

Implications of COVID-19 for the Conflict in Syria

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to illustrate the nature in which the global COVID-19 pandemic has affected the dynamics of the Syrian conflict and the strategies of external powers engaged in it. By emphasizing separate levels of analysis, at both the domestic level where COVID-19 affects the capabilities of involved actors and the international level where regional and global powers compete for their positions in Syria, it seeks to provide a holistic view of the immediate impact the pandemic has had within this particular geographic focus. The paper finds that COVID-19 and its various global consequences have facilitated efforts by Damascus to extend its influence into regions of Syria beyond its immediate control, as well as granting opportunities for Russia to further consolidate its reach within Syria relative to others. The humanitarian context generated by the COVID-19 crisis has also given new impetus to diplomatic efforts to normalize Damascus within the international community, and for external actors to normalize relations with them.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, coronavirus, Russia, Syria, Middle East, Iran, Turkey

Introduction

“Diseases have posed threats to countries throughout recorded history. In the late twentieth century, an era characterized by the globalization of the world’s political economy, the threat of infectious disease transmission across national borders and the expansion of the trade and the promotion of harmful commodities, such as tobacco, represent transnational health problems. Since these issues pose threats to the security and well-being of citizens in all states, they should be of concern to national foreign-policy makers who aim to protect the national interests of their respective countries.”¹

This excerpt from an essay published in 1997 by then Director-General of the World Health Organization Hiroshi Nakajima identifies the core of the problem that the international community is dealing with today. Indeed, there are perhaps few challenges in world affairs as damaging to a country’s foreign policy than pandemics, although the issue is rarely viewed from this perspective. Policy-making communities in different countries have long warned of all kinds of challenges that their nations may face – including climate change and pandemics – but decision-makers have barely embraced the latter as a serious concern when compared to the threat of nuclear arms, terrorism and cyberattacks.

Needless to say that when epidemics break out in war-torn countries, they are a serious aggravating factor. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis, which is essentially a disruptor that affects states at the domestic level, has had a clear impact on the level of international relations surrounding the Syrian theatre. As such, the effects of the pandemic require consideration across different “levels of analysis” in order to be able to reliably explain the effects at the international level. Whereas typical classical or structural realist theories would attribute changes in state behaviour to shifts in the “relative distribution of power,” the COVID-19 crisis has impacted states more or less equally and thus requires elucidation through an understanding of how intervening variables at the domestic level of involved actors impact international relations outcomes.²

Syria’s coronavirus story started off rather late given the country’s socio-political ties with Iran, the hardest hit state in the Middle East. The first case of COVID-19 was officially reported in Damascus on March 23. A 20-year-old woman who had come from abroad was reportedly identified by a “detection team” responsible for scanning incoming travellers. Although she did not exhibit all of the symptoms upon arrival, she was placed on a 14-day quarantine. The government shut down schools, parks, restaurants and various public institutions and suspended army conscription. The swift measures were followed by a ban on private and public transportation services in Damascus and between various cities and provinces. All efforts were geared towards alleviating the pressure on the healthcare system that had been badly ravaged by almost nine years of war.

Yet, as in other countries, the rising trend exposed itself in Syria within a few days: by early April, the country had about 20 registered cases of coronavirus and three reported deaths. Critics of President Assad argue that there were numerous

1 Nakajima 1997.

2 Rathbun 2008.

inaccuracies in the early testing procedures and that the government was hiding a number of cases, suggesting that the real figures were higher than the Ministry of Health had reported.

To be sure, three factors must be kept in mind when analysing the current situation. First, Syria is a country that is mostly isolated politically and the number of people travelling into the country has dropped significantly. That said, one of the primary sources for new COVID-19 cases so far has been the influx of foreign fighters, including from Iran. Second, the government has been using a highly conventional, albeit outdated way of publishing statistics and updates. Third, Damascus issued a circular warning of prison sentences for those spreading misinformation, which suggests the government is extremely focused on controlling the narrative and information coming out of the country. These are important to consider when attempting to forecast the implications of the COVID-19 on the development of the Syrian crisis moving forward.

