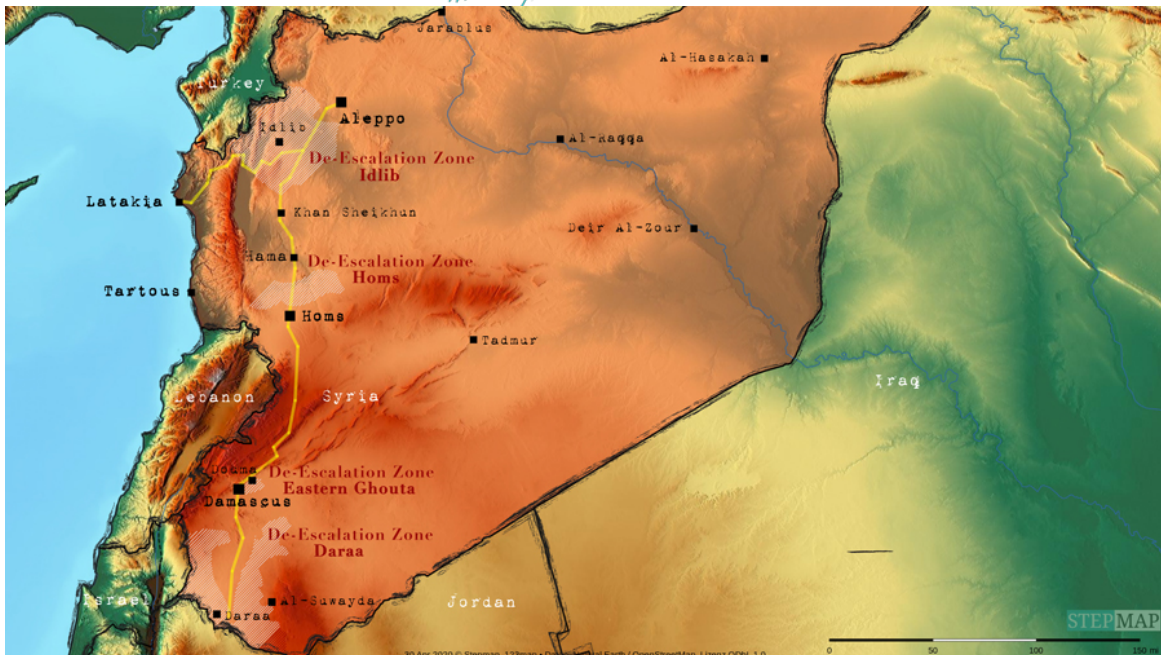


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De-escalation zones in Syria

Background and status quo of a paradox

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In May 2017, as part of the Astana peace talks, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed on the establishment of four so-called de-escalation zones in Syria. These zones were designed to be areas in which all hostilities should cease and in which civilians should be protected from attacks. The deal had been preceded by a massive deployment of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, followed by increasing international pressure on Syria and its ally Russia.

Three of these safe zones no longer exist today. The last one that remains, in Idlib, is under heavy pressure after severe recent fighting. In actual fact, the protection for the Syrian population that had been promised when the zones had been created was not provided by this agreement at any time. The establishment of these zones did not contribute to the peace process in Syria and, therefore, to ending the war.

It is worthwhile, however, to take a closer look at how this agreement was reached and how the four zones have developed in order to identify the failures of the various international actors. These failures could defeat hopes for finding a solution for the plight of the Syrian refugees for decades. Resolving this issue will crucially depend on whether Europe and the United States (US) will become more engaged in Syria in the future and whether they will be more successful in exerting political and economic pressure on the regime and its allies – mainly Russia.

Agreement in Astana

In early April 2020, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed that the regime of Bashar al-Assad had used sarin and chlorine gas in the Syrian town of Lataminah, close to the city of Hama.

This validated the claim that, three years before, the Syrian airforce had repeatedly used chemical weapons against rebel-controlled areas. Dozens of people had been killed in these attacks. On April 4, 2017, at least 89 people, most of them women and children, were killed in a sarin attack on the

town of Khan Sheikhun in Idlib province and hundreds of others were seriously injured. This was the most lethal poison gas attack in the Syrian war since 2013.¹

In response to the use of this banned weapon, there were both US air raids against Syrian military bases and increased pressure from the Western allies on Russia, which paved the way for the breakthrough in the Astana negotiations on May 6, 2017. As a result, four de-escalation zones were established, in Eastern Ghouta, Homs, Daraa and Idlib – all opposition strongholds at the time.² The Syrian regime had refused to be part of earlier peace efforts initiated by the United Nations (UN). Though it did not participate in the Astana talks either, Damascus approved the agreement.

