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SYRIAN DIPLOMACY RENEWED: FROM VIENNA TO RAQQA

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SUMMARY

- The Vienna Process represents a belated inclusive diplomacy, and is the only viable track towards a political settlement in Syria.
- De-escalating the broader war in Syria is a prerequisite for any effective campaign against Islamic State. No military strategy against the group that is detached from the wider Syria dynamics will be effective, as many of the key actors needed to defeat ISIS have other priorities.
- The challenges to diplomatic success are huge, but Europe should focus on pressing regional actors toward de-escalatory measures, alongside offering a political horizon that sketches the outlines of an eventual settlement. France and the UK need to push their allies towards more pragmatic positions.
- Europe should promote ideas for devolving political power in Syria both horizontally and vertically – from the presidency to a newly-formed government, and from Damascus to the regions – to help overcome the Assad impasse.
- Europeans should resist the temptation to see Syria as an opportunity to trap Russia in a military quagmire. A further spiral of violence will impact the EU's interests just as negatively as Moscow's.

After nearly five years of bloody conflict, the effects of the Syrian war are now being felt not only in the spread of violent instability in the broader region but across the world. While it is the Syrian people who have faced the most devastating consequences, the rising costs of the war have been felt in the recent wave of Islamic State (ISIS) attacks impacting the French, Russians, Turks, Lebanese, and Saudis, among others.

The last six months have been a wake-up call for Europeans in particular. The Syrian war is reshaping politics across the continent, as the response to a surge of Syrian refugees has called the European Union's *raison d'être* into question, and November's terror attacks in Paris mean that the conflict is now driving day-to-day security concerns in Europe.

A new diplomatic process, launched under US–Russian leadership, aims to chart a political path out of the mess. The immediate impetus for this return to politics was provided by Russia's military campaign in Syria. The October formation of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) (comprising 17 states, plus the United Nations, the EU, and the Arab League), and its first two meetings in Vienna, represent a belated but meaningful diplomatic drive to address the Syria crisis. It is the first time that all the key external actors, including Iran, have sat around the same negotiating table.

The group has got off to an auspicious start, with commitments on the outlines of a political process and a ceasefire. But the challenges are immense, and translating nascent political agreement in Vienna into progress on the

ground in Syria will be extremely challenging. The Turkish downing of a Russian fighter jet on 24 November indicates the risks of further international escalation, which could provoke an unravelling of the diplomatic process and again divert attention from the effort against ISIS.

Quite simply, de-escalating the broader war in Syria is a prerequisite for any effective campaign to counter ISIS and other violent extremists. While the war continues, too many of the actors needed for the struggle against ISIS are distracted at best, and often appear to have more pressing priorities. While not driving the key dynamics of the process, Europeans can and must assume a more central role. Europe has too much at stake to allow itself to be a marginal player, especially as its interests will not always align with those of other actors. The recent attacks in Paris have given France a unique platform, borne out by President François Hollande's new engagement with Presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin and other European leaders, as well as by the French leadership on UN Security Council Resolution 2249. This achieved a rare consensus among the council's five permanent members in calling for united action against ISIS.

But Paris and London – which is also looking to increase its activities against ISIS after the 13 November attacks – will be missing an opportunity if they focus narrowly on the military fight, including through air strikes in Syria. An ISIS-first military strategy will remain fatally detached from the broader dynamics feeding the group. What is needed is a Syria-first strategy.

A distinct and stepped-up European role should focus on pressing regional actors in particular towards immediate de-escalatory measures. This should include humanitarian access and a ceasefire implemented wherever possible and expanded over time, alongside advancing a political horizon sketching the outlines of an eventual settlement that can be used to bridge the fundamental differences between the parties.

Political progress between enough of the Syrian protagonists to make a difference will only be possible once external backers stop fuelling the conflict. Europe should do more to influence the calculations of those third parties – both old allies in the Gulf and Turkey, and Iran, with whom relations are being reset. France and the United Kingdom will have to get on board with a new politics aimed at softening up allies for necessary pragmatism, as opposed to indulging their maximalist refusal to compromise. EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, along with the Germans and Italians, should coordinate closely with France and the UK – who as UN Security Council members hold additional leverage – to advance a political plan that creatively moves beyond the binary choice of Bashar al-Assad: yes or no. By pushing ideas for devolving power both horizontally and vertically – from the presidency to a newly formed government and elected parliament, and from Damascus to the regions – Europeans can help

overcome this impasse, and devolution will also reflect Syrian realities on the ground.

Europeans should resist the temptation to see Syria as an opportunity to trap Russia in a military quagmire. If Moscow is willing to segue from securing the Assad regime to offering a genuine political process, then it should be seized upon. Paradoxically, Russian failure may not be conducive to subsequent de-escalation and political progress. Opposition ability to withstand Russian intervention could undermine its engagement in any political process, and cause Russia to engage in yet another cycle of escalation. And – equally hard for some to stomach – a counter-escalation and spiral of even worse violence will impact EU interests just as negatively as Moscow's. Europe should urgently step up efforts to ensure that the Turkey–Russia clash is contained, that escalation (particularly involving NATO) is avoided, and that the incident is not repeated.

Why now?

Renewed international diplomacy on Syria has been driven by four factors in particular. While the recent series of attacks by ISIS in Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, and – most significantly for Western actors – Paris has injected critical momentum into the talks, it was Russia's decision to initiate direct military intervention in Syria in September that counter-intuitively served to revive the prospect of a diplomatic push.

Russian intervention

Moscow's military intervention is a potentially pivotal development in the conflict, shifting the expectations of the various actors in a manner that could prise open a window of political opportunity. On the one hand, Russia's military intervention has sent a clear message that the Assad regime will not be militarily defeated. This has largely laid to rest the notion entertained by some allies of the opposition that a combination of more closely allied rebel forces – the Army of Conquest coalition (Jaish al-Fatah) in the north and the Southern Front, the former of which, in particular, has made significant battlefield advances in recent months – could succeed in toppling the regime. While efforts are underway by opposition allies to limit Russian military effectiveness and blunt the advances of pro-Assad forces, notably through the provision of significant quantities of TOW anti-tank missiles and other arms, this represents a largely defensive response.¹ The defining reality following Moscow's deployment is the continued immovability of the Assad regime.