Syria's Domestic Challenges

For Syria, as is the case with most countries in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted domestic politics significantly. The impact of the disease itself, and necessary measures to contain its further spread, are damaging even the most resilient economies in the world. This effect is even greater on a war-ravaged country like Syria, whose health infrastructure is overburdened and degraded as it is by nearly a decade of internal conflict.¹ These conditions severely limit Syria's ability to minimize deaths as a consequence of the pandemic, and this vulnerability could bring about additional constraints on its economic and security capabilities as efforts to contain the virus expand.

In addition to its weak infrastructure, the Syrian civil war has also led to a vulnerable population, including 6.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) spread throughout the different regions of the country.² The conditions in IDP camps, including overcrowding, lowered hygienic standards and malnutrition, are fertile ground for the spread of COVID-19. The absence of widespread COVID-19 testing within the vulnerable populations living in IDP camps means that concentrations of infected people could already be located there, and that any mobility to and from these locations risks further spreading the disease into the rest of Syria.³

The possibility of coming into contact with high-risk populations is, in turn, likely to affect the degree of external assistance these populations can obtain. The government in Damascus has exempted relief shipments and humanitarian personnel from its border closures, but even then, these efforts will be less effective as a result of the anticipated delays and precautionary measures to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19 through these interactions. Not only is the general vulnerability of the Syrian population a humanitarian risk, but it also imposes a significant policy burden on those actors controlling different parts of Syria, and as a result their behaviour in the context of the conflict and the constellation of international relations that are intertwined with it.

1 Kherallah et al. 2012.

2 "Syria Emergency," UNHCR, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

3 Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Nobody Cares About Us: Syrians Stuck at Rukban Camp Decry Lack of Testing," Al-Monitor, April 16, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/syria-camp-rukban-lack-testing-coronavirus-covid19.html>.

Damascus-Controlled Syria

Having recovered a substantial portion of the territory that it had ceded by 2015, when the Assad government controlled less ground than it had done at any point during the civil war, Damascus is now subject to the stresses and requirements that come with domestic control.¹ The government is already hard-pressed to provide the resources required to support the country's economy and population under persistent wartime conditions, and the outbreak of COVID-19 in Syria will only add to these challenges.

There are some hidden challenges in assessing the real impact of COVID-19 at the domestic level, due in part to cases being underreported by the Syrian government. However, there are three government initiatives that could impact the course of the conflict moving forwards: the introduction of travel bans within and between cities and the temporary suspension of the issuing of driver's licenses; proof of completion of military service and closures of universities, schools and institutions; the suspension of Friday prayers and group prayers for two weeks.²

In light of the government's security and military grip, obtaining reliable information about the number of infections has become even more difficult for any international organization or body. Remarkably, the largest number of cases is recorded in Deir ez-Zor, Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia, which are the areas where Iranian militias are heavily deployed. The major concern both among the Syrian opposition and, more tacitly, the Syrian government is the possibility of the spread of COVID-19 among security forces given the presence of the Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi militias that constantly move between their COVID-19-hit countries and Syria.

One significant driver of dissent against the government policies is the fear of COVID-19 spreading in detention and refugee camps. The management at Adra Prison, for instance, has suspended family visits, but prison cells themselves present a much more favourable environment for the spread of infectious germs, viruses and parasites. The problem is aggravated by the great number of detention centres and prisons in Syria, the vast majority of which are classified and run by political and military security, air force intelligence or other branches of the armed forces.

While the government has introduced a curfew and lockdown, hospitals are struggling to test the potentially infected, people still go out in their hordes to buy the essentials and withdraw their salaries from cash points, and passing cars have their tyres doused with disinfectants. There is the perception among the general public that the government has introduced these measures to divert attention away from the fact that it has been unable to provide basic medical aid during the pandemic, including face masks and ventilators. Not only does this set the stage for an even bigger jump in COVID-19 cases in the medium term, but in the long term it is also another example of the people rejecting the government's policies in the territories that are controlled by Assad, thus adding to the criticism of the incumbent president by the opposition inside

¹ Alam 2019.

² Khaled al-Khateb, "Coronavirus in Syria: A Catastrophe in the Making," Al-Monitor, March 27, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/syria-coronavirus-who-pandemic-denial-cases-detention-camps.html#ixzz6JfKd432c>.

and outside Syria. This, in turn, may make an ultimate post-conflict reconciliation even more difficult.

