



INFO PACK

Turkey, Russia, Germany and France:

Quadrilateral Syria Summit in Istanbul

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President Erdoğan, President Putin, German Chancellor Merkel and President Macron hold a joint press conference following the conclusion of the Istanbul Summit. Murat Kula - AA

Introduction

Playing a pivotal role in preventing a crisis in Idlib, Turkey has been trying to preserve the cease-fire that was reached in an agreement with Russia. As a follow up to the deal reached with Russia, Turkey organised a quadrilateral summit in Istanbul with Russia, Germany and France on 27 October 2018.

In 2011, when protests erupted in Syria, the Syrian regime employed repressive means to curb the unrest, including the deployment of security forces and regime-backed militias. Human rights organisations consider the Syrian regime to be complicit in war crimes given the scale of documented civilian casualties and human rights violations, including mass imprisonment, torture and executions that have taken place under regime auspices. The survival of the regime has depended on the alignment with Iran and Russia, particularly since the Russian military intervention in 2015.

The meeting, hosted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, included the participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, German

Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. The discussion focused on advancing a political solution to the war in Syria and how to best deal with the millions of refugees it has created.

Prior to the Summit, Turkish Presidential Spokesperson, İbrahim Kalın, said that “the summit will aim to address the Syrian conflict with all its aspects, focusing on the situation on the ground, the Idlib agreement and the political process, and to harmonize joint efforts for finding a lasting solution to the conflict” (AA, 2018).

On the basis of the recent developments vis-à-vis the situation in the war in Syria, this info pack provides a short background of the Syrian conflict and a timeline of the war. It gives the details of the Idlib agreement reached on 17 September 2018 between Turkey and Russia in the Russian city of Sochi. The positions of the Summit participants are elaborated and the significance of the summit for the respective participants is highlighted. Finally, a short discussion on the results of the summit and the possible harmonization of joint efforts to find a lasting political solution to the conflict is presented.



An aerial view of the buildings destroyed by the Assad Regime forces and Russian Army in the Tariq al-Bab neighborhood of Aleppo, Syria on October 2016. Source: Jawad al Rifai - AA

Background of the Syrian Conflict

What began as peaceful demonstrations seven years ago against the oppressive rule of Syria's Bashar al Assad turned into one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century. The death toll is estimated to be over half a million people. 5.6 million people have fled the country and 6.6 million people have been internally displaced according to the UNCHR (Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2018).

In order to have a better understanding of the war in Syria, one should look to the recent political history of Syria under Baathist rule. The Baath Party seized power in 1963 following the suspension of the political power-sharing framework operative at the time. The Baathists, alongside the powerful ruling family, prevented political participation, effectively putting an end to sanctioned dissent. Bashar al Assad's father, Hafez al Assad, appointed party members to top positions in the public sector, government, and military, effectively transforming the bureaucracy into a patronage network dominated by Baath Party loyalists. By the 1980s, the Baath Party had imprisoned, exiled or killed off effective opposition in a brutal and bloody crackdown. The decades to come would be epitomised by the Hama massacre of 1982, in which approximately 40,000 Syrians were killed.

Alongside the Hama massacre, killing, torture and oppression continued throughout the 1980s and 90s. Around 1000 political prisoners were killed in the notorious Tadmur prison after an assassination attempt against Hafez al Assad.

The Syrian regime blamed the Muslim Brotherhood and, as a result, the movement was outlawed. From then on, Syria became known as the "Kingdom of Silence".

Bashar al Assad inherited the rule of the country from his father Hafez al Assad in the year 2000. He presented himself as a reformer and promised a transition to democracy during the initial period of his rule. However, similar to his father, he consolidated power in the hands of loyalists and repressed any alternative or opposition voices.

In 2011, as protests and uprisings were sweeping across the Arab world, the Syrian people began calling for reforms and taking to the streets in protest of regime corruption and oppression. It is worth noting that these early protests in Syria did not take the form of the mass processions seen elsewhere in the Arab world, largely due to widespread fear of reprisal by regime forces. Thus, Syria remained relatively calm until mid-March 2011, when a regime crackdown paved the way for the outbreak of mass protests across the country.

On 6 March 2011, Baathist security forces arrested and tortured 15 boys from the southern city of Deraa. Their parents and community elders begged for their release but were reportedly told: "forget about your children. Go have new kids. If you cannot, send us your wives and we will get them pregnant for you" (MacKinnon, 2016). Word spread, and on 15 March protesters in Damascus and Aleppo organised a

series of peaceful gatherings in what they called ‘A Day of Rage’ (Flock, 2011).

The government reacted violently, in what would become a turning point in the conflict. Later that week, thousands of locals in Deraa took to the streets to demand the boys’ release and to call for democratic reform and an end to corruption. Security forces opened fire, killing four protesters (Marsh, 2011). During their funerals the following day, 10,000 people came together to protest the killings. Again, security forces fired into the crowd, killing six and injuring over 100 (Al-Khalidi, 2011).

Fifteen days after the schoolboys’ arrest, Assad sent representatives to Deraa and the boys were released, however, the uprising had already been set in motion. By the end of March 2011, over 100,000 people were rallying in Deraa. Dozens had been killed by Syrian security forces, and many more injured. Forty-five days after the fateful graffiti message that led to the arrests, protesters across the country were calling for Assad to step down.

On 18 April 2011, in the city of Homs, hundreds of thousands marched to the city’s clock tower square for a sit-in protest. At dawn the following day, Assad’s security forces stormed the square and opened fire on the unarmed crowd. This became known as the ‘clock tower massacre’ and was a pivotal moment in the escalation of the Syrian uprising. Thousands of soldiers and ranking officers opposed the regime’s crack-down on civilians and defected. Military arms depots were opened to civilians, and what began as a peaceful uprising transformed into an armed resistance (Stack, 2011).