The Astana memorandum had three formal key objectives: ending hostilities between the regime and the rebels in the de-escalation zones, providing humanitarian aid to the civilian population, part of which had been living under siege until then, as well as making progress on the path to a political settlement of the wider conflict. The agreement was initially limited to a term of six months and was supposed to be automatically extended, depending on the consent of the guarantors Russia, Turkey and Iran. Checkpoints and observation posts were designed to ensure compliance with the agreement. Explicitly exempted from the covenant was the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaida and associated terrorist groups.³

The interests of the actors

The three guarantors were pursuing different objectives: Russia wanted to prevent an

international intervention in Syria and, as the initiator of the Astana peace talks, safeguard its own political, economic and military influence and bolster the rule of the Assad regime. Turkey wanted to create a safe zone for Syrian internally displaced refugees in order to reduce the influx into its own territory and was also interested in containing the Kurdish influence at the southern Turkish border.⁴ Iran, in turn, had set its sights on extending its powerful position in Syria, thereby guaranteeing the continued existence of the “axis of resistance”.⁵

The Syrian opposition harbored the hope that the Astana agreement would end the bombing and that, based on this, further steps towards a comprehensive political settlement would be taken. Similar to the then UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and other observers, opposition representatives were skeptical, however, because previous ceasefires had failed.⁶

The de-escalation zone Eastern Ghouta

The de-escalation zone of Eastern Ghouta included the densely-populated northeastern suburbs of Damascus. At the start of the Syrian war in 2011, approximately 400 000 people lived there on roughly 100 km². Due to the poor economic situation and years of neglect by the Syrian government, Eastern Ghouta quickly developed into an opposition stronghold when the uprising against Assad started, but still had key importance for the regime because of its close proximity to the capital. After heavy fighting, Assad’s troops were initially forced to pull out of Eastern Ghouta. The area was then sealed off and laid under siege. The inhabitants soon started to

¹ On the poison gas attacks, see “[OPCW Releases First Report by Investigation and Identification Team](#)”, *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons*, 8 April 2020; see also “[Mounting Evidence Syrian Forces Were behind Khan Sheikhoun Attack](#)”, *Human Rights Watch*, 6 September 2017.

² The terms ‘opposition’ and ‘rebels’ include all groups that oppose the Assad regime, irrespective of their political and/or religious objectives.

³ See full text of the agreement, “[Memorandum on the Creation of De-Escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic](#)”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 6 May 2017.

⁴ Turkey has already taken 4.1 million refugees, including 3.6 million Syrians, which makes it the country hosting the biggest number of refugees worldwide; on the Turkish objectives in Idlib, see “[The Idlib-Operation in Eight Questions](#)” (8 soruda TSK’nin İdlib harekati), *Yeni Şafak*, 7 October 2017.

⁵ Tehran refers to allies that fight against Israel, NATO and Saudi-Arabia and support Iranian interests as the *axis of resistance*. The alliance includes militias in Iraq and in Yemen, the Syrian regime as well as the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

⁶ On Staffan de Mistura’s estimation, see “[Syria Agreement on De-Escalation Zones: Could Lift UN-Facilitated Political Talks](#)”, *UN-News*, 11 May 2017.

suffer from shortages of food, drugs, water and energy supply. Only rarely were UN food aid or evacuations, e.g. in medical emergencies, allowed to pass through. The people trapped in Eastern Ghouta depended, for their food supply, on a tunnel system that stretched as far as underneath some Damascus neighborhoods.

In early 2017, the Assad regime massively stepped up its attacks on Eastern Ghouta.

Establishment of the de-escalation zone Eastern Ghouta

After the conclusion of the Astana agreement in May 2017, the situation did not improve. While the regime and the opposition forces had agreed to cease hostilities and allow aid supplies to pass through, the situation in the besieged enclave actually deteriorated continuously after the de-escalation zone had been established. The regime and its allies kept bombing Eastern Ghouta almost on a daily basis and did not spare civilian infrastructure. Internal fighting among various opposition groups only increased the suffering of the civilian population even further.