The Rebel-Controlled Areas

The local rebel authorities of the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation that control a portion of Idlib along the Turkish border have similarly attempted to enforce a lockdown, although the divided nature of the Syrian opposition groups has made this incredibly difficult.¹ By preventing public gatherings and closing down checkpoints along the contact line with Damascus-controlled Syria, these authorities hope to prevent the spread of COVID-19 into the region. Even worse healthcare provisions and a dense population of IDPs have turned Idlib into a potential viral powder keg. As hospitals are already over capacity, few qualified doctors are available, and testing capabilities are nearly non-existent in the province, the fear is that any occurrence of COVID-19 might rapidly manage to infect nearly all of Idlib. Efforts to contain the province are complicated by the independent actions of jihadist elements among these opposition forces. Initially, groups such as Hayat Tahrir al Sham had actively rejected the containment measures, calling upon their supporters to remain focused on the fight against the Assad regime.² While they have since adjusted their position in pursuit of a perception as capable governors, the divisions between rebel groups and their diverging interests continue to make efforts to contain COVID-19 a careful balancing act.

The Turkish military, which had provided heavy support to these rebel groups during the Syrian government's offensives until the most recent ceasefire on March 5, has been forced to limit its activities within Idlib.³ Turkey is continuing essential movements to supply forces located within Idlib, and continues to take part in joint patrols with Russian forces along the line of separation. The self-imposed limits on mobility, as Turkey is suffering from a COVID-19 outbreak itself and fears that it may spread further into Turkey from Syria, still reduce the military effectiveness of Turkish operations. Turkey's role in deterring renewed Syrian offensives may be less critical at this point as Damascus itself is distracted by its struggle with COVID-19, but the reduced ability to effectively control local rebel groups or ensure the withdrawal of groups like Hayat Tahrir al Sham (a terrorist organization that is banned in Russia) from the contact line could endanger the stability of the ceasefire over time.

Eastern Syria

A separate issue is Damascus' relations with the Kurds in north-eastern Syria.⁴ The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria led by the Kurds autonomy accused the Syrian government of attempting to obstruct the delivery of aid to the

1 Nisan Ahmado, "Syria Medical Workers Say Coronavirus Spread in Idlib Could be 'Catastrophic,'" Voice of America, March 20, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/syria-medical-workers-say-coronavirus-spread-idlib-could-be-catastrophic>.

2 Maha Yahya, "Syria and Coronavirus – Coronavirus in Conflict Zones: A Sobering Landscape," Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, April 14, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/14/syria-and-coronavirus-pub-81547>.

3 Jonathan Spicer and Irem Koca, "Turkey to Curb Some Troop Movement in Syria as Coronavirus Cases Jump," Reuters, April 5, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-turkey/turkey-to-curb-some-troop-movement-in-syria-as-coronavirus-cases-jump-idUSKBN21NOTM>.

4 Shivan Ibrahim, "Syrian Kurds Hunker Down Amid Fears of COVID-19," Al-Monitor, April 1, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/syria-kurds-curfew-coronavirus-outbreak.html#ixzz6JJVjy7Q8>.

COVID-19 affected population. The Kurds believe this is part of coercion tactics on the part of Damascus aimed at pressuring the authorities of the autonomous region to drop its alliance with the United States and reinvigorate negotiations with the central government.¹ Indeed, the spread of coronavirus in the north-eastern Syria has afforded President Assad yet another opportunity to reset relations with the rebellious province and push the Americans out even further.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has also imposed a curfew and lockdown throughout its territories, as a preventive measure. Under the lockdown, which began March 23, the administration closed cafes, restaurants, public places, mourning halls and even private medical clinics. Bakeries, grocery stores and pharmacies were excluded from the list of places to be closed. The curfew was set for 15 days, but could be extended upon review. While these measures will help stem the spread of COVID-19, the Kurdish administration also faces difficulties in obtaining external help, as the World Health Organization refuses to operate in areas of Syria outside of Damascus' control.² This again may reinforce the leverage that Damascus is able to gain by offering such assistance to the Kurds should they give up on their relations with the United States. Until this happens, an active blockade of aid delivery is a way to "guide them" to such a decision.