Despite growing domestic unrest and international condemnation of his government’s conduct, Assad and his remaining forces refused to back down. The result has been years of conflict, which has drawn in various local and regional armed groups, neighbouring states, and international actors supporting different sides in the conflict.

Over the course of the war, international actors have attempted to resolve the crisis on several occasions. Toward this end, four separate conventions have taken place in Geneva since 2012. While these yielded some results on paper, they ultimately failed to resolve the conflict.

The Geneva I conference was convened by the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his role as the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria, in order to secure a ceasefire between the Syrian regime and the opposition. The failure of Geneva I led Kofi Annan to resign from his position as Joint Special Representative (Annan, 2012). In 2014, the Geneva II conference was initiated by the UN and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, but also failed to resolve the conflict. Following Kofi Annan’s example, Brahimi resigned from his post as well (The UN, 2014). Since then, the current UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has been working on a diplomatic solution to the conflict. However, he announced that he would step down at the end of November 2018 due to family reasons after more than 4 years at his post (BBC News, 2018). This has increased the sense of urgency amongst the international community in their efforts to find a political solution to the conflict.

Outside of the United Nations, members of the Arab League and the broader international community have come together within multiple frameworks, such as the Friends of Syria and the International Syria Support Group, in an effort to resolve the crisis (The United Nations Secretary-General, 2016). In 2017, Russia, Turkey, and Iran convened the Astana Process, which aimed to find a solution to the crisis in parallel to the ongoing UN-led process (Misto, 2017). Most recently, on 17 September 2018, Turkey and Russia came together in the Russian city of Sochi following a series of meetings in Iran and Turkey and reached an agreement regarding the situation in Idlib, the last remaining stronghold of the opposition in Syria (Reuters, 2018).



Refugees hoping to cross into Europe, arrive on the shore of Lesbos Island, Greece after crossing the Aegean sea from Turkey on December 01, 2015. Source: Özge Elif Kızıl - AA

Timeline of the Syrian Conflict

15 March 2011

Demonstrations erupt in the city of Deraa after security forces arrest and torture a number of teenagers for drawing graffiti on their school's wall in support of the Arab Spring. Security forces retaliate by opening fire on the protestors.

29 July 2011

Four months after the start of the protests, seven Syrian officers defect to form the Free Syrian Army.

18 August 2011

US President Barack Obama says, "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

24 February 2012

The Friends of Syria Group meet in Tunisia for the first time in an attempt to address the situation. More than 60 countries and organisations including the United Nations, European Union, League of Arab States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Arab Maghreb Union attend the meeting.

16 March 2012

Geneva I conference communique commences. Kofi Annan, the joint United Nations and the Arab League envoy to Syria, submits a six-point peace plan to the UN Security Council.

12 June 2012

The UN officially states that Syria is in a state of civil war.

22 June 2012

A Turkish F-4 Phantom reconnaissance jet is shot down by the Syrian regime.

2 August 2012

Kofi Annan resigns as US-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria.

20 August 2012

US President Obama declares that he will establish a "red line" against the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

9 April 2013

Daesh announces its split from al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, previously known as Al Nusra Front

9 August 2013

US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. They agree to work toward inviting the Syrian regime and opposition for peace talks on the basis of the Geneva I communique, but no concrete plan is agreed to.

21 August 2013

A chemical weapons attack takes place in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta despite the US "red line," killing some 1,700 people.

13 January 2014

Daesh takes complete control of the north-eastern city of Raqqa after seizing it from the opposition.



23 January 2014

Geneva II conference commences in Switzerland. The Syrian regime and the opposition meet for the first time at the negotiating table, but fail to achieve a template for a transitional government.

14 May 2014

UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi resigns after the failure of the Geneva II conference.

23 September 2014

The US-led coalition launches an aerial campaign against Daesh in Syria and Iraq after the terrorist group takes control of Mosul. The US, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE take part.

14 October 2014

The US supports the YPG, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK terrorist organisation, against Daesh in the battle for Kobane with air support, weapons and medical aid.

18 June 2015

YPG militants take control of a Daesh military base considered to be the group's first line of defence, north of its de facto capital Raqqa in northern Syria.

29 August 2015

The US and Turkey carry out their first joint operation in the Syrian conflict, conducting 20 airstrikes against Daesh in northern Syria near the town of Marea, where both countries have agreed to establish a safe zone.

30 September 2015

Russia enters the conflict, launching a military campaign backing the Syrian regime with air strikes and cruise missiles targeting opposition and Daesh-held areas.

23 October 2015

Turkish, US, Russian, and Saudi foreign ministers meet to discuss the Syrian crisis. The first such meeting after Assad's visit to Moscow.

14 November 2015

The foreign ministers of 17 countries meet in Vienna and agree to a proposal calling for a ceasefire and nation-wide elections to be held in Syria.

Timeline of the Syrian Conflict

23 November 2015

France launches a fresh round of air strikes on Daesh targets in Syria and Iraq after the Paris attacks in which 130 civilians were killed at various locations across the city.

1 February 2016

Geneva III conference begins after delays caused by a dispute over the participation of opposition groups.

27 February 2016

The US and Russia reach an accord for the cessation of hostilities across Syria, excluding groups considered as terrorist organisations.

11 March 2016

The Syrian Network for Human Rights documents more than 477 breaches of the ceasefire since the cessation of hostilities came into effect on 27 February. Staffan de Mistura calls for elections to take place within 18 months.

14 March 2016

The Russian military announces that it will begin to withdraw the "main part" of its armed forces from Syria.

15 September 2016

The UN urges the Syrian regime to allow immediate aid deliveries to hunger-stricken civilians in besieged areas in Aleppo after a ceasefire is brokered by Russia and the US.

25 September 2016

Warplanes belonging to the Syrian regime and Russian strike opposition-held areas in Aleppo ahead of a UN Security Council meeting.