After years of laying siege, the Syrian army launched its final offensive in the spring of 2018. On April 7, it used poison gas in its attack on Douma, the biggest city in Eastern Ghouta. At least 43 people died in this attack and 500 were injured by chlorine gas. The rebels then surrendered and signed a so-called *reconciliation agreement* with Russia, in which they committed to hand over the zone to the regime. In return, they were permitted to relocate to the remaining rebel-held areas in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo. On April 14, 2018, the regime declared that "all terrorists have been removed from Douma city"⁷, and that the region was again fully under Assad's control. 158 000 inhabitants of Eastern Ghouta had fled during the fighting in March and April. Among them were tens of thousands who initially lived in state-

controlled refugee camps, most of which were near Damascus. Many, however, were detained in the camps by security forces after the end of the hostilities or disappeared without a trace. About 66 000 people accepted the offer to be evacuated. Green buses took them to rebel-held areas in northern Syria.⁸ These green buses were often used by the regime for relocating people and have therefore become a symbol for Assad's policy of forced displacement.

Reconciliation Agreement

The so-called reconciliation agreements (اتفاقات المصالحة) are surrender agreements negotiated by individual rebel groups with the Syrian regime that stipulate the terms under which government administration returns to areas previously controlled by rebels. The rebels commit to surrendering their heavy and medium and, in some cases, even light weapons. In return, the regime gives rebel fighters the choice of either agreeing to a security vetting, including the subsequent termination of any criminal prosecutions (تسوية الوضع) or to relocate to the north of the country. Additionally, most of these agreements include commitments made by the regime to suspend the military draft for these individuals for up to six months and to guarantee the safe return of refugees to their home communities. Regularly, Russia committed itself vis-a-vis the rebels to guarantee compliance with the agreements (since 2016). However, the Assad regime and Russia repeatedly violated the commitments made in those agreements.

Eastern Ghouta under Assad's control

The 120 000 residents remaining in Eastern Ghouta were subjected to security checks. These checks actually boiled down to investigations by intelligence services, interrogations, even torture in many cases.⁹ Right after entering the city, the Syrian army and its allies started looting residential neighborhoods. Many buildings were seized at random. Until today, numerous checkpoints have severely restricted people's free movement. Just as in all areas that the regime has recaptured in the war, the civilian population lives in constant fear of further reprisals.

⁷ See "Army General Command Announces Eastern Ghouta Clear of Terrorism", SANA, 14 April 2018.

⁸ See United Nations, "Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in Rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5", Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 3 May 2018.

⁹ See *ibid.*

While food supply has been resumed since the capture of Eastern Ghouta by the Syrian army, the promised rebuilding effort, – including power and water supply – has been long in coming. Until today, even the delivery of humanitarian aid, as provided by international organisations, has not been hassle-free. The fate of this region and its population has since served as a warning to rebels in other parts of the country.

The de-escalation zone Homs

The de-escalation zone of Homs was situated in the north of the eponymous province. The majority of people in this rural area are Sunnis, but there are also Turkmen and Christian minorities. In 2011, the total population in this area was 260 000. Homs province is strategically relevant because the important highway M5 from Aleppo to Damascus runs through it. Further, it connects Damascus with the port cities of Latakia and Tartous.

In 2013, Assad's troops were driven out of northern Homs and went on to lay siege to the rebel-controlled area. Just as in Eastern Ghouta before, the objective of the Syrian army was to starve the population into surrender – a strategy known as “surrender or die”. Humanitarian aid convoys only rarely reached the zone. The Astana agreement neither improved the food supply situation nor ended the fighting.

On February 15, 2018, Moscow unilaterally terminated the de-escalation zone. Two months later, the Russian airforce and Syrian troops started attacking the besieged enclave. On May 2, the rebels finally surrendered. Fearing to become the targets of chemical weapons like the insurgents in Eastern Ghouta, they signed a *reconciliation agreement* with Russia.

Life under the regime

Again, residents were given the choice of undergoing a security check administered by

the regime and then staying in Homs or being transported by buses to northern Syria. Approximately 35 000 fighters and civilians decided to be evacuated to the opposition-controlled areas of Idlib and Jarablus in the north of the country.