At the same time, Russian intervention has held out the possibility of renewed vigour in political efforts. Russia's increased ownership of the regime's defence suggests the prospect of increased Russian leverage over Assad that could bring real deliverables to the negotiating table. Putin

¹ Adam Entous, "U.S., allies to boost aid to Syria rebels", the *Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 2015, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-allies-to-boost-aid-to-syria-rebels-1446682624>.

is unlikely to offer concessions from a position of weakness but he is aware of the risks of prolonged and over-extended military engagement in Syria, with the ghost of Russia's exhausting 1980s Afghanistan campaign hovering.

Since the start of direct Russian air strikes in Syria, Putin has already brought Assad to Moscow (the first time Assad had left Syria during the course of the conflict) and swiftly proclaimed his aim of moving towards a new political process. Although there is a concern that Russia's intervention could secure the regime a bargaining position so strong that Western and regional actors allied to the opposition could face a diktat rather than a negotiation, the US in particular has moved to test the possibility of a new political opening.

Initially, US–Russian re-engagement on Syria was narrowly focused on de-confliction of fighter jets flying combat missions over the country. But a new and much broader political dialogue is now in play with the Vienna Process. It started in a quartet format of the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and was subsequently expanded to 17 states, crucially including Iran, as well as the UN, the EU, and the Arab League.² This far larger grouping, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), has met on two occasions, producing a more substantial statement after the second, on 14 November, with the outlines of a roadmap and timetable for progress towards a ceasefire and political process.³

While some in the US, Europe, and the region want to make Moscow hurt in Syria, both Western and regional actors have been keen to explore the extent to which increased Russian skin in the game could be a useful tool to achieve political transition goals vis-à-vis Assad that have been elusive on the battlefield. The decision by regional backers of the opposition (notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but also Qatar) to attend the Vienna talks – and to accept the participation of Iran – can be read as a genuine desire to test the idea of new openings, as well as a result of US pressure.

Fears of spillover

Meanwhile, for Western states in particular, this potential political opening has come at a time when existing strategies in Syria are increasingly questioned in light of growing concerns about the dangerous spillover of the conflict – a perception dramatically heightened by the 13 November Paris attacks. Over the past six months there has been a gradually mounting Western consensus that the desire to see the back of Assad should not translate into victory for the more extreme opposition forces that look better positioned to fill the vacuum.⁴ These fears attach mostly to ISIS, which remains entrenched in parts of the north and east of the country, but also to the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, which, as part of the

² The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) comprises the Arab League, China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States.

³ "Statement of the International Syria Support Group", 14 November 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249511.htm> (hereafter, the Statement of the International Syria Support Group).

⁴ Author interview with European diplomat, 7 July 2015.

Army of Conquest coalition, has been seizing new ground in the north-west. Both have already been designated as terror groups by the UN, and there were fears that one of them could step in if regime power collapsed in Damascus, even if they are not currently dominant actors in the south. That was a key motivation for Western states and Jordan placing restrictions on the Southern Front as it attempted to move closer to the capital.⁵

There is a consensus that much of the old Syrian state structures should remain intact, avoiding the de-Baathification mistakes of the Iraq war. How far this should go is the subject of intense debate in the West. Some Europeans are openly revisiting the "Assad must go" mantra, while others have dropped his removal as a precondition for a political process, while still insisting on a clear timetable for a post-Assad leadership transition.⁶ In short, pragmatism is back on the menu.

In this context, Western states have actively sought to encourage a new political process as a means to ensure some semblance of state and institutional continuity. They aim to prevent a post-Assad extremist surge and enable a refocusing of efforts on ISIS rather than the entirety of the Syrian conflict and the competing claims of the various supposedly anti-ISIS actors (a broad camp which spans just about everyone but includes many for whom there are other, more pressing, priorities).

The refugee crisis

For European states, the Syria crisis is also seen through the lens of the refugee surge of summer 2015. Addressing that challenge has created unprecedented fissures within the EU, the reassertion of borders that had almost been erased, and a deep anxiety over the entire future of the European project, now compounded by a securitisation of the refugee issue after the Paris attacks and a growing Islamophobic backlash. In October 2015, when the Vienna talks began, the monthly number of refugees entering Europe, 218,394, was roughly equivalent to the total that entered over the whole of 2014, and more than 50 percent of these were Syrians.⁷ This dynamic has played a critical role in refocusing attention on the need to address the core political driver of the refugee flow – the Syria conflict itself.

The Iran nuclear deal

Finally, the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran on 14 July paved the way for expanded engagement with Tehran beyond the nuclear file, and a flurry of diplomatic exchanges – especially European – with the country. That opening has led to Iran's participation in the ISSG.

⁵ Author interview with European and Arab diplomats, October 2015.

⁶ See, for instance, Kylie Maclellan and William James, "UK softens tone against Syria's Assad, moots transition period", *Reuters*, 9 September 2015, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/09/09/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-hammond-idUKKCN0R91SF20150909>.

⁷ Tom Miles and Marina Depetris, "October's migrant, refugee flow to Europe roughly matched whole of 2014", *Reuters*, 2 November 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/02/us-europe-migrants-un-idUSKCN0SR15P20151102#Wlt4vyl3vJPArwFY.97>.

It has long been recognised that Iran's active role on the ground in Syria and potential leverage with the Assad government make it a critical actor to engage, but the West's nuclear preoccupation and concern at the risk of trade-offs between the files, or at least the suspicion thereof, as well as the domestic politics of the issue in Washington and Tehran, made this a non-starter. The deal has opened a new space, and there is some hope for a more constructive turn on regional matters.⁸ Importantly, Iran's participation in Vienna set the scene for the first truly inclusive international talks on Syria, guaranteed by Obama's entreaties to King Salman of Saudi Arabia to ensure that the kingdom also joined the talks, despite its fierce hostility towards any role for Tehran.