22 December 2016

After four years under opposition control, the Syrian regime takes full control of Aleppo. Civilians and opposition members are evacuated from formerly opposition-held parts of the city after an agreement brokered by Turkey and Russia.

23 January 2017

Talks begin in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, between Turkey, Russia, and Iran, accompanied by UN and US observers, marking the first non-Western initiated talks related to the Syrian conflict. Syrian regime officials and opposition representatives agree to swap prisoners and continue to honour the ceasefire overseen by Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The US is present but participates passively in the process.



17 February 2017

The second round of peace talks in Astana ends without a major breakthrough. Syrian regime officials and opposition representatives agree to swap prisoners and continue to honour the ceasefire overseen by Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

3 March 2017

The UN-led Geneva Process ends its fourth round of talks without achieving an agreement on a solution to the ongoing crisis.

4 April 2017

The Assad regime is accused by the US, the UK and Turkey of carrying out a chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib. Over 70 civilians are killed, and over 300 severely injured.

7 April 2017

In response to the chemical attack against Khan Shaykhun, the US launches a cruise missile attack on the Assad regime targeting the Shayrat Air Base near Homs.

8 May 2017

The US makes clear its intention to continue arming YPG, against the wishes of Turkey.

18 June 2017

The US shoots down a Syrian fighter jet near Raqqa after it allegedly conducted airstrikes near US-backed YPG controlled area.

17 October 2017

Daesh is entirely driven out from Raqqa, its de-facto capital in Syria.

2 November 2017

The Syrian regime takes full control of the eastern Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor from Daesh.

11 December 2017

Russian President Putin declares "mission accomplished" for his forces in the fight against Daesh.

20 January 2018

Turkey launches Operation Olive Branch against the YPG controlled city of Afrin and drives YPG forces out completely by March.

25 February 2018

The regime launches a ferocious assault on Eastern Ghouta, the final rebel-held enclave near the capital Damascus.

7 April 2018

The Syrian regime allegedly carries out another chemical attack, this time in Eastern Ghouta's main town of Douma.

17 September 2018

Turkey and Russia reach an agreement regarding the situation in Idlib, the last stronghold of the opposition. They declare that an agreement has been reached to establish and monitor a 15-20km demilitarised zone around the perimeter of the province.

The Situation on the Ground

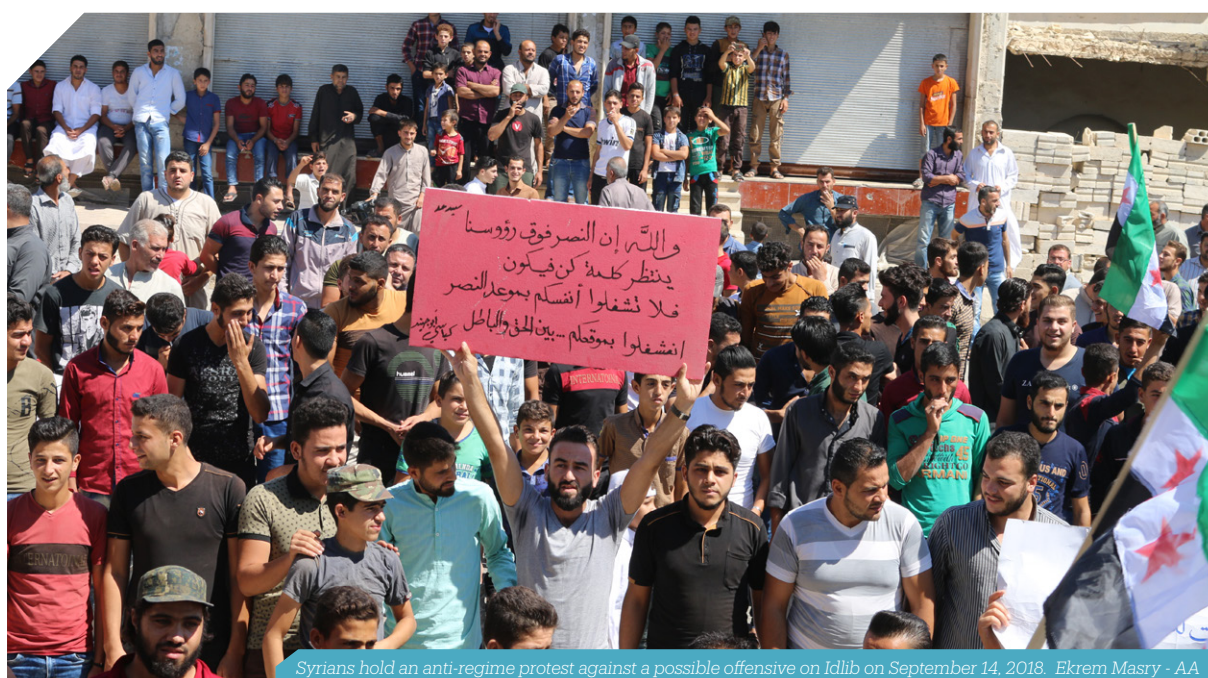
As of October 2018, the situation on the ground in Syria has seen the Syrian regime re-capture large swathes of land from both Daesh and the opposition and assert control over the majority of the country. With Northern Syria appearing complicated for the regime, given the many national and international stakeholders involved, this year saw the regime focus on consolidating control over Southern Syria.

Two major offensives launched by the Syrian regime in 2018 focused on Eastern Ghouta, an opposition-controlled suburb of Damascus, and Daraa, located to the south of Damascus near the Jordanian border and the cradle of the uprising against the regime. Eastern Ghouta, under siege since 2013, was previously controlled by various armed opposition groups including Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman, Ahrar al-Sham and the former Al-Qaeda branch in Syria – Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as Jebhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front). The offensive, code-named 'Operation Damascus Steel', lasted almost two months and witnessed some of the heaviest bombardment of the Syrian war, leaving approximately 1700 people dead. Daraa, dubbed the 'cradle of the Syrian revolution', was subjected to a military offensive lasting almost one month and two weeks code-named 'Operation Basalt'. Prior to the offensive, the governorate was under the control of various FSA factions who came together in March 2018 to form a new force called the 'Salvation Army',

in order to stand united in the face of escalating hostilities by the regime.