The bulk of the population, however, including roughly 2500 fighters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), remained in the area, hoping that the regime would abide by the *reconciliation agreement* and guarantee both the security and the supply of the residents. In actual fact, however, the regime has neglected the region until today. Moreover, no humanitarian aid has been delivered by international organisations since the regime assumed control.¹⁰

So far, state institutions have only done a minimum of rebuilding, the only functioning agency is the military recruitment office. There is an urgent need for the restoration of the power supply and the rebuilding of the health-care sector. In Homs, just as in other safe zones before, the Syrian airforce had deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure. Further, the regime shut down several hospitals run by the opposition after recapturing the zone.

Food supply has become an instrument of power by now: Industrial bakeries destroyed in the war have not been rebuilt, there is only a single big bakery subsidised by the regime that supplies the entire north of the province. Arbitrary approval procedures prevent the opening of more large-scale baking businesses.¹¹

The initial months after the conclusion of the *reconciliation agreement* in May 2018 were relatively peaceful for the residents of northern Homs. There were fewer lootings, arrests and executions than in Eastern Ghouta. Since the withdrawal of the Russian army in late 2018, however, the regime has again cracked down brutally on the opposition. People are arbitrarily arrested and simply disappear. The houses of individuals who do not conform to the regime are seized and subsequently used to accommodate

¹⁰ See Haid Haid, “[The War in Syria Approaches its End, but the Annihilation of the People Continues](#)” (الحرب في سوريا تقترب من نهايتها، لكن سحق الشعب مستمر) Syndication Bureau, 3 October 2019.

¹¹ See “[Residents of Homs Countryside Buying Loaf of Bread at Free Price](#)”, *Enab Baladi*, 16 September 2019.

supporters of the regime. The Syrian army forcibly recruits men it considers to be draft dodgers, in order to deploy them at the front in northern Syria. There, along the front line, they sometimes stand opposite their own friends and neighbors who have previously fled. Regime forces also killed at least 20 civilians in October 2018, when they were returning to Homs from Lebanon.¹²

After Eastern Ghouta and Homs provinces had fallen back into the hands of the regime, the Syrian army turned its attention to the de-escalation zones Daraa and Idlib.

The de-escalation zone Daraa

Daraa and Quneitra provinces lie in the southwest of Syria. In 2011, this agrarian region had a population of about one million, most of whom were Sunni Muslims. Its geographical location in the border triangle, adjacent to Israel and Jordan, gives the region high strategic importance.

It was in Daraa that the mass rallies against the Assad regime had started in March 2011. When the regime brutally crushed the demonstrations, the protest spread to all of Syria and the opposition began to arm itself. Subsequently, the FSA brought large parts of Daraa and Quneitra provinces under their control and was able, unlike in other parts of Syria, to largely prevail against Islamist groups, backed by arms shipments and logistical support from the United Kingdom, Jordan, the US and some Gulf States.¹³

The opposition established structures of civilian self-government and ran its own schools so that three different types of school co-existed: schools run by the regime, by the IS and by the opposition Syrian Interim Government.¹⁴ A worsening supply situation and continued attacks by the regime on the civilian infrastructure, however, prompted

tens of thousands of residents to flee mainly to Jordan, or, after the border was closed in 2014, to the no-man's-land in the Syrian-Jordan border region.

Establishment of the de-escalation zone Daraa

While the Astana agreement of May 2017 had already provided for a de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria, it was only possible to implement it when the US and Jordan were involved. In July, Russia, the US and Jordan agreed on the establishment of a safe zone outside the Astana format. This safe zone was designed to be a buffer zone in two ways: on the one hand, Jordan and the US supported an opposition-controlled zone in order to prevent an advance of pro-Iranian militias to the Jordan-Israeli-Syrian border, on the other, Amman tried to stave off further refugee movements to Jordan and to create pre-requisites for a return of Syrian refugees, which never succeeded, however.

