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Geopolitics of proxy warfare and non-state actors in the Syrian conflict

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🇷🇺 Russian Geopolitical Strategy

Russia’s intervention in Syria (beginning in 2015) was a watershed moment that preserved the Bashar al-Assad government. Its primary interests are the maintenance of its only Mediterranean naval facility in Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base. By acting as the primary patron of the Syrian state, Russia has re-established itself as a central power broker in Middle Eastern affairs, effectively countering Western ‘regime change’ narratives while testing modern military hardware in a live theater.

🇺🇸 US Strategic Objectives

The United States’ involvement has evolved from supporting moderate rebel groups to a primary focus on the territorial defeat of ISIS. This led to a tactical partnership with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). US presence, particularly in the Al-Tanf garrison and eastern oil fields, serves a dual purpose: preventing an ISIS resurgence and creating a strategic block against Iranian territorial expansion (the ‘Land Bridge’) from Tehran to Beirut.

🇮🇷 The Iranian Land Bridge

Iran views Syria as a vital component of its ‘Axis of Resistance.’ By supporting the Syrian government through the IRGC-Quds Force and various Shia militias (including Hezbollah), Iran seeks to maintain a secure corridor for weapons transfers and logistical support to Lebanon. This ‘Land Bridge’ provides Iran with strategic depth and a direct front against its regional rival, Israel, while cementing its influence over Syrian state institutions.

🇹🇷 Turkish Security Interventions

Turkey’s primary concern in the Syrian conflict is the growth of Kurdish autonomy along its southern border. Ankara views the YPG (a core component of the SDF) as an extension of the PKK, a group it designates as a terrorist organization. To prevent a contiguous Kurdish-held territory, Turkey has launched multiple military operations (Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring) and supports the Syrian National Army (SNA) to create ‘safe zones’ for refugees and security buffers.

SDF and Rojava Autonomy

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), dominated by the Kurdish YPG, have established the ‘Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria’ (Rojava). They utilize a unique governance model based on ‘Democratic Confederalism.’ While they were the West’s most effective boots on the ground against ISIS, they exist in a precarious geopolitical position, caught between Turkish hostility, US tactical reliance, and the Syrian government’s desire to reclaim centralized control.

Salafist-Jihadist Non-State Actors

The vacuum created by the Syrian civil war allowed for the rise of transnational jihadist groups. While the ISIS ‘Caliphate’ was territorially defeated, its remnants remain an insurgent threat. Simultaneously, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate—has evolved into a proto-state actor controlling the Idlib province. These groups utilize complex funding networks, including taxation of local populations, illicit trade, and foreign donations, to maintain their influence.