Since then, the Syrian regime has threatened to launch a final and decisive offensive on the province of Idlib. However, with calls from the international community and a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Turkey and Russia (a.k.a. the Idlib Deal), such an offensive has been halted and the province remains under the control of various opposition factions including the National Front for Liberation, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Syrian Liberation Front, FSA battalions such as Jaysh al-Izzah and disparate foreign groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party. Civilian political bodies and local councils in Idlib, which still operate in much of the province, are among the last remaining civil opposition bodies active in Syria.

With over 465,000 Syrians killed, 12 million displaced and millions injured, the majority of Syria is today under the control of the Syrian regime. It is important to note however, that effective rule in most areas is non-existent and the situation on the ground remains fluid. Effective administration by all parties remains effectively absent due in large part, to the lack of infrastructure and the existence of a damaged and fragmented social-fabric in much of the country.



Syrians hold an anti-regime protest against a possible offensive on Idlib on September 14, 2018. Ekrem Masry - AA

Who is in control of what?

Whilst the situation on the ground in Syria remains inherently complicated with numerous brigades, military factions and armies, the key players as of October 2018 are:

The Syrian regime and its allies

Main areas of control: *Damascus, Daraa, Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Lattakia, Tartus*

The main allies of the Syrian regime are Russia and Iran. Many of the offensives and assaults in the name of the Syrian regime have been conducted by the Russian armed forces, Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – a branch of Iran's Armed Forces.

Armed opposition factions

Main areas of control: *Province of Idlib and areas in north-western Syria, Azaz, Al-Bab, Jarablus and Afrin*

Armed opposition factions include those of the FSA as well as other groups which are comprised primarily of

Syrians but ascribe to different ideologies and self-distinguish from the FSA.

The Free Syrian Army is a loose coalition of armed brigades formed in 2011 by defectors from the Syrian army with the aim of toppling the Syrian regime. The Free Syrian Army do not necessarily represent a single ideology, as demonstrated by its various alliances with groups who ascribe to different visions for Syria. Their unifying element is their declared support for a democratic Syria. The main FSA brigades in the north of Syria have allied with Turkey, resulting in the unification of those groups under the newly formed National Front for Liberation. As such, the National Front for Liberation currently controls: Azaz, Al-Bab, Jarablus and Afrin.

Another notable opposition alliance, which comprises of various major factions in Syria, is the 'Islamic Front', which upholds, to varying degrees, Islamist values and principles.



Free Syrian Army Members in city of al-Bab. Emin Sansar - AA

PYD/YPG

Main areas of control: *Qamishli, Hasakah and Raqqa*

The PYD/YPG are an added element to the Syrian War. Their primary objective has been to advance their political agenda of establishing an autonomous region in northern Syria. The group is recognized as the Syrian branch of the PKK. The PKK is a terrorist organization

and is listed as such by the EU, US and Turkey. The PYD/YPG have received consistent US support in the form of armaments, training, and air support. More recently, the PYD/YPG has seen a more cooperative approach from the Syrian regime in return for its support against elements of the Syrian opposition.



A photo shows an American flag flying together a PKK/PYD flag in Raqqas Tell Abyad district, Syria on September 20, 2016. Mustafa Güçlü - AA

Daesh

Main areas of control: *Abul-Kamal, Hajin (Deir ez-Zor)*

After the Battle of Raqqa in which Daesh was defeated and forced out of the city, they now maintain control only over Abul-Kamal and Hajin, a district and city in the Deir ez-Zor governorate of eastern Syria. While Daesh is no longer considered to be a major player in Syria, their continued presence cannot be ignored, including the potential for a revival.

Other actors

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham –the former Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria now only remain in limited areas of Idlib.

The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS – the American-led

coalition does not officially control any territory in Syria but remains present on the ground and in the skies.

International Efforts to Solve the Conflict

In June 2012, the Geneva I peace talks were initiated in an attempt to bring an end to the conflict, monitor a transitional political process in Syria and bring all sides of the conflict together to discuss a political solution. Spearheaded by the United Nations, the Geneva Peace talks have concluded 6 rounds since 2012, albeit with many hiccups. Of the major issues the Geneva peace talks encountered was the halt of the talks for an entire year between February 2016 and February 2017. The gulf between both sides was too large for the United Nations to be able to mediate effectively.

The halt of the Geneva peace talks paved the way for the Astana Process, which launched in January 2017. In a significant geopolitical shift, talks were held under the patronage of "the guarantor states" of Turkey, Iran and Russia. The Astana Process signifies a shift from the United States' efforts - with the primary aim to facilitate a transitional process in Syria for the ultimate removal of the Assad regime - to Russian-led efforts more focused on the military situation on the ground and the facilitation of a stable ceasefire in the country.

Astana succeeded in bringing both the Syrian regime and opposition groups directly together for the first time

since 2011. The first round of the Astana talks sought to consolidate a ceasefire in Syria, build confidence among parties and maintain a unified front in fighting against Daesh and Al-Qaeda. The first round was attended by both the Syrian regime and the main opposition and saw face-to-face discussions between the two parties for the first time in the conflict. Whilst the parties did not sign on to any agreements in the first round, the talks nevertheless proved productive. Nine rounds of the Astana Process have taken place to date. The latest round took place in May 2018, albeit with little progress achieved and a clear loss of trust between the main parties.