In June 2018, the regime launched a military offensive against the rebels in Daraa. On fliers, it threatened the opposition with "another Ghouta".¹⁵ The US decided not to intervene and let their rebel allies know via WhatsApp message that they could not expect any military support.¹⁶ Jordan did not intervene, either. After brief fighting, the rebel groups surrendered one month later and each signed a *reconciliation agreement* with the regime. Moscow formally guaranteed the regime's compliance with these agreements. However, Russia did little to stop the regime from committing abuses against civilians. In the course of the offensive, 320 000 residents of the provinces had fled. 60 000 returned after it had ended. Again, about 10 000 opposition members were moved to Idlib by bus.¹⁷

¹² In November 2018, the Lebanese Minister of Displaced confirmed that he had information on 20 killed Syrian refugees who had returned to Syria from Lebanon. See "[The Syrian Regime kills Returnees](#)" (النظام السوري يقتل المعتدين) , *Al-Hurra*, 2 November 2018.

¹³ The FSA-associated rebel group *Southern Front* had a command centre in Amman. Some assistance reached southwestern Syria across the Jordanian border. Apart from the above-mentioned countries, the rebels received support from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi-Arabia. See International Crisis Group, "[Keeping The Calm in Southern Syria](#)", *Report No. 187*, 21 Jun 2018.

¹⁴ See Muhammed al-Masalmah, "[Syria's Daraa Region Has Schools Run by the Regime, the Rebels and Daesh](#)", *TRT World*, 16 March 2018; The Syrian Interim Government considers itself as an alternative government to the Assad regime in Damascus. It is based in Turkey and in the Turkish-controlled areas in northeastern Syria.

¹⁵ See "[Syria Regime Warns Daraa Rebels with Air-Dropped Leaflets](#)", *The Daily Star*, 25 May 2018.

¹⁶ See International Crisis Group, "[Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South](#)", 25 February 2019.

¹⁷ On the number of refugees, see Kristy Siegfried, "[The Refugee Brief – 5 July 2018](#)", *UNHCR*, 5 July 2018. As

Life under the regime

Even two years after the return of the regime, living conditions in Daraa are difficult. Connecting the region to the state-managed power and water supply network and rebuilding the region have only made sluggish progress. The supply situation has also deteriorated drastically: as Damascus only permits very few humanitarian aid deliveries, many people living in this region lack food and medicine.

The regime broke up all administrative structures created by the opposition and reinstated officials loyal to the regime to their old positions. State reprisals are the order of the day: members of the opposition are often arrested at checkpoints, some of them are tortured and killed. There are also attacks on former rebel leaders who had signed the *reconciliation agreement*. The regime's intelligence services are believed to be behind the killings, but there are no criminal investigations. Just as in the other zones, men of military age are forcibly recruited and are deployed at the front against the Turkish army as well as against rebels in northern Syria. Moreover, based on so-called "Counterterrorism Laws", the regime conducts expropriation proceedings against members of the opposition.¹⁸

Despite these repressive actions, the regime has not been able to re-establish full control. Apart from larger protests, there are now almost daily attacks on the Syrian security apparatus, in which more than 280 civilians, rebels and soldiers were killed between June 2019 and May 2020. The Syrian Army then redeployed troops in mid-May 2020 to reinforce units in the Daraa region, including the 4th Division, an elite unit of the regime.¹⁹

Russia had warned the residents of Daraa that an attack on Idlib was imminent, only relatively few people fled to the Idlib region this time.

¹⁸ Houses and property are systematically seized or destroyed by the regime. Several decrees and laws enacted since 2012 have legalised this practice, which is a war crime according to the Geneva Convention. See Alaa Nassar and Walid al-Nofal, "[After Stealing their Dream of Freedom, Damascus Goes after Syrians' Assets](#)", *Syria Direct*, 7 November 2019.

¹⁹ See Walid al-Nofal, "[Fear and Uncertainty in Daraa: Is Reconciliation over?](#)", *Syria Direct*, 15 May 2020.

The de-escalation zone Idlib

With a total surface area of 12 000 km², Idlib was the largest de-escalation zone. After several offensives launched by the regime, roughly half of the former zone is again under the control of Assad's army.²⁰ Idlib is an agrarian, predominantly Sunni region in close vicinity to Turkey. Even before the Syrian war broke out, the province had been politically and economically neglected by the regime. That is why the government in Damascus had never been very popular here.

Immediately after the beginning of the protests against Assad's rule, armed resistance started to form in Idlib. In June 2015, the regime finally had to accept defeat and had to pull out all its forces. Currently, the strongest armed group in Idlib is the radical Islamist militia Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is widely considered to be the successor of the Al-Nusra front, an offshoot of the Al-Qaida network. Numerous other militias, including the FSA, have joined forces in the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army (SNA).