Driven by these factors, the US and Russian foreign ministers, John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov, succeeded in creating the ISSG and launching the Vienna Process. For the moment, Syrian parties have not been invited to participate, despite a shared commitment to a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned" process. The external actors consider, probably correctly, that more groundwork will be needed to make a meaningful intra-Syrian dialogue possible. Part of the difficulty lies in the external players, who have significant leverage over the multiple warring parties and have continued to pull in such different directions. Saudi Arabia has taken on the role of convening the opposition, with preparatory meetings planned in Riyadh for December. For the ISSG to make progress, that corner will have to be turned.

Progress in Vienna

After two sessions of the ISSG there have already been a number of notable results – beyond simply bringing the group together, which is an achievement in itself. Following the second session, the parties agreed a timeline aimed at ending the violence and initiating a political process towards a transition,⁹ including:

- A ceasefire and new monitoring mission to be backed by a UN Security Council resolution (which would not apply to ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other groups subsequently designated as terrorists)
- Expedited humanitarian access
- Opposition–government talks to begin by 1 January
- A new credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian government within a period of six months, and a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution
- Free, UN-backed elections after 18 months, in which all Syrians, including refugees outside the country, are able to vote

At face value, the agreement on these principles is remarkable progress. It represents for the first time a tangible plan with a specific dateline that fleshes out important elements of the much-disputed Geneva communiqué of July 2012, which is still the reference point but has largely been a dead letter for

over three years of horrendous conflict.

The external powers, especially the Western non-regionals, but potentially Russia too, given the downing of its plane in Egypt, are now more adamant about forging ahead with some form of progress on the Syria crisis so that all actors can focus their efforts more fully on the threat from ISIS, which, while not the biggest threat to Syrians themselves or to the Assad regime, is clearly emerging as the most significant threat facing extra-regional powers from the conflict.

However, the progress made in formulating a text that can sustain buy-in from all sides will not easily translate into either a changed reality on the ground or continued consensus as the details of the political roadmap are addressed – certainly when the Syrian parties themselves are added to the mix and expected to take increased ownership of the process. For now, all sides see the ISSG as, if not optimal to realising their respective goals, then at least not antithetical to them. The most contentious issues, which most risk breaking the fragile unity, have been skirted around thus far. These include, most obviously, the fate of Assad and his prospective candidacy in future elections, as well as details of ceasefires, elections, and other aspects of the transition, and the question of which groups will be designated as terrorists and so remain military targets and ineligible to participate in any process.

Challenges to the Vienna Process

Despite the surge of diplomatic activity, these sticking points could still represent insurmountable hurdles, and the prospect of meaningful short-term success emerging out of the Vienna Process remains precarious. To best advance the ISSG process it should be pursued with full awareness of the key dilemmas, driven by the sharply contrasting interests of internal and external actors that cut through the talks.

The Assad dilemma

The fundamental question of Assad's fate, which has bedevilled Syria talks for years, has not gone away. If anything, intensified internal and external polarisation after so many years of conflict makes his position ever-more central to both sides, with victory or defeat now measured almost exclusively by whether Assad stays or goes. The issue is what Assad's leadership symbolises, not simply how it relates to wider facts on the ground or even the degree of regime control over the country. For the opposition, as well as for Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, Assad's departure is a key symbolic and practical component of any acceptable political deal. Western states, including nearly all European states, have, occasionally at least, embraced a more pragmatic line over recent months, but still talk about his departure as a necessary endgame for any transitional process, as does the US. Critically, though, they recognise that even if they were to embrace a less demanding position, they would currently be unable to deliver their allies on the ground or in the region under such an arrangement.¹⁰

⁸ Author interviews with European diplomats, 2015.

⁹ See the Statement of the International Syria Support Group.

¹⁰ Author interview with European diplomat, 11 November 2015.

For the regime and its internal and external backers, Assad is the glue holding their immediate interests together. Many, probably correctly given the degree of on-the-ground polarisation, no longer believe that an immediate transition away from Assad could be accompanied by sufficient guarantees to protect their interests moving forward, whether in terms of holding the state together, protecting Alawites and others from reprisals, or maintaining Iran's access to Hezbollah in Lebanon. While many of the regime's own supporters take issue with how Assad has managed the conflict, they now perceive their fates as closely tied to his, given their assessment that nothing can be guaranteed post-Assad, whatever may be promised at the outset.

Tehran often suggests that it is not tied to Assad personally, and in fact may not be over the long run. In the context of the Vienna talks it clearly remains fearful that any agreement on a short-term transition away from Assad would open the door to a wider systemic change that would eventually, given the majority-Sunni demographic realities of Syria, hurt its position.

Some Western and regional parties perceive a certain flexibility in Russia's position, considering it to be something of a wildcard.¹¹ Moscow's intervention has clearly been guided by a desire to support the Assad government and push back against both ISIS and non-ISIS forces (predominantly the latter) gaining ground on the government's position in core regions of Syria, as well as a longer-term principled focus on ensuring that what plays out in Syria lends no succour to the notion of externally driven regime change. Despite this, and Russia's continued position that Assad must figure in the transition, there is speculation that it may now be more willing to discuss a potential post-Assad scenario. This uncertainty as to Russia's bottom line, particularly if a process can be advanced which has the appearance of a locally owned transition, where Russia could be seen as one of the external guarantors, is one of the key elements now being tested by the ISSG talks. This being said, the history of nearly five years of conflict and Russian declarations that Assad remains central to holding the state together (and that without him collapse becomes almost inevitable) suggests the need for a decidedly cautious interpretation of any private Russian position that differs from their ongoing display of public support for Assad.

There may be discontinuities between the Russian and Iranian positions that could be leveraged towards a settlement. The two states are currently tactically aligned in terms of their military support for Assad, but could diverge over the longer-term direction of the country. For Russia, the focus is on the state and its structures; securing its interests, including a direct foothold in the region; as well as a counter-terror concern that has no doubt been magnified by the downing of a Russian Metrojet airliner over Sinai. Non-state actors do not gel neatly with the

Russian *modus operandi*. Iran, as it has demonstrated elsewhere in the region, including in Lebanon, is more willing to work through non-state actors and militias, which are seen as an acceptable fallback option for guaranteeing Iranian interests. In Syria this could involve a pro-Iranian armed faction guaranteeing supply routes to Hezbollah in Lebanon¹² – a model that obviously comes at the expense of the functioning of a strong central state. Russia and Iran, for instance, appear to be out of step with regard to the National Defence Forces, the pro-government militia – Russia has called for its incorporation into the Syrian army, but Iran, which wields considerable influence over the body, wants to maintain it as an independent force.¹³ These divergences could become moot as the Vienna Process moves forward, but could also have important ramifications for longer-term Russian and Iranian positions towards the state and Assad. In the meantime, Western speculation about the possibility of playing Iran and Russia off against each other is tenuously grounded. Although the details of Putin's tête-à-tête with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran on 23 November are not known, the symbolism of that meeting alone sends a powerful signal.