Aside from the Geneva Peace Talks and Astana Process, other efforts - both independent and complementary to the initial talks - have taken place, such as the talks in Sochi, the Tehran talks and Ankara Summit. The Sochi talks were to be conducted within the Astana diplomatic track. The latter two were conducted without the presence of the Syrian regime, the opposition or the US. They aimed to arrive at a formal agreement that would conclude the war. The talks ended diplomatically, however, no concrete progress on how to end the war was made.



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Vladimir Putin and President Hassan Rouhani ahead of the trilateral summit to discuss progress on Syria, November 22, 2017 in Sochi, Russia. Sefa Karacan - AA

The Idlib Deal



Turkey's National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and Defense Minister of Russia, Sergey Shoigu after signing the memorandum of understanding regarding the Idlib following a joint press conference held by President Erdogan and Russian President Putin in Sochi, Russia on September 17, 2018. Halil Sağırkaya - AA

Overflowing with those forcibly displaced from other previously opposition-held regions– and being the last major rebel-enclave in Syria, in September 2018, Idlib was facing a major campaign by the Syrian regime and their allies, referred to in the international media as the ‘final offensive in the Syria war’. Events similar to those that took place in Eastern Ghouta and the fall of Aleppo were expected to take place in Idlib, albeit on a larger and ultimately bloodier scale. The threats of a decisive offensive on Idlib saw the three guarantor states of the Astana talks stand on opposite ends of the spectrum; Russia and Iran being allied with the Syrian regime and ready to partake in the regime offensive under the pretext of ‘fighting extremist groups’, and Turkey, which warned of dire humanitarian consequences, made it clear that it would not stand by and watch a Russian-led attack on the province.

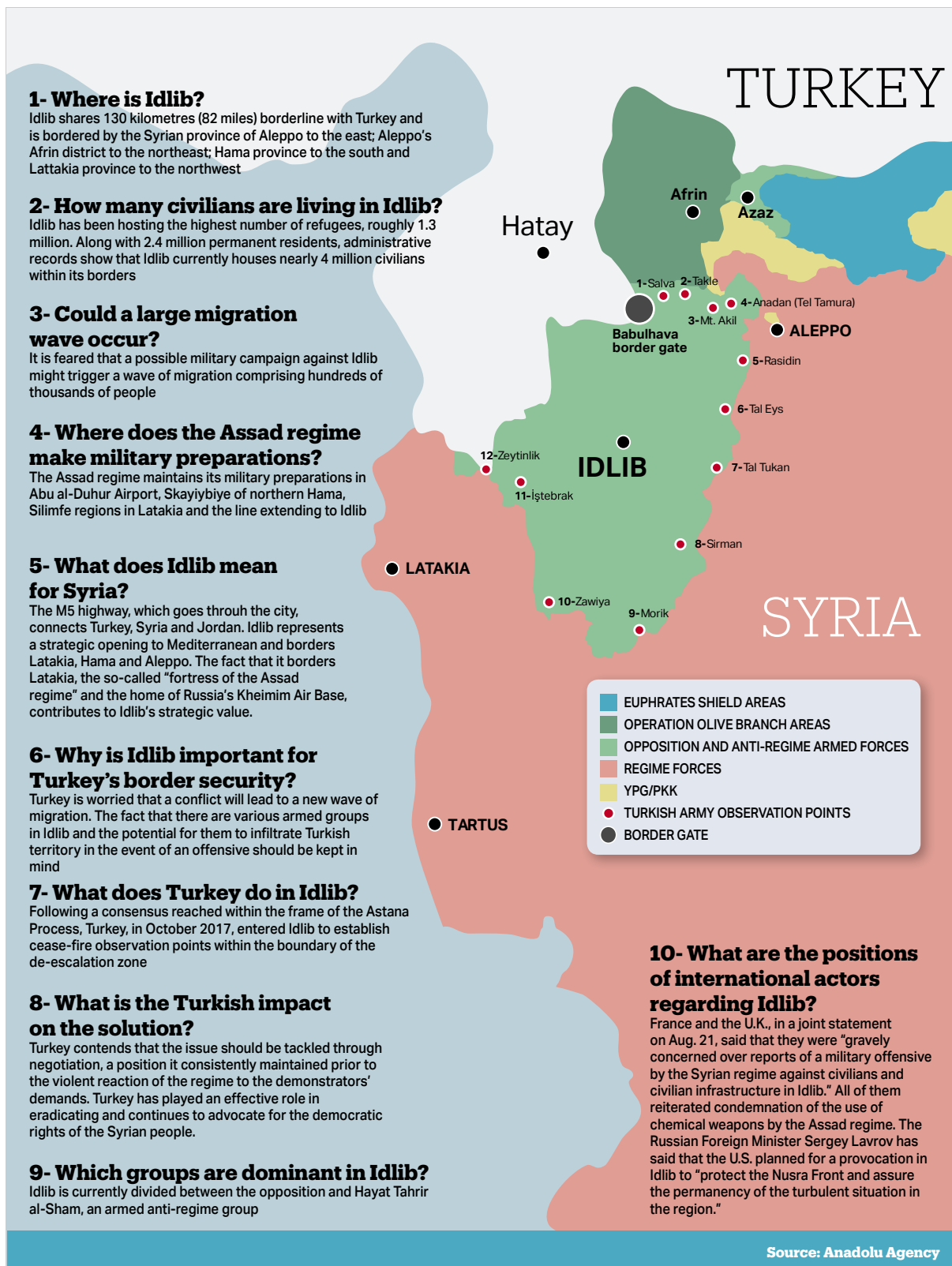
Many international campaigns were launched against the impending offensive on Idlib by states, activists, the Syrian opposition and Syrians on ground. The three guarantor states convened in Tehran in bid to find a solution. This initial meeting resulted in Turkey and Russia re-convening in Sochi and signing a “Memorandum of Understanding” (MoU), on 18 September 2018, which aims to create a 15-20km demilitarised buffer-zone in Idlib between regime forces and the opposition.

