



SYRIA STILL MATTERS
CHARTING A STRATEGIC APPROACH
TO SYRIA POLICY

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SUMMARY

Nine years of conflict in Syria has had a profoundly destabilizing effect on regional and international security. Although overarching dynamics have changed, the crisis is far from over — it is merely evolving. All of the conflict's root causes remain in place and many have worsened. In controlling less than two-thirds of the country, the Syrian state and its Russian and Iranian backers are increasingly incapable of addressing the many challenges they face: economic collapse and inflation, fledgling insurgencies, a resurgent ISIS, a COVID crisis, endemic corruption and mismanagement, elite infighting, and increasingly public levels of popular discontent. What happens in Syria never stays in Syria. The United States cannot afford to prematurely withdraw or sustain today's inconsistent and ill-considered policy — it must step up, re-assert its leverage, strengthen its partners, mobilize its allies, and move determinedly toward protecting American interests and helping to diplomatically resolve the crisis once and for all, creating space for foreign actors, the U.S. included, to depart Syrian soil responsibly.

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INTRODUCTION

There can be no underestimating the geostrategic consequences of Syria's crisis — it has transformed the world in ways that no other conflict has done in decades. The unprecedented exodus of refugees toward Europe in 2015 arguably catalyzed a surge in far-right populism that rippled all the way to the United States, emboldened Brexit, provoked disunity within the European Union, and challenged transatlantic ties like never before. Syria's neighbors meanwhile — all U.S. allies — continue to face the immeasurable strains imposed by refugee populations that have expressed no sign of returning willingly unless substantive political change is realized at home.¹

The rise of ISIS gave way to a years-long wave of terror attacks, resulted in a further erosion of nation state borders in the Middle East and Africa, exacerbated ethnic and sectarian tensions in multiple hotspots worldwide, mobilized the most expansive multinational military coalition in modern history, and created conditions in which NATO's second-largest standing army — Turkey — is now more at odds with the alliance than in unity with it. The international norm against the use of chemical weapons was not just flouted on several occasions by Syria's regime, but nearly 340 times.² Iran, meanwhile, found the time and space to expand its destabilizing behavior further than ever before and Russia was granted the foothold it needed to begin challenging America's alliances and exploiting conflicts

and vulnerable governments in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and further afield.

In Syria itself, the human cost of nine years of war and the unrestrained brutality of Bashar al-Assad's regime is palpably clear. Over 500,000 people have been killed, more than 100,000 others remain missing,³ and nearly 12.5 million people (over half the population) have fled their homes. Years of regime carpet bombing has left over 50 percent of the country's basic infrastructure destroyed or unusable,⁴ and there is no prospect for any meaningful reconstruction. Meanwhile, rife corruption, warlordism, mismanagement, and government incompetence have left the economy in tatters. More than 90 percent of Syrians⁵ now live under the poverty line and inflation, exacerbated⁶ by the financial crisis next door in Lebanon, has seen the Syrian pound lose at least 60 percent of its value since January 2020. Domestic economic strife is now giving way to tensions within the regime's elite and stimulating rising and arguably unprecedented levels of public discontent⁷ within communities that have stood by the regime throughout the war.

Though the U.S.-led coalition defeated ISIS's territorial "caliphate" in March 2019, the jihadist group is now resurging in areas controlled by the regime, where the group killed 76 pro-regime personnel in 35 attacks⁸ in August. ISIS attacks in Syria's central desert are increasing in frequency, scale, and scope and it appears only a matter of time before the jihadist group attempts to take and hold territory again. At the same time, al-Qaeda retains an active

array of loyalist factions in northwestern Syria, some of which are covertly engaged in planning terrorist operations in Europe and potentially beyond.