Whichever way this plays out – and Russia's position may well not be fixed but calibrated to developments on the ground – it would be wrong to assume that Moscow necessarily has the capacity to deliver regime supporters as well as Iran on its chosen position.

The opposition dilemma

The reality is that there is no agreement on who constitutes the legitimate opposition that should be engaged in negotiations with the regime, and indeed that can be entrusted with Syria's future. The regime and its backers refuse to engage with a broad swathe of the opposition, who they categorise as terrorists. Political dialogue excluding these groups is an unsellable proposition to the opposition's backers, and would be irrelevant to securing change on the ground, where armed groups thus labelled control large and intermingled parts of Syria.

Of at least equal significance are the differences within the opposition and its backers, which have throughout this conflict severely complicated the task of organising a coherent, united, and representative alternative to Assad – and continue to do so. Moving beyond the reality that the opposition now numbers hundreds of different groups riven with deep fissures, this question is even more clouded from a Western perspective by the fact that many of those who may merit a place at the table by virtue of their power on the ground hold ideological positions deeply at odds with the West's proclaimed vision for a future Syria. While it is wrong to paint the political opposition at large as extremist, there is a distinction when it comes to the armed and fighting opposition. The Southern Front in

¹² See Ellie Geranmayeh, "Iran hedges its bets in Syria", *Al Monitor*, 20 November 2015, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-syria-strategy-hedging-national-defense-force>.

¹³ Author interview with Arab diplomat, 20 November 2015.

¹¹ Author interview with European diplomat, 11 November 2015.

particular represents a comparatively moderate force, as do a scattering of groups across the northern front, but the main non-terror-listed groups today – whether it be Ahrar al-Sham, which dominates the Army of Conquest coalition with Jabhat al-Nusra, or Jaish al-Islam in Damascus – espouse a strongly Salafist ideology with a strictly sectarian vision of an Islamist Syria, and, in the case of Ahrar and others, have fought in alliances alongside al-Qaeda to boot.

Even as it negotiates with the regime's backers, the West is simultaneously wrestling internally and with its regional allies on these questions, and confronting the dilemma of how to bridge the gap between the pragmatic necessity of including Syria's key rebel factions in talks, and the concern over their extremist positions and likely unwillingness to accept any realistically attainable compromise. It is notable that some of the West's other regional allies, such as Jordan and Egypt, have for their own reasons taken a firm line, including against these non-listed groups.

Russia may now cleverly be playing off this dynamic, thrusting the question of identifying the legitimate opposition to the forefront of talks. The strategy's effectiveness stems from its firm roots in reality. The Syrian armed opposition's greatest weakness over the years of conflict has been its failure to present a coherent and inclusive vision for a post-Assad Syria (there have been efforts, often supported by external players, to support moderate intra-opposition platforms, but none of the more palatable have to date secured appreciable leverage). Given the strong extremist presence on the ground, this is one of the key reasons why the West is trying to tread such a careful balance between regime change and state continuity, fearful that too abrupt a change will empower ultimately hostile forces, susceptible to further radicalisation and unlikely to steer Syria in the direction that fits the West's interests. It is a dilemma exacerbated by additional levels of opposition incoherence, sometimes regional or ethnic (notably disagreements over the Kurdish role in a future Syria) as well as ideological, but also the simple clash of personal ambitions, given the dynamics of the war and its creation of warrior fiefdoms.

The regional war dilemma

Syria is just one theatre in a broader regional conflict, most notably between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and current intensification elsewhere makes the prospect of progress in Syria more difficult. On the Saudi front, the Iranian nuclear deal has heightened fears that an end to international sanctions will give Iran new financial resources to deploy in this regional stand-off, and specifically to pass on to allied militia and its own forces. This is despite Saudi Arabia vastly outspending Iran on arms purchases and having a far more sophisticated and advanced military capacity, at least in terms of hardware, if not in terms of battle-hardened forces.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Anthony H. Cordesman, "Military spending and arms sales in the Gulf", Center for Strategic & International Studies, 28 April 2015, available at <http://csis.org/publication/military-spending-and-arms-sales-gulf>.

In Riyadh, the Saudi-led war in Yemen is in large part viewed through the lens of competition with Iran. The kingdom is intent on pushing back any perceived Iranian influence on its southern border, even though this is widely considered to be exaggerated. In so doing, Riyadh has locked itself into a costly and potentially long-lasting conflict that may only serve to harden its unwillingness to compromise with Iran regionally. While there have been some private hints that Saudi Arabia might be willing to dampen ambitions in Syria in exchange for progress on Yemen – with Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the king's son and deputy crown prince, allegedly discussing something along these lines with the Russians¹⁵ – this track, effectively that of a wider regional deal, remains unexplored, and it is hard to imagine the Syria–Yemen trade-off being achievable in the real world. Beyond this hint, Riyadh has shown no signs of readiness to backtrack from or triangulate its Syria position.

If anything, Riyadh believes it can continue to bleed Iran in Syria at relatively low cost to itself by fuelling the anti-Assad struggle, and thus gain leverage in the regional struggle. Iran also views the conflict as the frontline of a broader battle that will eventually engulf critical allies such as Hezbollah if it is defeated in Syria. It remains invested at a far more costly level than Saudi Arabia, in terms of both finances (due to its more limited resources) and manpower. Given the almost existential lens driving the fight, Iran is likely to maintain this commitment short of a deal that sufficiently secures its interests.