The memorandum also included agreements on Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s presence in the zone and demanded the withdrawal of heavy weaponry from all conflicting parties. Additionally, both Turkey and Russia agreed to conduct patrols on either side of the demilitarised zone, as well as affirming their commitment to fighting terrorist groups in Syria.

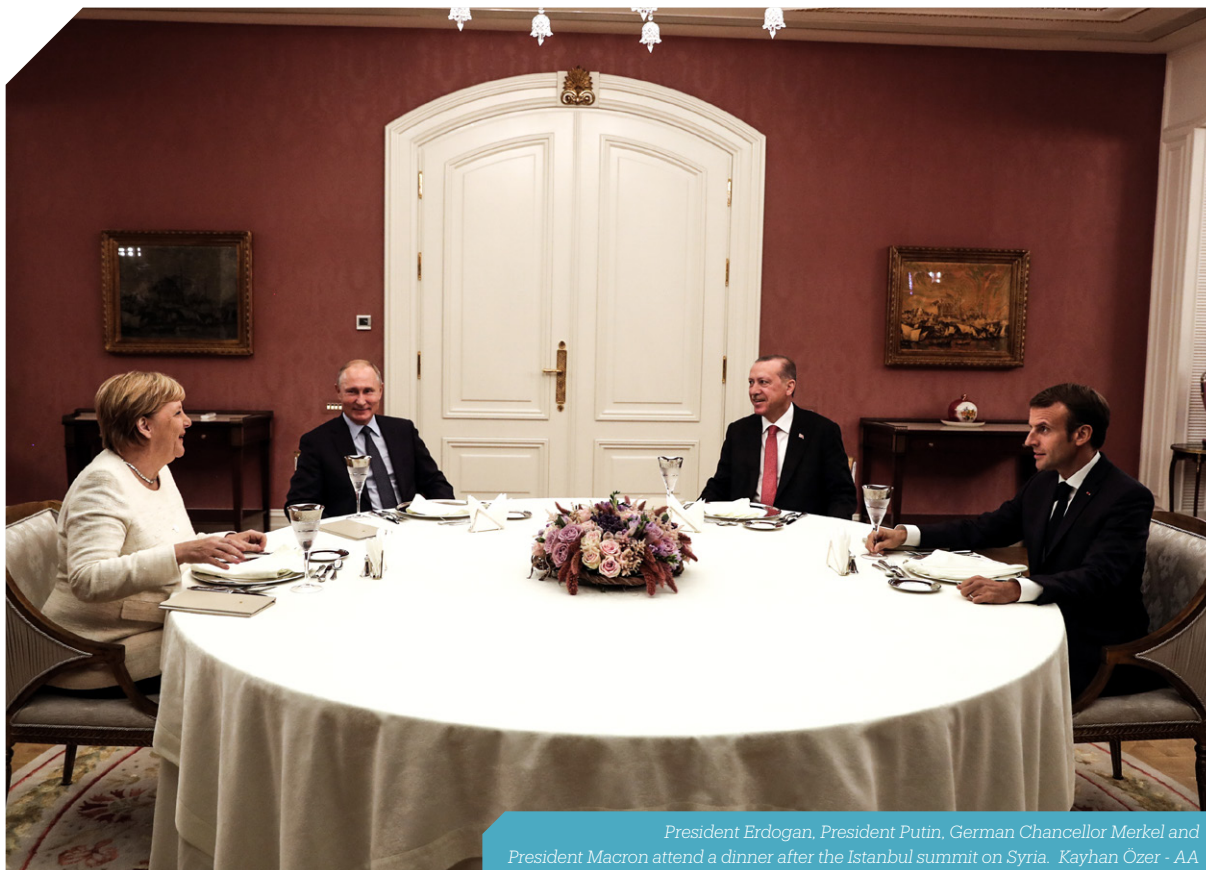
Despite initial scepticism after the agreement was signed, the MoU has so far proved effective and has been hailed by many international actors as a great success. As such, Turkey was able to prevent a major humanitarian crisis in Idlib – and its spill over effects of refugees into Turkey and other countries, particularly into EU member states

The implementation process of the MoU began immediately after its signing and is being monitored by Turkish drones. The demilitarisation process was completed on 8 October 2018, with opposition forces removing their heavy weapons from the zone. What remains is the full compliance of the Syrian regime. Bashar al-Assad’s has stated the agreement is only a ‘temporary measure’ and has implied that eventual action will be taken until Idlib and all other territories in Syria are ‘returned to the Syrian state’.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDLIB IN 10 QUESTIONS



Source: Anadolu Agency



President Erdogan, President Putin, German Chancellor Merkel and President Macron attend a dinner after the Istanbul summit on Syria. Kayhan Özer - AA

The Istanbul Syria Summit and Participants' Positions

The Syrian war involves a complex mixture of internal and external actors. Initially, the two main actors were the Syrian regime and a coalition of moderate opposition groups known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was established by defectors from the regime's forces. Afterwards, Hezbollah, Iran, Shia militias, and Russia came to the regime's aid, helping it retain a hold on power in the face of staunch opposition at home and abroad, and further propelling the conflict into a full-fledged civil war. Meanwhile, the opposition has been weakened by the activity of radical groups, such as Daesh, commonly referred to as ISIS, in addition to the PKK's Syria affiliates the PYD and YPG. The Syrian War is now a complex conflict involving shifting alliances and multiple groups with different goals and widely divergent ideologies.

Bringing major actors together at a Summit on the future of Syria, which was held in Istanbul and included participation by Russia, Germany and France hosted by Turkey, is of vital importance for the future of Syria, particularly since the Idlib deal is currently at the implementation process. Although some of the major players in Syria, namely the US and Iran, did not participate in the summit, declarations of support from the leaders of Germany and France alongside Turkish and Russian counterparts has lent credence to the implementation of the Idlib agreement and the maintenance of the current ceasefire.