Various rebel groups established their own civilian administrations in the province, set up local councils, ran schools and hospitals and organised power and water supply. After decades of authoritarian rule, the first mostly free local elections in Idlib took place in January 2017. Due to the competing administrations, living conditions and the degree of freedom enjoyed by the residents differ widely from community to community.

After the entry of government troops into Eastern Ghouta, Homs and Daraa, many additional fighters flocked to Idlib, including followers of radical Islamist militias. According to estimates, there are now approximately 70000 armed rebels in the area.²¹ The total population has grown from 1.3 million to 3.5

²⁰ Apart from Idlib province, the de-escalation zone included areas of the adjacent provinces of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama. The Syrian and Russian army had carried out large-scale offensives against the safe zone of Idlib in 2018 as well as between April and August 2019. On December 19, 2019, a second offensive started that lasted until March 5, 2020. On the de-escalation zone Idlib, also see "[Syrien: Eskalation als Verhandlungsstrategie](#)", *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, April 2020.

²¹ The UN Security Council estimates that the Al-Qaida-associated Hurras al-Din has about 5000 and the HTS militia 15 000 fighters in Idlib. See "[UN-Security Council](#)

million people because of the influx of internally displaced people. Although the supply situation and living conditions in Idlib are extremely difficult after years of war and destruction, it is still the last refuge for many people in Syria.

In accordance with the Astana agreement, the Turkish army entered the de-escalation zone Idlib in October 2017 and set up observation posts to monitor the ceasefire. In Astana, Ankara had committed to disarming the rebels and to granting free movement on the highways M4 and M5. In return, Moscow and Damascus had promised not to attack the province. Either way, none of these commitments were honored.

The regime advances

The future and continued existence of the de-escalation zone Idlib is not decided yet. While the regime has brought large parts of the zone back under its control, Turkey and the rebels are defending their remaining territory. A ceasefire agreed on March 5, 2020, has stopped the advance of the Syrian army and its Russian and Iranian allies for now.

Since the regime launched its offensives (2018-2020), roughly one million people have fled, 98 percent of residents have left their villages and towns that were entered by the Syrian army. Currently, these displaced people are living in refugee camps or in makeshift shelters on the Turkish border. During their advance, the Syrian troops and their allies destroyed entire communities. The UN accuse the regime of having deliberately bombed hospitals and civilian infrastructure. The Syrian military murders civilians and systematically loots conquered territories. By seizing houses and properties, Damascus is creating demographic facts that will probably

permanently prevent a return of the former residents.²²

If violence breaks out again, the world's attention will focus once more on the fate of millions of refugees who may well trigger a new mass migration to Europe.

Failures in Astana

In accordance with the Astana agreement, the de-escalation zones were supposed to lead to an improvement of the humanitarian situation and, based on this, facilitate finding a political solution for Syria in the medium term. This, however, was doomed to fail for at least three reasons, all linked to the way the agreement was designed: first, the guarantors avoided defining a mechanism of sanctions in case of violations. Second, they failed to involve a neutral party that could monitor and enforce compliance with the agreement. Hence, the conflict parties were the guarantors of their own bargain and they were free to decide whether to permit humanitarian aid or honor a ceasefire. And finally, they did not define terms for a political transition in the agreement, which left Syria's reorganisation up in the air. The purpose of the de-escalation zones as well as the notion itself were turned upside down and thus became paradoxical, for, in reality, they serve for opposite matters. The de-escalation zones were used by the Assad regime and its allies to systematically eliminate the opposition's areas of influence bit by bit.²³ Potential hopes that these zones would lead to a lasting and sustainable settlement between the regime and the opposition were therefore illusory, especially since the latter hardly had any say in the matter.²⁴

Today, only the Turkish-controlled de-escalation zone of Idlib still exists, because Ankara has a political and economic interest in

[Report S/2020/53](#), 20 January 2020; In addition, there are about 50.000 fighters of other rebel groups.