The ground disconnect dilemma

Above all, the ISSG process ultimately has to be more connected to realities on the ground. It is the ground forces and their relative fortunes which continue to shape the politics, more than vice versa. This is not just a question of the lack of Syrian representation at the talks, which is critical and without which meaningful progress will remain elusive – and, in the end, selling any deal reached by the ISSG to the Syrian parties will be as difficult, if not more so, than actually securing external buy-in.

The various external parties are seeking to strengthen the positions of their allies on the ground in order to increase their negotiating strength – and until there is greater clarity on this front, whether in terms of one side gaining the upper hand or stalemate prevailing, none of the parties are likely to be willing to commit to new or more flexible positions. In essence, the upsides of Vienna – including renewed US–Russia cooperation and the opening of a Saudi–Iranian dialogue – run in direct contradiction to the facts on the ground, where US–Russian priorities remain more unaligned than aligned, and where Saudi Arabia and Iran are battling it out more viciously than ever, with Turkey acting increasingly as a wildcard threat to the talks. Russian intervention has been widely interpreted as an attempt to

¹⁵ Author interview with European diplomat, 27 October 2015.

guarantee and extend the regime's position to the degree that it can dictate the peace terms; the opposition backers' counter-escalation in terms of renewed military support for rebels is clearly intended not only to ensure that Russia cannot secure this intended position, but also to deal Moscow a bloody nose and push Putin towards wanting out at any cost. The Ukraine-driven dimension of a broader return to more direct Western–Russian confrontation also of course lurks in the background, fuelling mutual suspicion, adding domestic political constraints in some key quarters, and encouraging the Syria conflict to be viewed more through the lens of global great power geopolitics.

Absent greater clarity on the ground, or a willingness to suspend the pursuit of an improved position on the ground accompanied by the ability to create sufficient coalescence of interests (at least on the US–Russia–Europe front), talks will look more like shadowboxing than deal-making. The local actors are far less likely to make compromises if external support continues to push conflict and maximalism, and to prevent war fatigue and asset depletion from kicking in. Genuine political progress between enough of the Syrian protagonists is only likely to be possible once the external backers stop fuelling the conflict. Given that the ISSG brings together those external backers, that is its key challenge – and that is what Europeans should take the lead on pushing.

Ground scenarios

Russia's intervention is now the key variable on the ground in Syria. Less than two months into Russia's campaign, results are mixed – there have been no great successes, as regime ground troops have been insufficiently capable of taking advantage of their new air cover, particularly in the context of enhanced rebel capabilities, though there have been some advances (notably seizing back the Kweyris military airbase east of Aleppo and other towns to the south of the city). It is still early days, however, and it would be wise not to draw too hasty a conclusion about the impact that Russia will have in shaping the battlefield trajectory.

Broadly speaking, there are three different scenarios that could emerge, based on the underlying assumption that Russian intent is to secure the regime's position by pushing back and retaking areas from rebels who threaten it most, whether or not that is ISIS – and it often is not.

However Russian intervention does play out, it is clear that the longer it goes on the more of a radicalising impact it will have on what is left of the opposition. It will also raise the risk of some form of hot conflict with regional backers of the opposition, as seen in Turkey's shooting down of the Russian jet.

Decisive shift in favour of the regime

In this scenario, Russia's intervention helps to decisively shift the nationwide military momentum in the regime's

favour, including by pushing back the Army of Conquest in Idlib and retaking Aleppo. Russian-backed regime advances along these lines would deal a definitive blow to the armed opposition in terms of further ambitions to conquer Syria or significant parts thereof. While the opposition would survive in some areas, potentially including the south, the regime would emerge in a position of ascendancy unprecedented since the conflict began, and would be more able to set the terms of any political process.

Securing regime control over core Syria

In this scenario, Russian success is more limited but still significant, helping the regime to consolidate its control over core Syria, from Damascus through the central cities of Homs and Hama and the coastal cities, but excluding Aleppo. Due in large part to the weakness of regime forces and counter-escalation on behalf of the opposition, efforts to recapture territory beyond these areas meet with failure. The opposition remains effective as a fighting force and entrenched in significant parts of the country including the south and north-west. The war slips back into a familiar pattern of insignificant advances on either side, with whatever party is on the offensive in any particular area achieving only limited returns.

The political impact of this scenario would be less clear-cut. On the one hand, it would guarantee the position of the regime, and potentially of Assad himself, in the core and more useful areas of the country, including Damascus. In this context, negotiations would have to accept the immovability of Assad, at least in the medium term, and any meaningful political process would have to include an acknowledgment of the regime's hold on key areas. The opposition, in this scenario, would continue to be a significant actor to be factored in on the ground and in any political process, and would continue to exact a price from government forces and their backers in holding key territory. While Assad's immediate position would probably withstand negotiations, and the regime would hold key cards, meaningful political compromises would still be needed to reach any kind of settlement. However, the opposition might in this scenario assume that long-term trends still favoured them, especially if they were still being given sufficient external support, given the Assad regime's weakness in manpower. In other words, if outside assistance continues to allow them to sustain the war, then they would be likely to hold out for unrealistic negotiating goals, blocking ISSG progress.

Stalemate

In this scenario, counter-escalation on the part of the opposition allows them to take the fight to the regime and to the Russians, ensuring a maintenance of the status quo ante or even a further escalation and expansion of the conflict – a patchwork of conflict zones across the country where neither side is able to gain the ascendancy – which could have the impact of drawing Russia deeper into the conflict.

This could in turn result in Russian successes on behalf of the regime (extensive, as in scenario 1, or more limited, as in scenario 2) or bog the country down in a more costly, long-term mess akin to Afghanistan, which it is widely assumed Putin wants to avoid. The extent of potential rebel gains and the likelihood of a Russian quagmire is limited by well-placed Western caution over weapons provided to rebels – including a strict US veto on the provision of MANPADS (portable surface-to-air missiles)¹⁶ – as well as by continued rebel infighting and extremism that fuels Western angst, and the military ineffectiveness of the opposition. Another factor is the reality that Putin may simply decide not to escalate Russian intervention to the point where being bogged down is a possibility. In the short to medium term, a cycle of escalation and counter-escalation only worsens the suffering of Syrians, as well as generating further refugee flows.