Much like the Turkish offensive along the northern border of Syria in October 2019 forced the SDF to call in the help of Syrian forces to contain the Turkish advances,³ COVID-19 now serves as an additional force that may be driving them to cooperate. This is one of the notable ways in which the COVID-19 outbreak, in addition to the disruption that it brings, offers up political opportunities to Damascus. The current policies of the Syrian government seem to both negate the reliance of the SDF on their relationship with the United States, and gradually progress towards an eventual restoration of territorial integrity.

Impacts on the Dynamics of the Conflict

At the time the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread throughout the world, the Syrian conflict was at a point where its overall dynamics resembled state-on-state competition more so than it did a struggle between internal parties, which had dominated the conflict before.⁴ With the war to recapture its territories from Islamic State over and the rebel-held enclaves largely pushed back into areas on the Turkish border, the remaining military stalemates have come to emphasize the role of external powers such as Turkey and the United States. The involvement of these external actors, as well as the sustained Russian support to the Assad government, has led these remaining stalemates to become heavily defined by deterrence and the potential for escalation presented by their military capabilities.

1 Sirwan Kajjo, "Coronavirus Raises Tensions Between Syrian Government, Kurds," Voice of America, April 4, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/coronavirus-raises-tensions-between-syrian-government-kurds>.

2 Amberin Zaman, "Syria's Kurdish-led region decries lack of international support in COVID-19 fight," Al-Monitor, April 20, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/syria-northeast-covid19-coronavirus-kurdish-who-un.html#ixzz6KqIGWSdS>.

3 Andrew Wilks, "Turkey's Military Operation In Syria: Biggest Winners And Losers," Aljazeera, November 9, 2019, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/turkey-military-operation-syria-biggest-winners-losers-191108195517958.html>.

4 Omar Lamrani, "The Syrian Battlespace: a Net Assessment," Center For Global Policy, April 4, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/the-syrian-battlespace-a-net-assessment/>.

The tensions brought on by the engagement of regional and global powers, which themselves feature in power dynamics reaching far beyond the Syrian conflict, have subsided for the time being, as a relative period of calm settled right before the COVID-19 outbreak. The signing of the Idlib peace deal has, for now, removed the main potential for escalation between Russia and Turkey, while the gradually reduced presence and role of United States Special Operations Forces has led to fewer standoffs with Russia as well. The global COVID-19 pandemic, which is hitting all of these individual actors both directly through outbreaks of the disease and indirectly through the effects of a global recession, appears to further dampen the potential for significant altercations. While the kinetic aspect of the Syrian conflict may be at a temporary pause, however, these regional and global powers still have cards to play and continue to see the potential to influence the progression of the Syrian conflict during the pandemic.

Efforts Towards Normalization

Perhaps the most critical and most clearly directed effort to capitalize on the COVID-19 crisis has been the attempts of Damascus to progress towards diplomatic normalization. Damascus, leaning heavily on support from Moscow and Beijing, has been trying to achieve this through its appeal to remove sanctions from Syria in order to help the country deal with the COVID-19 emergency.¹ This appeal, while made on a humanitarian basis, would effectively roll back Western diplomatic efforts to put pressure on the Assad government. This would be a significant step forward for the Syrian government, even if only a limited portion of the sanctions were removed, towards the greater strategic goals of re-entering the international community following its apparent victory in the civil war. Syria is not the only country attempting to exploit the humanitarian crisis for diplomatic victory, as its ally Iran has joined in this appeal. While the success of this strategy is by no means guaranteed, it is clear that the conditions generated by the COVID-19 crisis have altered the threshold for such diplomatic appeals on a humanitarian basis, and this may be the time at which the effort is most feasible.

