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## **SYRIA: FROM PROXY WAR TO REGIONAL PEACE? The Pitfalls and Prospects of Realpolitik**

International Roundtable

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### **SYNOPSIS**

The unipolar constellation resulting from the collapse of the power balance of the Cold War encouraged a series of interventions, dictated by an agenda of régime change, in geopolitically vital regions such as the Middle East. This has resulted in a number of failed states and a profound destabilization of the entire region, with far-reaching consequences for global security. In connection with widespread social dissatisfaction and simmering ethnic and religious tensions, within and between regional states, the **political vacuum** in the region triggered developments that led to the so-called Arab Spring. The dramatic escalation of social unrest in Syria into a full-scale civil war was, in the early phase, to a large extent due to (covert) support of foreign actors to warring factions in the country. As with any situation of domestic strife, a conflict escalates and may become almost intractable as soon as local parties can rely on outside support.

Because of a lack of consensus among the permanent members of the Security Council, the United Nations system of collective security has proven **dysfunctional** in solving the widening regional conflict. After repeated unilateral action, in defiance of international law, by the dominant global player and its allies before and in the course of the “Arab Spring” (e.g. in Iraq, but also Libya), the prospects of “pacification” at the global level – through Chapter VII enforcement action by the UN – are dim. What is required – first and foremost in view of the

catastrophic humanitarian situation – is an **exercise in responsible realpolitik** at the regional level, on the part of those powers who (for whatever reason) have a stake in the conflict or who have come out in support of one of the parties. While, in the initial phase, foreign actors have contributed to the intensification of the conflict, risking an uncontrollable chain of events, in the present phase of the war it is them who can induce the domestic actors to consider compromise, and who bear responsibility to “moderate” this process between the conflicting parties and among themselves (in view of their competing national, i.e. strategic, interests).

The “trilateral mechanism” between Russia, Turkey and Iran to monitor the ceasefire has shown the potential of such an approach. It may be too late to return to the *status quo ante*. Instead of searching for an elusive “ideal” peace (which might only prolong the war), a **new “regional compact”** will have to be agreed that must address social, ethnic and religious issues, the root causes of the conflict in Syria, and include a compromise between, and **realignment** of, the rights and national aspirations of all peoples in the region. This would not be a new version of “Sykes-Picot diplomacy,” but an open and rational renegotiation of interests among all parties and their partners, based on commonly recognized principles of international law.

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