The impact of this scenario on the political process is the subject of much conjecture – some opposition supporters hope that a Russian setback would force Moscow to come to the table and offer up more meaningful compromises. Opposition ability to withstand Russian intervention could also feed a fresh belief on the opposition side that victory is in sight, undermining opposition engagement in any political process. It might also cause the Russians and Iranians to double down and engage in yet another cycle of escalation, rather than accept the possibility of opposition victory. It is the scenario least propitious to advancing a settlement in the near term, and most likely to cause greater devastation and displacement.

More likely than anything is that the conflict would retain the dynamics currently on display, with insufficient fatigue or perceived necessity to pursue serious de-escalation and talks (particularly given the ongoing perception on both sides that a game-changing element in their favour is a possibility, with the prospect of US willingness to deploy more heavily under a new president after January 2017 featuring prominently for the opposition).

Of these, only scenario 1 or something on the border between 1 and 2 would be enough of a game-changer to potentially hasten a settlement. The prospects of scenario 1 are questionable given realities on the ground, notably the commitment of the opposition's main backers to ensuring that it does not occur. Scenario 2 could serve to clarify the lines of control between regime and opposition areas and shape the outlines of a political process, especially if the external backers refuse to enable the warring parties to continue the pursuit of scenarios 1 or 3. Scenario 3, which is unlikely, would probably create a violent backlash on the ground rather than advancing the political process.

The next phase will require the West to carefully calibrate its response to Russia's moves – for which there is no exact science. For Russia, the securing of sufficient regime stability is a likely prerequisite for political progress. So too

will be an appreciation of when further Russian military action risks the kind of mission creep that presages a drawn-out, exhausting campaign in which the law of diminishing returns prevails. For Europe and the US, a Russian bloody nose in Syria is not an optimal outcome.

Where next for the Vienna Process?

Despite the clear challenges to the process there remains considerable value in pursuing existing ISSG progress to the maximum, and seeking to use it as a platform for more short-term openings and the basis of a longer-term political horizon. From the US perspective, there should be an added element of urgency – as the presidential election approaches, current US government positions may have less traction – and that should also be a concern for Europeans in need of a shorter-term breakthrough. All the European parties should be getting more actively behind the underlying logic of Vienna – inevitably one that replaces maximalism with compromise, predicated on pressing rather than indulging reluctant regional allies. Even if the ISSG process does not play out according to the transition timetable outlined on 14 November and takes longer to bear fruit, it should be doggedly pushed, sustained as necessary, and accelerated wherever possible.

The ISSG draws together the two most important tracks that will eventually have to be harnessed if there is to be any progress in getting Syrian parties to take ownership of a meaningful political transition: that of Russian–US cooperation, which provides the critically needed international driving force for a political process, and regional dialogue, notably Iranian–Saudi, which is critical to de-escalating the intense regional proxy war unfolding in Syria.

In this context the immediate aims of the Vienna Process should be twofold:

1) To deliver at least some tangible results on the ground. This will be necessary to avoid continued escalation, including in terms of yet more dead and displaced people, and to sustain the process itself. This should include advancing de-escalation in fighting, and advancing the goal of a full ceasefire via the ongoing, gradual delineation of zones where hostilities would cease, as well as advancing urgently needed humanitarian access.

2) To develop the longer-term political horizon sketched out in the 14 November ISSG Joint Statement, which can also be used as a vehicle to ensure that the different sides see it as being in their interest to remain part of the process, and to slowly narrow differences until enough commonality can be built around an endgame.

In terms of the first of these aims, the ISSG represents a much-needed opportunity for deliverables that can alleviate the immediate situation on the ground – results of this kind will be needed to safeguard and justify an ongoing process. Having bought into the Vienna Process, including

¹⁶ Author interview with US official, 20 November 2015.

the 14 November statement, the parties now have a certain pressure to deliver results, especially if they are codified in a UNSC resolution. Their respective leverage should be deployed on the competing warring parties towards that end, while grandstanding at the UN to embarrass fellow permanent Security Council members should be avoided. To wit, Russia and Iran should be working with the government to deliver on its agreed elements, while Western states do the same with the pro-opposition regional actors, and both work with the opposition itself.

In this light, the immediate objectives should be securing ceasefires, even if these are initially geographically limited; increasing humanitarian aid; and ending wider offensive operations, particularly the use of indiscriminate weapons in civilian areas.

The ISSG statement commits group members to “support and work to implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria to come into effect as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards the transition”.¹⁷ The definition of what constitutes “initial steps” will inevitably be the subject of intense debate. Europeans should develop a common position that errs towards a more minimalist definition, and work to promote this interpretation and hence the ceasefire itself with other ISSG members and with regional allies. Given that such an approach will inevitably be decried by some (whose buy-in is needed) as acquiescence to and re-legitimation of the regime, it will have to be combined with giving increasing meaning to the prospect of a longer-term political process – as the ISSG has started to map out.

From a Russian and Iranian perspective, the immediate benefits of buying into this process will include the sense that opposition backers are recognising the legitimacy both of the government and its international backers. For Russia, this is important to address the isolation that has followed its activities in Ukraine and cement the notion that any solution has to run through Moscow. But it also offers a means to some short-term relief – particularly a ceasefire – which would help them manage the manpower and financial pressure of supporting the regime, as well as securing Assad’s de facto control over core areas of the country. It is notable that Iran, which is simultaneously waging an intense battle in Iraq, and which is increasingly overstretched, alongside its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, has been one of the strongest supporters of the ceasefire proposal during the talks.¹⁸ Moving forward, both Russia and Iran appear to believe that elections will favour the state apparatus, which may or may not include Assad, and so their interests. Nor would either be unfavourably disposed to a track that allows for greater common focus on ISIS, which has threatened them both, whether in the form of downed airplanes or the situation in Iraq.

On the other side of the equation, Europe and the West

have the responsibility of convincing their partners that this is the best option available, and that it offers a means of eventually securing a realistic package of reforms. In many respects the language from Vienna already offers them this – setting out the timetable for a new government and internationally supervised elections. Europe should forcibly argue this position, making the case that a political process locks Assad and his backers into a process that they cannot exclusively dictate. In this context the aim of freezing the conflict in different ways – including by recognising regime control over large areas of the country – should not be framed as a long-term political concession, but as a strategy aimed at allowing a meaningful conversation about transition, which cannot take place so long as the trajectory remains one of continued escalation.