²² See "[Assad Forces, Allied Militias Carried out Widespread Looting in Seized Areas](#)", *The Syrian Observer*, 2 April 2020; See also "[The Lootings in Idlib and its Environs Increase: War Crime](#)" (التعويض يتوسع في إدلب وريفها: جريمة حرب), *Al-Modon*, 31 March 2020; Also, just as in the other de-escalation zones, self-government structures were dismantled in communities recaptured by the regime. Here, too, Damascus reinstalled the former

administrative structures and filled important positions with loyal regime supporters.

²³ See Mohammed Alaa Ghanem, "[Assad's Lethal Peace Deals](#)", *Hoover Institution*, 17 July 2018.

²⁴ Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, both members of the US National Security Council under then President Barack Obama from 2011 to 2013, disagreed and assumed that local ceasefires would lead to a comprehensive peace in Syria. See Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "[A New Plan for Syria](#)", *The New York Review of Books*, 26 September 2014.

its continued existence and is prepared to use military force to assert this interest.

Neither before nor after the takeover by the regime did the de-escalation zones offer viable and effective protection for the civilian population. On the contrary, the regime is even exacerbating the situation and is trying to prevent the return of refugees: arbitrary arrests, torture, executions, forcible recruitment for military service, systematic expropriations, ongoing ethnic and sectarian purges as well as the planned settlement of regime supporters in former opposition-controlled areas will result in permanent displacement and will create a new demographic reality in line with the regime's intentions.²⁵

Conditions for an EU engagement

In view of Assad's policy towards the de-escalation zones, it is quite clear that the Syrian refugees will not be able to return home in the foreseeable future. This also applies to the Syrians who have fled to Europe. Enabling them to return safely, in dignity and on the basis of permanent guarantees, however, is a primary interest of Germany, the European Union (EU) and a large number of refugees themselves. Europeans must be aware, however, that their commitment to refugee repatriation will always clash with the interests of the Assad regime.²⁶

The EU member states can only build up credible political pressure on the regime if they manage to define a unified Syria strategy. It seems doubtful, however, that there is sufficient political will to take on this task. There are actually indications for an

erosion of the European position on the policy of sanctions and isolation vis-a-vis the Assad regime. Nonetheless, especially at this moment, unity is urgently needed, because the "largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War"²⁷ may not have reached its climax yet: the worst is probably yet to come for the 3.5 million people in Idlib.²⁸

What is also needed is a determined transatlantic initiative that focuses on Assad's ally Russia. Putting pressure on Moscow could be a crucial lever in dealing with the Assad regime. This is the only way in which Damascus can be pushed to extend security guarantees for returnees and to implement necessary political reforms. Otherwise, it is not to be expected that the Syrian regime will be prepared to make concessions to the West in the short, medium or even long term. This is demonstrated not only by the last nine years of war, but also by the past 49 years of the Assad dictatorship.

Even the Russian government – Assad's staunchest ally – seems to realise that Damascus only reacts under pressure. Apparently for this reason, a series of articles were recently published in newspapers close to the Russian government, in which the Syrian regime was openly criticised, mainly for its corruption and inability to implement reforms. While this does not mean that Moscow will drop Assad, it does show that even the Kremlin is willing to be 'tougher' with its ally – if the latter acts against Russian interests.

It is a fact that the Syrian refugees in Europe and in the Middle East will only be able to return to Syria if they no longer have to fear for their lives and if the lawlessness in their country ends. A minimum of physical safety as

²⁵ On 20 August 2017, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that Syria, while having lost much in the war, had nevertheless won "a healthier and more homogeneous society" and that "homogeneity is the basis of national unity." See Bashar al-Assad, "[We Continue Fighting and Destroying the Terrorists](#)" (مستمرون في مكافحة وسحق الإرهابيين), SANA, 20 August 2017.

²⁶ In a speech on 26 July 2015, Bashar al-Assad said: "Syria is not for those who hold a Syrian passport but for those who defend it", see "[Al-Assad: Syria is for Those Who Defend it](#)" (الأسد: سوريا لمن يدافع عنها), *Al-Jazeera*, 26 July 2015; In September 2017, Issam Zahreddine, general of the Syrian Republican Guard, warned refugees against returning: "I say to those who have fled from Syria to another country: please don't come back, because even if the government forgives you, I swear that we will never

forgive you and will never forget. My advice is that none of you returns." See "[High Ranking Syrian Officer Threatens People 'Who Fled Syria'](#)", MEMRI, 10 September 2017.

²⁷ This is how the then Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Børge Brende referred to the Syrian war in 2017.