Dozens of Iran-backed Shi'a militias, led from the front by Hezbollah, remain active across Syria, where they are growing roots and integrating into an expanded front against Israel. That intimidating reality continues to fuel a campaign of aggressive Israeli airstrikes that hit Iranian-linked targets across Syria at will. Concurrently, Turkey has established a seemingly permanent presence in large swaths of northern Syria, fueling a bitter conflict between Arab and Turkmen factions and the largely Kurdish-commanded Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

SYRIA STILL MATTERS

Although the Assad regime now controls a little over 60 percent of the country's territory,⁹ dominating the more densely populated west commonly referred to as "Useful Syria," the crisis is far from over and almost 8 million Syrians (roughly 45 percent of the in-country population) remain outside regime authority. In fact, the crisis appears to be entering a new and more complex phase, as the regime's inability to consolidate control, stabilize, or rebuild the areas it does control becomes increasingly clear.

Much of Idlib, home to at least 3 million civilians and over 30,000 irreconcilable or deeply entrenched jihadist and opposition

fighters, remains out of regime hands, as does a substantial chunk of eastern Syria, where the U.S.-backed SDF controls the vast majority of Syria's valuable oil resources as well as large swaths of agricultural land. In southern Syria, a Russian-negotiated "reconciliation" deal with the armed opposition is fraying at the seams, giving way to a substantial insurgency responsible for over 400 attacks in the last year. ISIS looks set to be an increasingly significant threat and with winter approaching, Syria's economic crisis and a severe¹⁰ — though unacknowledged — COVID-19 emergency is likely to give rise to further instability.

All of this is to say that Syria still matters. And if there are two things to learn from these past years, they are that debilitating and seemingly intractable conflict at the heart of the Middle East is very bad for global stability and for American interests; and that what happens in Syria never stays in Syria. With a new wave of instability on the horizon, we ignore Syria at our peril, and the peril of a great many of our allies.

In recent years, Syria policy has been the victim of a crippling lack of presidential leadership or strategy. Though America's approach to the Syrian crisis has been consistently insufficient and imperfect, President Donald Trump has dealt a series of damaging blows to U.S. influence, leverage, and credibility. From the December 2018 withdrawal order and its subsequent reversal, to the cessation of stabilization funding to areas liberated from ISIS and the de facto greenlighting of a Turkish intervention against our SDF partners in October 2019, Trump has undermined



“The last nine years show clearly the outcome and costs of insufficient international action to resolve the root causes of Syria’s crisis and mitigate its many effects.” (Photo by AAREF WATAD/AFP via Getty Images)

American security and stability and further narrowed an already challenging list of policy options.

However, all is not lost. Though the days of demanding the outright removal of Assad may be over, the U.S. retains significant national security interests in Syria. Chief among them is seeing a negotiated end to the conflicts between the regime and those who oppose it and the creation of space in which meaningful negotiations could begin to deal with long-term policy goals, including prospects for administrative decentralization, limited security sector reform, elections, and power sharing. Beyond that, the U.S. has strategically consequential interests in realizing the defeat of ISIS and the protection of the homeland and U.S. assets overseas from terrorist threats; the prevention of the

further use of weapons of mass destruction; resolutions to the humanitarian and refugee crises, thereby lifting the burdens currently held by our allies; and the need to push back against the increasingly malign roles being played by states hostile to the U.S. and its interests, principally Russia and Iran.

CONSIDERING SYRIA POLICY

These are significant asks and there is undoubtedly no magic solution. However, the last nine years show clearly the outcome and costs of insufficient international action aimed at resolving the root causes of

Syria's crisis and mitigating its many effects. Given this context, having "no policy" will represent the definition of "bad policy."

Amid a continuing debate over Syria policy, some have suggested that America should simply withdraw, arguing that America does *not* have sufficient interests to remain engaged and that instead, we should leave the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran to shoulder the burden of dealing with the crisis. These proposals advocate a policy that on the surface might appear quite appealing in the short term, but they fail to account for the medium- and long-term inevitability that those actors will fail to contain, let alone resolve, Syria's many sources of instability. Indeed, with just 60 percent of the country under their control today, they are already falling far short. If previous years are anything to go by, the U.S. would continue to suffer the costs emanating from Syria, but no longer be in a position to meaningfully intervene or protect its interests.