This will involve elaborating on what the political track will look like, and Europeans can take a lead in developing this roadmap. While it will likely involve ambiguity on the question of Assad’s future role, there are also creative options for moving beyond the binary choice on Assad and the almost fetishisation of his person. A strong push for a political process which devolves power both horizontally and vertically could make the issue of the president less important. Power can be devolved from the presidency to a government and newly elected parliament, and from Damascus to the regions and localities. A geographical devolution of power would effectively formalise non-regime control over parts of the country already under opposition control. External actors could act as some form of guarantor of both the ceasefires and devolved powers in certain parts of the country.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that power has already been effectively diffused away from the centre. Any political process solely framed on a national-level approach with a recentralisation of power is likely to meet with rapid failure, even if Assad is out of the equation. A smarter bet for stabilising any transition would be to draw local powerbrokers into the equation by institutionalising a degree of local governance, including one based on current realities on the ground, dependent on the commitment of local actors to the broader principles guiding the political process. While some fear this would be a prelude to fragmentation and breakup, it may in fact represent the opposite – the most effective means for preserving a coherent Syrian state.

Recommendations for Europe

Europe has too much at stake to be a bit-part player in the ISSG process or to contract out its vital interests. The attacks in Paris brought that home in the most tragic of ways. Until now, however, Europeans have not been part of the core group driving the Vienna meetings; despite lobbying for a seat at the table they were excluded from the pre-Vienna quartet made up of the US, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ That reflects a reality that cannot be ignored – the US–Russia dynamic is *the* core driver of the current political opening, and Europeans’ leverage over that and the key

¹⁷ See the Statement of the International Syria Support Group.

¹⁸ Author interview with European and Arab diplomats, November 2015.

¹⁹ Author interview with European diplomat, 22 October 2015.

regional players, notably Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, has its limitations. Europeans will not play a helpful role if their interventions serve to stiffen the resolve of regional allies against the compromises that will be necessary for progress rather than the opposite – France in particular should consider revisiting its position in this regard.

Of the 20 parties in the room in Vienna, five were European (France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the EU itself) and their leverage is not negligible. Where distinct European interests are at stake – as they are in this context, given the geographical proximity and the manner in which refugee numbers and terror attacks affect the EU – a distinct and stepped-up European role is called for. France in particular has, at least for a time, a unique platform from which to address the world, which Hollande is already deploying through stepped-up diplomacy with Obama and Putin and the ownership of an anti-ISIS Security Council resolution.

While France has assumed this prominent role in the post-Paris environment, a more sustainable European position of strength that aims to safeguard European interests within the ISSG will require a greater degree of unity and purpose behind the contours of the approach outlined above. It will also require the willingness to deploy respective and common influence in practical ways, including:

At the UN

The ISSG has reinvigorated the central role of UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, particularly in terms of mediating concurrent intra-Syrian talks that are meant to be initiated by 1 January. Europe should continue to provide strong support for the de Mistura mission, particularly in relation to humanitarian access, the pursuit of a ceasefire, and a monitoring mission, providing expertise as well as political and diplomatic support. France and the UK should build in the Security Council on the progress made in Resolution 2249 to work on codifying further progress made in the ISSG talks, and avoid a return to using the UNSC for grandstanding.

With the US and Russia

Building on Hollande's visits to Washington and Moscow, European ISSG members should promote the above line with both the US and Russia – giving prominence to the push for immediate humanitarian access as a deliverable at the next ISSG gathering, something that can no longer be held hostage to calculations of who might benefit from the provision of aid. Europeans should press both Washington and Moscow not to make Syria the arena for playing out renewed mutual mistrust – this could result in further escalation and prolong the time it takes to reach a settlement – for which Europe will pay a high price.

It needs to be acknowledged that there is not a perfect alignment of US and European interests in Syria – if Russia bleeds and all sides escalate, then it would be a manageable if undesirable scenario for the faraway US, but for Europe

it would mean more immediate pressures in terms of refugees, strains on European coherence, and the threat of terrorism. That divergence should guide both a concerted European push and a European willingness to be tougher on recalcitrant allies and more willing to compromise with erstwhile foes if they can deliver in an ISSG context.

With Iran

European members of the ISSG should tap into the privileged access relationship that Europe has developed with Iran, while avoiding a US/Gulf–Europe/Iran divide. Given both US and Iranian domestic politics, Washington will remain constrained in its dealings with Tehran in ways that Europe is not. Europeans already have a density of interaction with Iran, with Brussels in a strong position (Mogherini and Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs Helga Schmid have developed strong working relations with Tehran), and there should be intra-European coordination to ensure consistency of message and maximising of effect.

Europe will need to understand Iran's baseline in Syria, particularly continued access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, if there is to be hope of Iran pushing for the commitments from the regime that are needed to make progress. While member states have legitimate concerns about Hezbollah, the Syrian theatre should not now be seen as a means to squeeze the Iranian channel of support, given the clear need to secure Tehran's constructive participation in the ISSG process.

There has been a significant improvement in ties with Tehran since the nuclear deal, but Europe should make Iran aware that a more meaningful and sustained shift of relations will also be dependent on it embracing a degree of pragmatic compromise in ending the Syria conflict.

With Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has experienced its own uptick of terror attacks, aimed at establishment targets and also at fomenting unrest within the Shia minority. Saudis don't need convincing that for ISIS one end goal is to directly confront the kingdom, with its eyes set on the guardianship of the Holy Mosques. Nevertheless, this awareness has not translated into an immediate Saudi willingness to seek a political deal in Syria in order to allow a focus on the ISIS threat, or to influence its opposition allies in that direction. The Saudi focus on Assad as the root cause of ISIS's rise has some merit, but it is not a comprehensive explanation – that would involve a greater degree of introspection on the part of the kingdom. Europeans will have to be less indulgent of Saudi maximalism if the ISSG is to work, and indeed the Saudis have adopted a constructive approach already, in as much as they have accepted Iran's presence in Vienna and taken the lead in organising the opposition representation to intra-Syrian talks. That role should be encouraged around a platform that allows for realistic political progress rather than obstructing it. As with other opposition backers, Europe should encourage Riyadh to see a de-escalatory path and the

opening up of a political space under the political format laid out by the ISSG as a means to secure its interests, given the costly failure of the military track.

