus **to loosen its grip on the local society**.

For this reason, it is not proper to talk about the “end” of the conflict; it is more correct to talk about a long-term status of low-intensity conflict, emerging as the result of a process of conflict management. Under such a status, tensions and grievances are kept under control through security and military means until such means weakens or another game-changer event – similar to the 2011 wave of regional uprisings – occurs, possibly leading to a new “contagion effect”.

## 2 THE “PERMANENT-TEMPORARY” ARRANGEMENT WITH TURKEY AND THE “CYPRIOTIZATION” OF SYRIA’S NORTH

The need of the regime and its allies to strike temporary deals with domestic and regional actors in order to manage the various phases of the conflict led to a limited partition of the country, which will not likely be reunified in the foreseeable future. In particular, Moscow – on behalf of Damascus and Teheran – negotiated deals with Turkey, which over the last three years emerged as the main sponsor of the Syrian armed opposition. In recent years Ankara’s policies have been focused on limiting the Kurdish YPG’s control over northern Syria more than on Assad’s demise. Deals brokered by Ankara and **Moscow gave Turkey the green light** to launch military operations into the Syrian territory.

In 2017 and 2018 such operations resulted in the occupation of large areas in the northern Aleppo province and in the Afrin province.

Ankara and Moscow also reached **a deal on the Idlib region** – the last bastion of the armed opposition – which was put under Turkish custody in exchange for Erdogan’s (so far unkept) promise to get rid of the jihadi groups active in the area. Although the Turkish presence in these territories – direct or exerted through Ankara’s Syrian proxies – was meant to be temporary, Turkey has shown in multiple ways its will to maintain its control over these lands in the long term.

For instance, the administration of these areas has been **directly connected** to the administration of Turkey’s bordering provinces, and Turkish domestic institutions provide **all basic services**; education curricula are taught in both Arabic and Turkish while Turkish universities are opening **local branches**.





Protests in Idlib, 2012 [©Freedom House - Flickr]

Ankara invited Turkish entrepreneurs to invest in these areas – including by creating **special industrial parks** – and local militias are trained by Turkish forces and transformed into a local security force directly dependent on the Turkish authorities. By so doing, the Turkish government aims to pursue three interests: first, to avoid the establishment of an independent – or autonomous – Kurdish authority led by the PYD (which Turkey considers the Syrian branch of the PKK) along its border; second, to obtain swathes of territories along its borders where Ankara can relocate at least part of the over 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently hosted in Turkey; third, to fulfil, at least in part, its commitments to the Syrian opposition groups that Ankara has sponsored and, in general, to exert influence over Syria’s future domestic affairs. Especially the second and third of these goals would not have been possible to fulfil unless a large

share of Syrian society were ready to support the presence of an occupying force in order to obtain a safe-heaven within its own country.

International observers recognized in these policies something rather **similar to what occurred in Northern Cyprus** after the 1975 Turkish invasion of the island’s North. According to this perspective, Ankara is aiming to create a separate mini-state controlled by its Syrian proxies similar to the Republic of Northern Cyprus. Ankara’s official position is that Turkey will withdraw from Syria only when a comprehensive political solution between regime and opposition is reached. This is an official position that, as in Cyprus’s case, is aimed at justifying both Ankara’s open-ended presence in the area and its claim that Turkey does not want to annex these territories but defend the interests of the Syrian opposition until a (improbable) peace deal is signed.

# 3. A SMALLER, MORE LOYAL SOCIETY

Cost estimations for Syria reconstruction range from \$200 to \$400 billion. The Syrian regime and its allies cannot provide such huge amounts of funds without support from financially well-endowed international powers such as the Western countries, China, and the Gulf monarchies. However, until now only a few Gulf monarchies – especially the UAE – have expressed interest in providing financial support.

Western powers have repeatedly refused to take part in the reconstruction without a serious political process of power transition. For its part, China, despite diplomatically supporting the regime throughout the entire crisis, has not shown strong interest in playing a central role in rebuilding the country.

According to some observers, this is due to the Chinese leadership's skepticism of the re-

lity. Furthermore, all potential donors are wary of the ongoing presence of US and European sanctions, which are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

In the regime camp, Russia has been the most proactive actor attempting to find sources of financial support. In particular, Moscow has been actively courting European and Western leaders using the argument that a successful reconstruction would cause most refugees in Europe to return to their country.



Syrian refugees along the Turkish border near the district of Suruç, 2015 [©quetions123 / Shutterstock.com]

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Russians have pressured the regime (explicitly or behind closed doors) to adopt policies conciliatory to some European requests, especially regarding refugee returns. However, Damascus has only rarely complied. A law aimed at promoting reconstruction projects – a law which most analysts consider a tool to expropriate Syrians who fled abroad – has been amended after months of **discreet Russian pressure** but without radically altering its main contents and the effects of its provisions. Moreover, after multiple requests from international organizations the regime agreed to introduce an amnesty for military deserters – most of whom fled abroad during the conflict.

However, the amnesty only exempts deserters from being arrested upon return; **it still compels them to join the army**, a condition that would deprive many refugee families of their main breadwinners if they return. Finally, while, on the one hand, Damascus has accused foreign countries (especially European ones) of forbidding Syrian refugees to leave and come back to Syria, on the other hand many of those who returned **have disappeared** at the hands of the security forces. Even when coordinated procedures for returns have been bilaterally ratified with foreign governments – **such as Lebanon** – the regime introduced long and complicated security vetting processes that produced only a few thousands returns.



The mosque of Aleppo before the bombings [©Oasis]



This line of policy is hard to understand if by “reconstruction” one means to define the process aimed at returning the country to its pre-war status. If this were the goal, then one would expect Damascus to introduce measures to encourage returns and to comply with the requests of potential donors. But what emerges from the regime’s actions and declarations is a different idea of post-war reconstruction. To better understand the regime’s strategy, it may be more useful not to look at the reconstruction according to that word’s literal meaning. Instead, one should understand the regime’s post-war strategy as being aimed at completing a process that has been transforming the Syrian society throughout the entire 8-year-long conflict. Forced migration from previously rebel-held areas and the relocation abroad of most opposition members, supporters, and sympathizers has downsized the Syrian population and “won it a mo-

re homogeneous society”, **in the words of president Assad himself.**

Thus, the reconstruction needn’t be so expansive and so extensive if it is meant only for a smaller population and if the spoils of victory are meant to favor those who demonstrated their loyalty to the regime while marginalizing the rest. Loyalty – more than sectarian identity – is the key to understanding the main factor underlying this process: while most rebels and opposition supporters happen to be Sunni, a significant share of the Sunni population – especially in urban areas – remained loyal to the regime and is expected to be rewarded along with other social groups that supported Damascus all along. Thus, loyalty to Assad is the main criterion that will determine the post-war Syrian identity from the regime’s perspective.

## CONCLUSION

For over two years, some observers have been repeating that the Syrian conflict was close to its end and that the next chapter for Syria was going to be a massive process of reconstruction. However, the conflict is still ongoing, albeit transforming in both size and means. This article has provided three concepts to better understand the next evolutions of the Syrian war and the country’s reconstruction: the concept of “conflict downsizing”, the concept of “permanent-temporary” agreements, and the description of the social and identitarian transformation that has been occurring over the war years and which is meant to determine the main features of future Syria.