Turkey on Syria

In the context of the uprisings that took place across the Arab world beginning in 2011, Turkey had declared its position to be on the side of the people and has tried to remain in line with the demands of the Arab world for freedom and democracy. Throughout Syria's six-year war, Turkey has been among the staunchest supporters of the moderate opposition and efforts to achieve a political solution to the crisis. Turkey, as the host country of the summit, has been one of the most affected countries by the war in Syria. Having deep seated historical, cultural and societal ties with its neighbour, Ankara has taken part in every platform that has aimed at finding a solution to the crisis.

Moreover, Turkey launched two unilateral military operations inside northern Syria. Operation Euphrates Shield was launched by Turkey on 24 August 2016 together with the Free Syrian Army against Daesh. The cities of Jarablus, Azaz and al-Bab was cleared of Daesh on 29 March 2017. Turkey's second military operation took place on 20 January 2018. Known as Operation Olive Branch, together with the Free Syrian Army, the YPG's terror enclave in the city of Afrin was neutralised as of 24 March 2018.



Turkish tanks are seen in Jarablus, Syria during "Operation Euphrates Shield" on August 24, 2016. Firas Faham - AA

Russia on Syria

Russia has deep geopolitical interests in Syria. Syria is the only Middle Eastern country where Russia has military bases, namely in the cities Latakia and Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. Russia's intervention in the conflict in support of the regime dramatically changed the trajectory of the Syrian civil war.

Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council in conjunction with its direct military involvement since the end of 2015 is said to have saved Assad-led Syrian regime at a crucial turning point in the conflict. The survival of the Syrian regime critically rests on Russian support.

Russian military support has helped the regime to retake Aleppo, the country's second largest city from both terrorist

groups and the FSA, leaving Idlib as the only remaining opposition-controlled area in Syria.

Russia has sought to ensure that any political solution to the conflict is aligned with their long-term vision and interests. Since 2014, Russia and the US led the Geneva talks under the auspices the UN, however, the talks thus far have largely been a failure as the parties proved unable to move beyond their respective agendas regarding the fate of the Syrian regime. In an effort to create an alternative platform to the Geneva talks, Russia sought to enhance political dialogue and security cooperation with the regional powers like Turkey and Iran in the Kazakh capital, Astana. Most recently the Idlib deal concluded in Sochi was agreed by to by Russia and Turkey.

France, Germany and the EU on Syria

France has not been involved in large-scale military operations in Syria, apart from targeted operations against Daesh militants under the umbrella of the international coalition. France has also supported the various international attempts to resolve the conflict, having taken part in talks under UN auspices

Germany, the most powerful economy of Europe, has historically been reluctant when it comes to international military operations which entail sending German soldiers overseas. Due to the legacy of the Second World War, it is both politically and legally difficult for Germany to deploy forces overseas, particularly in combat roles. Therefore, Germany's approach to Syria has come within the context of supporting a multilateral approach to finding a political solution to the conflict.

conflict itself, with the exception of the security concerns related to Daesh

The EU has not taken decisive action to address the Syrian crisis, nor has it developed a well drafted or comprehensive policy on Syria. This is due in part to the institutional structure of the EU, which has prevented the formation of an all-inclusive approach to the ongoing crisis. Member states have been reluctant to address the root causes of the problems affecting Europe. Instead they adopt ad-hoc measures to address the particular problems each state faces.

On 16 March 2015, the European Council adopted the EU Regional Strategy for Syria, Iraq, and the Daesh threat. This strategy outlined the framework that would be implemented in order to counter Daesh terrorism spreading from Iraq and



Refugees walk near the border fence between Hungary and Serbia, 13 September 2015. Thomas Campean - AA

Regarding the war in Syria, both France and Germany, and the EU in general, have primarily been concerned with the refugee crisis, which erupted as the result of the civil war in Syria. In the initial phase of the popular uprising against the Assad regime, the EU responded to the regime's violent oppression by strongly condemning its cruelty and use of live ammunition. The EU's pro-active role in the crisis diminished as it was hit by a massive exodus of the Syrian refugees fleeing the war. The focus of EU member states shifted to the refugee crisis, becoming increasingly detached from the

Syria. The report underscored that the fight against Daesh and efforts toward a political solution should go hand in hand. The new strategy also reiterated the EU's support for the military campaigns led by the international coalition. In its 2007 Syria Strategy Paper, the EU stated that Syria is a key factor in regional stability and plays a pivotal role as a transit country between the EU and the Middle East (Turkmani, 2016).

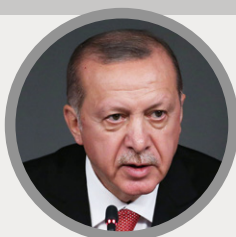


■ According to President Erdogan, the highlight of the summit was the indication of intent to move the synergy of the Astana Process forward.

■ Leaders maintained the importance of strengthening the Constitutional Reform Process to hold free and fair elections.

■ The Turkish, Russian, German and French leaders underlined the fact that diplomacy is the only way for a solution.

■ The leaders re-iterated that the voluntary return of refugees to Syria could only take place under appropriate legal and security conditions.

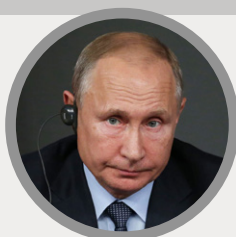


President of Turkey
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

"Today with the contributions of France and Germany we have seen that the Astana Synergy can be moved forward."

"We appealed for the Constitutional Committee to be set up by the end of the year."

"The Syrian dispute has turned to a global problem because the international community did not show determination to solve the issue."



President of Russia
Vladimir Putin

"Diplomacy is the only way for a solution in Syria."

"The international community should work together."