Europe, notably France and the UK, has provided important backstop support to Saudi Arabia in the international arena and in the Yemen war in particular, and of course that support has often been handsomely reciprocated. But it cannot be business as usual in the Europe–Saudi relationship. If pressure is needed to advance de-escalation in Syria and active support for the ongoing Saudi mission in Yemen provides France and the UK with a lever of influence, Paris and London should not shy away from using it.

With Turkey

In the context of broader re-engagement with Turkey over refugees, aid, accession, and visa issues, Europe should promote Turkish acceptance of a political accommodation and ceasefire in Syria. Turkey is a key regional actor in Syria with considerable sway over the opposition, given its ongoing material support to rebel forces, especially as it is via the Turkish border that assistance is provided. While the urgency in recent European–Turkish dialogue has been driven by the refugee crisis, the driver of that crisis is the Syrian civil war. European actors with a privileged relationship to Ankara, including Berlin and London, should frontload the ISSG process and Turkish support for necessary pragmatism in their contact with the Erdogan government.

While Turkey has a certain enhanced leverage with Europe given the refugee crisis, recent weeks have also shown some degree of Turkish interest in resetting its Europe relations to a more positive mode. Europe can stress in this dialogue not only what Turkey already knows – namely that ISIS is also a threat to Turkey and that the ongoing conflict fuels that threat – but also what Turkey suspects and is uncomfortable with – that, absent ISSG progress, Europeans and the US will increasingly look to the People’s Protection Units (YPG, the Syrian affiliate of Turkey’s nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)) as a key ally in confronting ISIS. The Turkish downing of a Russian jet, while explicable in terms of legitimate self-defence if Turkish airspace was violated, brought an additional and unwanted layer of complexity to the already challenging ISSG discussions. Turkey’s European NATO allies should urge a less bellicose and trigger-happy posture from Ankara.

Within the ISSG

Europe should seek to build a bloc of ISSG participants who actively support the de-escalatory track, creating a critical mass to push, and if need be isolate, countries still holding on to maximalist positions. China could be a critical ally given its Security Council membership, but Europe should also look to regional states such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt, who are paying heavy prices for the ongoing conflict.

Conclusion: From Vienna to Raqqa

A Vienna Process that secures even limited de-escalation in Syria, opens up humanitarian access, and initiates a longer-term political process would have significant implications for the fight against ISIS. The conflict has served as a recruiting tool for ISIS, while provoking a collapse of state authority and a governance vacuum that the group and other violent extremists have deftly exploited. Any political process that lays the ground for a decrease in violence – which has included indiscriminate attacks on civilians by all sides and notably by the Assad regime – and the re-establishment of basic forms of local governance would therefore represent a significant step towards closing down ISIS’s mobilising and operating space. De-escalation of the overall Syria conflict is a prerequisite for refocusing enough key actors on the ISIS threat. It is also likely to achieve far more than the ongoing air campaign against ISIS, which after more than one year has only had limited results and in many ways has actually fed ISIS’s narrative – stepped-up French and British bombing campaigns will not shift that dynamic. While there is no necessity for Europeans to drop their endgame goal of a post-Assad Syria, it should not be ignored that gains could still be made through a deal that sees him remain in power for some time in exchange for meaningful compromises in terms of a decrease in violence and devolving power away from the president and away from the centre.

At a minimum, a de-escalation in the Syrian civil war will allow local, regional, and international actors to more forcefully focus their efforts on fighting ISIS and other violent extremists, dampening the multi-pronged conflict that has for so long distracted efforts – not just in terms of regional actors, who have clearly prioritised the fight against Assad, but even for the likes of the US. At times, such as when ISIS moved on Palmyra, Washington has been accused of weighing its anti-ISIS imperative against a fear of strengthening the regime. Even the question of who is best placed to take which territory from ISIS, a thorny issue for an optimistic future scenario, cannot be effectively addressed under current circumstances.

However, it would be wrong to think that even a viable political track and de-escalation of the Syria conflict can solve the problem of ISIS and its ilk. First, in the absence of a similar meaningful political process in neighbouring Iraq, where ISIS and its top leadership emerged, the group will continue to have substantial operating space. Despite initial expectations that Iraq would be an easier arena in which to combat ISIS, based on the hope that Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi would usher in substantive political reform to engage Sunnis, the process is faltering and its foundations remain fundamentally shaky. Iraq’s sectarian fault lines, awoken by the ill-conceived war launched in 2003, have become deeply entrenched and ISIS is at least as firmly positioned in Iraq as it is in Syria. Just as attention is now refocusing on Syria, so international actors must refocus on addressing the politics of the Iraq front

in this wider conflict. Again, that will involve a combination of local and regional actors, and a preponderance of political means over military.

But more importantly, nearly five years into the Syrian war, ISIS has in many respects outgrown the conflict onto which it attached itself after metastasising from al-Qaeda and the Iraq conflict. Given its size and the territory it controls, as well as the narrative it has established, it is likely to survive even without the fuel provided by the ongoing civil conflict in Syria – and it will be another pyrrhic victory if we declare “mission accomplished” in defeating ISIS, only to wake up to a new and more virulent strain when al-Qaeda 3.0 introduces itself. The Assad question is now far from being the answer to the ISIS question.

Beyond the Syria and Iraq conflicts, Europeans will have to revisit how much of what is essentially a struggle within the Sunni Arab world we can or should own. If the ISSG process slowly opens the door towards a solution for Raqqa, no less complex challenges will still await as Europe comes to terms with the underlying drivers of ISIS-type phenomena, including issues of political space, governance, and the absence of social contracts in the Arab world. This extends to our alliances with those in the region who crack down on less extreme versions of political Islam that are willing to engage in the democratic processes, our approach to the Palestine issue, as well as the religious ideologies dangerously instrumentalised by Europe’s allies and actors on both sides of the sectarian divide.

Renewing our commitment to de-escalation and a political opening in Syria is a prerequisite for an effective counter-ISIS strategy, but it is far from being its endpoint.

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