Another, more isolated strand of the debate suggests the U.S. should drop all opposition to the Assad regime and initiate a fresh policy aimed at re-engagement — removing sanctions, initiating dialogue, and supporting the recovery of the economy and the stabilization and reconstruction of the country. Beyond betraying the foundational moral values that America is built upon, this proposal fails to acknowledge the single guiding rule of the Syrian crisis: that the Assad regime is *the* root cause and principal driver of every facet of the crisis, so many of which have destabilized the world and damaged American interests.

Granting legitimacy to that regime and providing it with the space and potentially even with the resources to recover would aggravate all drivers of conflict, exacerbate instability, and guarantee an intractable and costly crisis.

Both of these proposed policy approaches claim to align with domestic skepticism about foreign military engagements and "forever wars" and the prevailing belief that there is little the U.S. can do to help. This foreign policy vision is based on a profoundly short-term agenda that pays little realistic attention to its long-term consequences. The emergence of an isolationist America that deals only in diplomacy and disavows meaningful assertiveness will not catalyze a sudden epiphany in the minds of the world's many dictators and malign actors. Diplomacy was tried in the Syrian crisis' earliest phases and it catastrophically failed because the regime believed it could achieve more with violence. This vision as it pertains to Syria is also based on a flawed argument, for it fails to acknowledge that America's current engagement in Syria is qualitatively different to rightfully critiqued misadventures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

While all aspects of the so-called "War on Terror" since 2001 — principally in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan — have reportedly cost the U.S. a total of \$6.4 trillion,¹¹ the counter-ISIS campaign that began in 2014 and covers Iraq and Syria has been a more minimalist, cost-effective, and militarily efficient effort that has amounted to \$40 billion¹² in Iraq *and* Syria combined. That is a mere 1 percent of U.S. defense spending

worldwide and 0.2 percent of GDP. The war in Afghanistan (2001-present) has tragically killed over 2,400 American servicemen and women and a further 3,836 were killed in Iraq (2003-2011), but our engagement in Syria (2014-present) has been markedly less risk-laden, resulting in six combat fatalities. While the 2003 invasion of Iraq (based on a lie) sparked a debilitating war and our war in Afghanistan has barely dented the Taliban, the 2014 intervention in Syria (based on an immediate threat to U.S. citizens and interests) dealt a wholesale defeat to ISIS's territorial caliphate and killed almost its entire senior leadership, including notorious leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Moreover, by operating with a light-footprint approach by-with-and-through local partners, the U.S. has also contributed toward creating a multi-ethnic, militarily and politically capable actor in the SDF, which should — *if* we make the right decisions — outlive America's presence on Syrian soil.

Our continued presence on the ground, in partnership with the now 100,000-strong SDF, provides strategically significant leverage to bolster America's negotiating position on Syria's broader challenges. As noted, Syria policy offers no easy fixes, guaranteed solutions, or straightforward options. Indeed, as situations evolve beyond our control, policies will inevitably need to adapt, but it surely makes most sense for the U.S. to keep "skin in the game" and to remain actively and meaningfully engaged in what is a highly consequential crisis with far-reaching effects.

While U.S. policy on Syria should by definition be working toward an eventual disengagement, doing so prematurely would represent a betrayal of our local partners, the abandonment of our regional allies, and a callous and strategically dangerous surrender of Syria to an appallingly chaotic fate. By prematurely departing and ceding leverage for little if anything in return, the U.S. could not and would not be capable of isolating itself from the effects of instability and chaos that will inevitably emanate from Syria. Worse still, when internal conflict within Syria again challenges regional and international stability, a withdrawn U.S. would have no relationships or tools to return.

STAYING THE COURSE: THE STRATEGIC OPTION

Instead of disengaging from Syria altogether or capitulating and re-engaging with a brutal, criminal regime, the U.S. has a clear interest in recommitting to a Syria policy aimed at sustaining influence, re-expanding leverage, rescuing credibility, and enhancing American diplomatic relationships — all with the aim of achieving an eventual negotiated settlement and U.S. departure. What the U.S. needs is a holistic and consistent policy focused on addressing root causes, not just symptoms, and which better matches ends with means, but also avoids underestimating American potential.

