



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Coming Home to Roost: War Threatens to Spill Beyond Syria's Borders

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As [tens of thousands more refugees are shunted by Turkey toward Europe](#) and a new phase of the brutal Syrian war unfolds, Russia, Turkey, the EU, and the international community are being handed the bill for a flawed short-term approach to the nine-year conflict that lacked empathy for the millions of victims and was likely to magnify rather than resolve problems.

The failure of Western policymakers to adopt an approach that would have served Europe's longer term security interests in Syria and sought to end that country's nine years of suffering in ways that may have held out the promise of a sustainable resolution of the conflict is compounded by the failure to exploit what was always a fragile alliance between Russia and NATO-member Turkey.

With that alliance under strain, both in Syria, where Russia has [warned](#) that it cannot guarantee the safety of Turkish aircraft in Syrian airspace, and in Libya, where the two allies support opposing sides, multiple regional conflicts have begun to mesh.

Some analysts have suggested that Russia was [seeking](#) to enlist the support of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Syria so that it could dump Turkey with which it is on the brink of military blows. The two Gulf states oppose Turkish ambitions in the Middle East and beyond.

The analysts [point](#) to recent contacts between Emirati, Russian, and Syrian officials and the [establishment](#) of relations between Syria and Libya's UAE and Russian-backed rebel force, which is led by renegade commander Khalifa Haftar.

The various maneuvers constitute variations on a theme.

The international community, including Russia, did little in the early years of the war to stop militant groups and regional powers from contributing to the violence by exploiting Syria's power vacuum to their immediate advantage. That changed selectively when the Islamic State gained a territorial foothold in Syria and Iraq.

Similarly, much of the international community falsely assumed that a Syrian victory in Idlib, Syria's last rebel stronghold, would create a *fait accompli* that Turkey would accept and that would pave the way to an end to the war and reconstruction.

Neither Russia nor its detractors read the writing on Syria's walls because they failed to heed the widespread discontent seething on the ground—discontent they similarly missed elsewhere in the Middle East even as it produced a decade of revolution and brutal counterrevolution.

What started in 2011 as peaceful protests demanding reform led in Syria to a popular demand for the overthrow of Syrian president Bashar Assad, an effort pushed by militants and external powers. Nine years later, criticism of the regime is widespread among a population impoverished and traumatized by war.

Rather than creating an environment for reconciliation and reconstruction, the Russian-supported Syrian military has retaken territory from rebels by force or in negotiated handovers that have not been accompanied by a relieving of economic and social hardship. This approach has sparked a further cycle of intermittent [anti-government protests](#) and [stepped-up repression](#).

Much international criticism focuses on the Syrian government's failure to improve economic and living conditions for the people, but, as in the early days of the popular revolt, it shies away from calls for regime change.

It is highly improbable that a Russian-Syrian military victory would put Syria on a road toward peaceful resolution and recovery. This is highlighted by snap polling that [suggests](#) that less than 10% of the millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons would be willing to return to or remain in a country that continues to be ruled by Assad and his regime.

As a result, Russia and Assad appear to have adopted a scorched earth policy that emulates Russia's brutal crushing of rebellions in Chechnya in the 1990s.

"Russia realized that it cannot cement its military victories into permanent political gains through diplomacy within the projected remaining lifetime of the regime. Instead, it decided to employ the 'Grozny doctrine' of [complete annihilation](#) of all those who stand in the way of its strategic goals and bring the conflict to an end before the regime collapses," said Syrian activist Labib

Nahhas, referring to the Chechen capital that was virtually destroyed by Russian forces.

The approach violates international law in that it takes no heed of the consequences for innocent civilians in Idlib or the fact that many of those people, rather than supporting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an erstwhile Al Qaeda affiliate that controls part of the province, have in fact [repeatedly protested against it](#).

The approach could also potentially spark a renewed refugee crisis in Europe with Turkey no longer restraining fleeing Syrians and others from trying to cross its Greek and Bulgarian borders with the EU.

Russia would likely be happy to see a repeat of the 2015 refugee crisis that fueled support for far-right, anti-immigration, and nativist forces in Europe that are empathetic to Moscow's effort to weaken the trans-Atlantic alliance as well as the EU, with its adherence to Western values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Even with that being the case, Russian policy toward Idlib and the rest of Syria is likely to produce only problematic outcomes: ensuring total victory for Assad risks a break-up with Turkey, a key regional player, and forecloses chances for a sustainable resolution of the Syrian conflict that would allow for the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons.

An unsustainable alternative scenario would involve a Russian-Turkish agreement to cram three million refugees into a tiny slice of Idlib in what would amount to sub-human conditions. As noted by Nahhas, "The humanitarian catastrophe that is Idlib has shown that the lessons from the second world war still apply: appeasement of dictators who are willing to kill massive numbers of people will never work. If Europe fails to heed those lessons again, it will not only be Syrians who pay the price."

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