²⁸ Especially Germany, France and the United Kingdom abide by the strict principle that political reforms have to precede rebuilding assistance. Other EU countries, including Italy, Hungary, Cyprus, Greece, Austria and Poland, however, are considering to resume diplomatic or economic relations with Damascus. See Muriel Asseburg, "[Wiederaufbau in Syrien](#)", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, April 2020; On Greece and Cyprus, see Paul Antonopoulos, "[Cyprus Is Reopening Relations with Syria](#)", *Greek City Times*, 13 May 2020.

well as legal and material security is needed for the returnees.²⁹ Only when this has been resolved can other questions regarding the reconstruction of Syria be addressed.³⁰

The road to Damascus goes through Moscow

The financial resources required for this would be a potential instrument for inducing Assad and his allies to comply. Because, in view of a price tag of 250 to 400 billion US dollars, as estimated by experts, Russia, Iran and the Assad regime cannot afford to rebuild Syria on their own. They need considerable international support for this effort. Further, Russia is not prepared to raise spending on Syria above current levels, but will give priority to domestic projects that benefit its own population.

The Russian intervention in Syria (since September 2015) is also an opportunity. While a Western military intervention has become nearly impossible since then, the Russian engagement offers some leverage in terms of exerting indirect pressure on the Assad regime by imposing targeted sanctions on Russia. The Kremlin is probably as unwilling to risk tough economic sanctions just to give free rein to Assad as the West is to risk a military conflict with Russia. The road to Damascus, therefore, goes mainly through Moscow.

In March 2020, several European politicians – including the two CDU³¹ foreign policy experts Norbert Röttgen and Roderich Kiesewetter – called on the EU and NATO to consider taking targeted action against Russia because of its violations of international humanitarian law in Syria. As early as late 2019, the US administration adopted comprehensive sanctions against the Assad regime and its supporters which will come into force in mid-June 2020. For the first time, the set of actions known as *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act* targets Russia and imposes

sanctions on individuals as well as state-owned and private businesses that have links to Syria. The options for imposing sanctions on Assad and his allies have not been exhausted by any means. The EU could take similar action and severely drive up the price for Russia's engagement in Syria. Increased pressure, combined with a currently falling oil price and the COVID-19 pandemic, would have a considerable impact on the Russian economy. Moscow could feel compelled by this to cooperate constructively with the UN, the EU and the US on key issues relating to the future of Syria. In terms of coordinating humanitarian aid for the suffering Syrian population, an involvement of Russia in an international mechanism would also be important. Russia is a rationally acting player with global interests who is seeking a speedy stabilisation of the situation in Syria. Brussels should always look at the conflict in the wider international context, not least because the alliance with Assad is only *one* building block of Russian foreign policy.

Any kind of transatlantic commitment, however, must be linked to clear conditions and depends on credible Russian and Syrian security guarantees for the civilian population – as postulated by UN Resolution 2254. The EU must not fund a postwar order that prevents a sustainable process of peace and reconciliation in Syria *a priori*, that is an obstacle to a return of refugees or that thwarts a criminal investigation of war crimes and serious human rights violations. Finally, a security concept for Syria needs to define the terms for a possible use of military resources in order to protect the civilian population, if the Assad regime does not honor the agreements.

Taking a resolute stance is moreover important because the credibility of European foreign policy is at stake in Syria. Although political realities on the ground have undoubtedly changed with the military advance of the Assad regime and its allies,

²⁹ The World Bank cites the insecurity and repression that plague Syria as major reasons for deterring refugees from returning. See "[The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis](#)", *World Bank*, 6 February 2019.

³⁰ Another risk associated with humanitarian aid delivered without reliable guarantees is that these deliveries could

be diverted to benefit the Assad regime, as illustrated by the rebuilding of Aleppo. See "[Reconstructing Syria: Risks and Side Effects](#)", *Adopt a Revolution*, December 2018.

³¹ The Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) is a German conservative party. The CDU heads the German federal government under Angela Merkel since 2005.

Europe must keep standing up for its values in the Syrian conflict – beyond the sanctions issue. A humanitarian engagement in Syria, therefore, must not result in a belated rehabilitation of the Assad dictatorship. Not

least because such behaviour could encourage other authoritarian regimes to violate international regulations in a similar manner.

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