It is not only Syria and its traditional allies that are spearheading efforts to normalize the situation. Quite noticeably, the United Arab Emirates has engaged in a diplomatic offensive towards Damascus at a time when COVID-19 makes such overtures less controversial given their humanitarian cloak. The UAE was the first to discern the new openings in terms of the ability to interact more freely with the Syrian government and publicly support Damascus. In late 2018, the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus and embarked on a number of initiatives to help boost the Syrian regime. On March 27, President of Syria Bashar al-Assad had a phone conversation with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the United Arab Emirates Armed Forces, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Among other things, the two discussed efforts to jointly fight the coronavirus. "Brotherly Syria will not remain alone in these critical conditions," the Prince later tweeted.²

1 Sami Moubayed, "China, Russia Push for Lifting of Sanctions on Syria over Pandemic," *The Arab Weekly*, April 5, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://thearabweekly.com/china-russia-push-lifting-sanctions-syria-over-pandemic>.

2 "@MohamedBinZayed," Twitter, March 27, 2020, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://twitter.com/MohamedBinZayed/status/1243613323519762432>.

Bin Zayed's statements show that the COVID-19 is being used by the UAE – and, more broadly speaking, by the Gulf monarchies – to advance its political agenda. By pushing for Syria's expedited return to the Arab fold, the Saudis and Emiratis in particular seek to add strategic depth against Turkey, which they believe has gone too far in strengthening its own position in Syria. At the same time, its rapprochement with Syria also supports separate efforts to reduce tensions with Iran. Given the relationship between Damascus and Tehran, and the fact that both are in need of support to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE has identified this multi-pronged diplomatic offensive as a key opportunity to move in on established interests now that the COVID-19 emergency may facilitate it. Indeed, the crisis seems to play into new regional rivalry between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the one hand, and Ankara and Doha on the other. Russia has been remarkably intertwined in this dynamic and may too face uneasy choices as it seeks to maintain its relationship with various actors on opposing sides of these dynamics.

The current diplomatic efforts do not mark a sudden shift towards acting on these interests, however. In particular, Mohammed bin Zayed allegedly tried to prevent the Idlib ceasefire agreement negotiated by Russia and Turkey from being implemented, and has since called Assad to encourage him to resume his offensive.¹ If the story is to be believed, given the caveats one should apply to the pro-Qatari outlet, the Crown Prince's plan involved the UAE agreeing to pay Assad \$3 billion to relaunch the offensive against forces loyal to Turkey in Idlib, \$1 billion of which was due to be paid before the end of March. By the time the ceasefire was announced, \$250 million had already been paid up front. The UAE was particularly concerned that the deal be kept secret from the United States, since the Trump administration supported Turkey's military efforts to confront Assad in Idlib and had previously expressed its anger with Mohammed bin Zayed over the release of \$700 million of frozen Iranian assets in October. In turn, Moscow, which closely monitors military movements in Syria, learned of the plan, prompting President Putin to send Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu to Damascus for talks with President Assad. The visit eventually thwarted the plan.

The UAE rationale for paying Assad to re-launch his offensive against Turkey could be twofold. Firstly, the UAE seeks to further tie the Turkish army up in a quagmire in north-western Syria. Secondly, Abu Dhabi is looking to stretch Turkish resources and distract Ankara from successfully defending Tripoli from the UAE-supported Khalifa Haftar, where Turkey recently came to the aid of Fayeze al-Sarraj, prime minister of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). Even if the story may be embellished, the geopolitical reasons for the UAE to take such a decision with regard to Turkey are understandable and could be played out in the future too.

Impact on the Strategies of External Powers

As any crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only created challenges. It has also brought about remarkable opportunities both for the Syrian government and external actors engaged in the Syrian conflict. For these external actors, their role in the Syrian

1 David Hearst, "EXCLUSIVE: Mohammed bin Zayed Pushed Assad To Break Idlib Ceasefire," Middle East Eye, April 8, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/abu-dhabi-crown-prince-mbz-assad-break-idlib-turkey-ceasefire>.

conflict is defined by much more than the results on the battlefield within Syria, which are merely an element of broader foreign policy agendas nested in global security strategies, as well as of regional power competition. The interests of these actors, and the actions they take to achieve them, are situated at the international relations level. However, they are shaped heavily by the impact that COVID-19 has had at the domestic level both within Syria and within the territories of these countries themselves.