"If the conditions are suitable Constitutional Committee will be set up to commence its activities by end of the year."

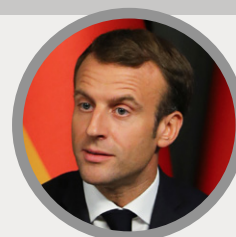


German Chancellor
Angela Merkel

"We are ready to do everything we can for a sustainable ceasefire in Idlib."

"A Political solution at this time is very important."

"A political solution is needed for the return of the refugees."



President of France
Emmanuel Macron

"Today the regime is employing a re-conquer strategy. This is not a viable way for stability."

"We need to provide an environment for all Syrians to vote and determine their own future by building a constitutional framework."

Source: Anadolu Agency

The Joint Statement of the Istanbul Summit

The Idlib Deal has been praised by many including the UN, EU, US and Iran. The deal can be considered as a by-product of the Astana Talks, which began in January 2017 between Turkey, Russia and Iran. These talks have focused primarily on military developments on the ground, the logic being that reaching a political solution for the conflict is unlikely without a lasting ceasefire. The historic Istanbul Summit highlighted the fact that military solutions are not sustainable and that the only way forward for Syria is a political solution negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations.

In their joint statement following the summit, the leaders of four countries “expressed their support for an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process that is facilitated by the United Nations.” They “called for establishing and early convening of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva by end of the year, to achieve constitutional reform, paving the way for free and fair elections under UN supervision and in compliance with the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora”.

The four leaders also “reaffirmed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic” by rejecting separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and

territorial integrity of Syria as well as the national security of neighbouring countries.

The statement also underlined the “the importance of increased coordination among all international initiatives which aims at contributing to a credible and sustainable solution” to the conflict in Syria together with “the importance of implementing confidence-building measures to contribute to the viability of the political process and a lasting ceasefire”.

They highlighted “the necessity to continue the fight against terrorism, through the full implementation of the effective measures” for a lasting ceasefire reaffirming their determination to ultimately eliminate the Daesh, Nusra Front and Al Qaeda terror groups and other terrorist groups.

The leaders called on the international community, particularly the UN and its humanitarian agencies to increase their assistance to Syria and underlined the need to ensure safe and unhindered access of aid groups throughout Syria.

The leaders also stated, “they remain committed to the safe and voluntary return of refugees to Syria on conditions consistent with the international law”. The returnees should not face armed conflict, political persecution or arbitrary arrests, and they need humanitarian infrastructure.



What's Next? Potential Implications

The international and regional consequences of the Istanbul summit are multiple. Firstly, this is the first major international summit wherein EU member states, namely Germany and France, play a leading role without the presence of the United States. As the US continues to withdraw from pro-active involvement in global affairs, other regional and international actors will continue to fill the void or responsibility. In this regard, Germany and France are seemingly shifting from their alignment from the US position in Syria to that articulated by Russia and Turkey and the Astana Process.

This shift should be read in light of other regional developments vis-à-vis Europe's interests in the region. For example, European opposition to the US unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal is based on a calculation that such a move risks further destabilization in the region, and ultimately an even greater flow of refugees and migrants towards Europe. The Istanbul Summit has demonstrated the willingness of the powerful EU member states, once reluctant to get involved directly in the Syrian conflict, to work towards a political solution in Syria independent of the US, thereby becoming invested in Syria's political future. As such, the EU took a serious step in addressing its security concerns growing out of the conflict in Syria, particularly as a result of the migration flow. For the last 3 years, since its peak in 2015, migration has been on the top of the EU's agenda. Thus, most of the actions that the EU member states have taken have been vis-à-vis the challenges posed by migration and refugee flows. It is estimated that Idlib host around 3.5 million people. If the Idlib Deal cannot be upheld, it is expected that a massive refugee flow will follow, which would not only exacerbate Turkey's refugee issues, but those of the EU as well. By being part of political solution in Syria, the EU can contribute has become directly vested in the potential consequences if a deal is not reached.

As being the host country, Turkey not only showed its willingness to solve the prolonged conflict through political negotiations but also proved that it is a capable country contributing to the potential resolution of a 7-year of conflict by bringing different parties into the table. Above all else, the conflict in Syria is a national security matter for Turkey. The threat of and the destabilizing effects of failed state at its southern border has led Turkey to uphold international and regional agreements aimed at stopping the fighting on the ground and providing a lasting solution to the conflict. Furthermore, Turkey host around 4 million refugees within its borders, the most out of any country in the world. Another wave of refugees resulting from a regime offensive on Idlib,



is not a palatable option for Turkey. Making France and Germany part of the process of finding a political solution in Syria ultimately strengthens the sustainability of the Idlib deal. Additionally, it implies an acknowledgement of the Turkish position that support for the YPG is unacceptable.

The summit served as an avenue for Russia to articulate its desire to end the conflict through political means. After 3 years of fighting, the Russian objective is to proceed to a transition period as soon as possible, in which where lasting political solutions can be implemented. In pursuance of their objectives, Russia will have to keep up with the terms of the Idlib deal. Russia also wants the EU to engage and commit to reconstruction aid for Syria. In this regard, the involvement of Germany and France in the negotiations has increased the likelihood that the EU will take on significant responsibility for the reconstruction Syria once a political settlement is reached.

Lastly, all participants highlighted the importance of a political, rather than military solution to the conflict. In this sense, the Istanbul Summit constitutes a critical milestone where the major international actors reaffirmed their determination to the territorial integrity of Syria by rejecting any form of separatist agendas and highlighted their commitment to the principle that the will of the people will ultimately determine the future of Syria. In this vein, all four summit participants agreed to the stated goal of establishing a Constitutional Committee by the end of year. Once established, the Constitutional Committee will provide an important platform for representatives of the Syrian people to have their voices heard and pave the way for a political future determined through elections.

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