Regional Actors

For Turkey, one can hardly think of a worse moment to engage in direct competition with the Gulf monarchies. The country is struggling with almost 100,000 cases of COVID-19 and has already had to limit some of its military activities in Syria. To make matters even worse for Ankara, the country is under constant pressure from Russia over its commitments to the 2019 Idlib ceasefire deal. According to the agreement, Turkey has to clear the Idlib de-escalation zone from rebel groups, including the radical Hayat Tahrir al Sham, to ensure the separation of forces within the contact line. It also has to sustain the dominance of moderate rebel forces relative to extremist elements within the opposition-controlled province of Idlib. These imperatives are part of a greater effort on the part of Turkey to prevent Syria from restoring its territorial integrity and stability. Due to the strategy that Turkey has pursued within Syria, by setting up Turkish-protected zones, Ankara has inadvertently also assumed responsibility over a significant refugee and IDP population. While this has in the past both placed Turkey at odds with and provided them leverage over the European Union, in the case of COVID-19 this population has mostly presented an additional risk to the Turkish strategy. Even though the most recent ceasefire that predated the observed spread of COVID-19 had temporarily reduced military pressure on Turkey and its allies within Syria, for Ankara, the disruptions to the military operations that it provides is cause for concern. Given the global impact of COVID-19, however, Turkey's interests are protected to some degree by the way in which the pandemic has also affected most other actors within the Syrian theatre.

Iran has been one of the main pillars of support for the Syrian government since the start of the country's nearly decade-long conflict. It played a critical role in helping to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power, through the deployment into Syria of tens of thousands of its own men from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and multiple Shiite proxies, including Afghan and Pakistani militias. Even though Damascus understands the health risks associated with the Iranian presence, it cannot accuse Iran of spreading the virus in Syria. Any decision to halt contact with Iran over COVID-19 would be interpreted in a highly politicized fashion and would thus be strategically perilous. Damascus needs flights between Syria and Iran (Tehran and Qom) to continue, as they provide the Syrian government with cash, fighters and other material assistance that help keep Assad in power. Simply put, Syria cannot afford to continue its offensive operations without these resources. Moreover, as Assad needs to sustain a military presence along the frontlines, he is going to need to supply these people with ammunition, food and other basic materials.

Iran, in turn, will still need to rebuild Shiite-dominated neighbourhoods in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia and Tartus as a key element of its own strategy to anchor its influence in Syria and beyond. This includes both bringing back Shiites who

fled their homes during the war and having others brought in from Iraq and Lebanon as part of an alleged demographic engineering scheme to entrench Tehran's influence. Similar efforts are underway in Deir ez-Zor, where growing numbers in the Baggara tribe are converting to Shiism after being encouraged to do so by Iranian proselytizers. Given that these areas are already seeing the highest rise in COVID-19 cases, things may get even worse in these areas very soon.¹

Meanwhile it should be noted that the process of Sunni tribes converting to Shiism started before the civil war and has been on relatively small scale. Shias from the Baggara tribe compose the fighting force of a handful of local self-defence units. It is rather their loyalty to Damascus, the participation some of their Sunni fellowmen in the national defence forces and the presence on their territories of pro-Iranian Shia training centres that present the bigger challenge.

Despite these mutual dependencies between Tehran and Damascus, however, the COVID-19 outbreak does present opportunities to other actors, for instance Russia, to subtly scale back Iran's relevance in Syria. To Russia, Iran presents a potential risk to its Syria strategy because it inevitably draws Israel into the fray, which wants to disrupt Iranian operations and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. While Iran resists such efforts, it is forced to do so from a position of weakness because of the country's role in the spread of COVID-19 in the region and the anticipated economic hangover that could simmer for years. A recent meeting between Foreign Minister of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif and President of Syria Bashar al Assad could be interpreted as an emergency measure to ensure that Tehran stands alongside Damascus, as under normal conditions such public shows of affinity have typically not been required.²

Israel's main concern in the Syrian theatre has been the incremental presence and influence of Iran in Syria, and to a lesser degree the capabilities that this presence provides to Hezbollah as a proxy of Tehran. The COVID-19 pandemic may provide a windfall for Israel if it does indeed lead to a weakened Iranian state and possibly even reduced clout within Syria. The impact of the pandemic is unlikely to force Iran out of Syria completely, however, and Israel will likely see the need for its proactive security posture towards Iran and its proxies in Syria and Iraq confirmed. In the background of the Syrian theatre itself, the unravelling of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has also led to Iran resuming the enrichment of uranium. While the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have put this particular threat on hold for now, its re-emergence in the future will continue to force a challenging foreign policy problem onto Israel.³

Great Power Actors

For the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic provides further disruption following a period in which its geographic reach within Syria was on the decline. While Washington maintains a presence in Syria and has clearly broadcasted its continued activity in that

- 1 Amberin Zaman, "Is Syria Unable, or Unwilling, to Fend off Iran Coronavirus Contagion?" *Al-Monitor*, March 25, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/syria-iran-coronavirus-stop-spread.html#ixzz6JNUa75Et>.
- 2 "US Accuses Iran of Double Dealing on Syria after Assad and Zarif Meeting," *The National*, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-accuses-iran-of-double-dealing-on-syria-after-assad-and-zarif-meeting-1.1008643>.
- 3 Eyal Cohen, "Israel's Changing Regional Landscape in Light of COVID-19," *The Brookings Institution*, April 17, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/17/israels-changing-regional-landscape-in-light-of-covid-19/>.

theatre, the global outbreak has already impacted the readiness of its military forces. Combined with security concerns over recent Iranian proxy attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq, the pandemic has even led the United States to concentrate and reduce its troop presence in neighbouring Iraq.¹ While COVID-19 may have weakened the availability of operational support to special operations forces based in Syria, it is not considered a threat to the sustainability of that mission altogether. However, it may have greater difficulty achieving its more strategic goals, which consisting of maintaining the alignment of the SDF in order to limit the reach of Damascus to the Euphrates River.

The dire need of the SDF and the local authorities for support in their efforts to contain COVID-19 in Eastern Syria has opened up additional avenues for Damascus to expand its relationship with them. As the United States finds itself with restricted capacity and unable to provide the SDF with the help it needs directly, Damascus' gain in influence will come at the cost of that of the United States. The United States could become further distracted by fears that Islamic State could regroup and gain in strength during the pandemic. The fear was already there, but as Islamic State is not bound by the same constraints as state actors under the COVID-19 crisis, it could capitalize on the distraction of regional security forces to present a greater threat. Such a development, in combination with the ongoing security challenges posed by Iranian proxies operating in Syria and Iraq, would hurt the ability of the United States to act in Syria.

Over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, Russia has managed to further several of its ongoing efforts in Syria, ranging from material support to the Syrian military to diplomatic support to Damascus, and even the further reduction of Iran's role within Syria. Russia has clearly sought to stabilize its ties with regional actors such as Turkey and Israel in order to secure the other gains that it has made with Damascus. Although Moscow intensified its contacts with the UAE during the Syrian-Turkish clashes of February and March, Russia clearly demonstrated that Ankara is a significant partner on most Syria-related affairs. In addition, Russia is not keen on developing similar tensions with Israel and has kept itself isolated, to the extent possible given Russia's significant role in Syria, from direct escalations between Israel and Iran within Syria. Iran's actions, in turn, have long been quietly met by Russia with various countermeasures due to the potential complications that Tehran could cause between Russia and these various regional actors. These countermeasures have included personnel transformations within the Syrian army, efforts to centralize control over proxy militias and restraining pro-Iranian groups in the southwest and northwest of Syria.

The Lebanese periodical *Al Modon* reported that Russian commanders in Syria decided to turn the COVID-19 epidemic in Iran to their benefit by starting to filter out pro-Iranian forces fighting on the side of the Syrian Arab Army. The Russian command allegedly imposed a rule requiring Syrian army formations loyal to Russia to be deployed separately from pro-Iranian forces. These precautions were officially introduced to prevent infection among soldiers who, in one way or another, may come into contact with the Iranian "Shiite international forces" or other local militias affiliated with Tehran.

1 Maher Nazeh, Thaier al-Sudani, and Ahmed Rasheed, "U.S.-Led Forces Depart Iraqi Military Base Near Mosul in Drawdown," U.S. News, March 26, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa/u-s-led-forces-depart-iraqi-military-base-near-mosul-in-drawdown-idUSKBN21D1UR>.

It should be noted that such isolation, if true, could be limited to select areas, involving certain formations, including the 5th Special Mission Forces Division, also known as “Tiger Forces,” under the command of Syrian Brig. Gen. Suhail al-Hassan and Russian special forces’ patronage, and brigades of the pro-Russian 5th Corps. It is widely known that numerous local militias affiliated with Iran, collectively called the Local Defence Forces, had been integrated into the regime’s army, and that a number of Shiite international forces, such as Liwa al-Imam Hussein (Lions of Hussein Brigade) and the Liwa Sayyaf al-Mahdi (Lions of the Warriors of the Mahdi Brigade) have been integrated into Syrian Maj. Gen. Maher al-Assad’s 4th Division.¹

Russia is using the current calm in Syria, derived from both the recent Idlib deal and the COVID-19 distraction, to consolidate its position. On May 29, 2020, President Vladimir Putin ordered Russia’s Defense and Foreign ministries to hold talks with Damascus over the issue of “transferring additional real estate and [adjacent] water areas” to Russia. Protocol №1 – the document that Moscow and Damascus should be discussing – is supposed to be an annex to the Russia-Syria agreement on the deployment of Russian air forces in Syria that Moscow and Damascus signed on August 26, 2015. The deal was amended on January 18, 2017 to have Syria, among other things, lease out the Hemeimeem air base, including real estate on its territory, to Russia for 49 years with an option to automatically extend the agreement for another 25 years unless one party informs the other via diplomatic channels at least one year in advance of its willingness to terminate the deal.

For now, it is unclear whether Moscow merely seeks to rent additional adjacent areas to improve its security systems or whether it is planning to develop comprehensive military infrastructure that could enable it to permanently project power into the broader Middle Eastern region. This would allow Moscow to support direct troop deployments if and when it needed to, and could support the permanent deployment of strategic weapons such as air defence and missile systems that would strengthen Russia’s overall military capabilities and avenues for intervention in the Middle East, including towards the Suez Canal as a naval “chokepoint.”

While Russia is currently struggling with the consequences of COVID-19 at home, its foreign policy projections suggest it is also bracing itself for the post-pandemic world.

Conclusion

A pandemic that begins in one country and spreads with great velocity around the world is the definition of a global challenge. It is also a perfect illustration of how the disruption of economies, social stability, perceptions and other elements of intrastate dynamics force their effects on foreign policy strategies and thus the realm of international relations.

“The fact that the political boundaries of sovereign states do not represent natural barriers to infectious agents or to harmful products underscores the need for interstate cooperation to address these global health issues,” Nakajima wrote in 1997.²

1 Anton Mardasov, “Is COVID-19 Changing Astana Allies’ Dynamics in Syria?” *Al-Monitor*, March 31, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/russia-iran-syria-turkey-coronavirus-subversion.html>.

2 Nakajima 1997, 319.

But in addition to the clear nature of COVID-19 as an international problem that individual states cannot tackle on their own, the particular dynamics revolving around the Syrian conflict show that it is also a significant driver of relations between states. While the global pandemic has not cancelled out the established interests of states, and perhaps has even added to them, the subtle reshuffling of the cards these states have been dealt has accelerated, decelerated or even spawned entirely new approaches to achieving those interests.

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Влияние распространения коронавируса на конфликт в Сирии

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассматриваются возможные варианты влияния пандемии COVID-19 на динамику сирийского конфликта, и вероятные изменения стратегий внешних держав-участников конфликта. В настоящей работе предпринята попытка предложить целостную картину влияния пандемии на отдельное государство в период острого конфликта через анализ ситуации на различных уровнях: на внутреннем, где COVID-19 истощает ресурсы вовлеченных игроков, и на международном, где региональные и глобальные державы, несмотря на пандемию, продолжают конкурировать друг с другом за отдельные ниши в Сирии. Вместе с этим, данное исследование выявило, что последствия COVID-19 уже сейчас предоставляют Дамаску возможности по расширению зоны контроля над пока еще занятыми оппозиционными силами территориями и также потенциально дают возможности для Москвы консолидировать собственные усилия по разрешению конфликта на выгодных для себя условиях. С другой стороны, обострение гуманитарной ситуации в стране создает условия для нормализации отношений Дамаска с международным сообществом.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

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