This policy would be closely aligned to U.S. interests, in seeking an end to conflict and Syria's humanitarian crisis and the creation of conditions more amenable to refugee return; the containment and de facto defeat of ISIS; the protection and further development of the SDF; and the exploitation of America's leverage to mobilize the international community to work determinedly toward a political settlement that seeks sequential strategic changes, including decentralized governance, a transitional power-sharing government followed by elections, as well as meaningful security sector reform, chemical weapons inspections, and eventual disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and peace and reconciliation processes.

Instead of focusing blindly on the counter-ISIS mission and leaving other aspects of Syria policy to waver on the sidelines, this policy of recommitment would consist of five distinct, but inter-connected and inter-dependent strands of policy. Individually, each would seek to address specific objectives and taken together, they would serve to reinforce each other and amount to a genuinely holistic strategy. The following section proceeds to explore the core structure, mechanisms, and goals of each: (1) Defeat ISIS and Preserve and Protect the SDF; (2) Idlib; (3) Humanitarian Response; (4) Sanctions; and (5) Diplomacy.

DEFEAT ISIS AND PRESERVE AND PROTECT THE SDF

When ISIS dramatically expanded throughout swathes of Syria and Iraq in mid-2014, proclaiming a "caliphate" and initiating a genocide against Iraq's Yazidi community, the Obama administration mobilized an unprecedented multinational coalition to begin rolling it back. In Syria, the U.S. deployed a small force of approximately 2,000 troops to partner with, train, equip, and expand a controversial Kurdish militia into a more socially representative umbrella now known as the SDF. By March 2019, the SDF, backed by U.S. troops and small contingents of British and French special forces, had dealt a comprehensive defeat to ISIS's territorial "state." That the methodical advance against ISIS was, in large part, won by the SDF — a local sub-state actor, albeit backed by U.S. artillery and air support — was a clear demonstration of the value of the "by-with-through" approach. It minimized U.S. costs and risk to U.S. personnel, while simultaneously building partner capacity and creating newly advantageous political conditions.

However, despite the scale of the challenge faced in 2014, rolling back ISIS's territory was arguably the easy bit. The U.S. and the SDF have now transitioned from targeting an overt quasi-conventional enemy to dealing with a covert guerilla insurgency — a pivot from semi-conventional warfare to counterterrorism. This new phase

of the counter-ISIS campaign places a particular emphasis on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), coupled with the use of capable special forces-type operatives to target ISIS cells and standard infantry-type forces to hold and patrol territory. But instead of having the necessary resources to sustain this complex mission, while continuing to train and equip the SDF, President Trump removed U.S. troops and resources — reducing American force levels from 2,000 to 600.¹³ The president further added to the challenge by opening the gates to Turkey's October 2019 intervention, which damaged U.S. credibility on the ground, broke pre-existing deconfliction lines, and invited in Syrian and Russian troops, who have an interest in challenging U.S. patrols and lines of control. It has only been by dangling the

prospect of “oil” that President Trump has been convinced (again, and for now) to avoid a total withdrawal.

Though ill-thought-out decisions in the Trump Oval Office have made today's circumstances more challenging than they needed to be, the counter-ISIS campaign remains strategically vital and, with good corrective decisions, also sustainable. With 600 troops on the ground, the U.S. and the SDF have maintained a largely effective containment of ISIS in the “Eastern Secure Zone” east of the Euphrates, but through a series of intimidatory actions, Russia and the Assad regime are clearly determined to test America's staying power. That ISIS is so clearly resurging west of the Euphrates shows just how tenuous the situation remains. Were the U.S. to withdraw altogether, ISIS will inevitably thrive again.



“Were the U.S. to withdraw altogether, ISIS will inevitably thrive again.” (Photo by STRINGER/AFP via Getty Images)

In response, the U.S. should seriously consider returning troop levels to 1,500 or 2,000 in order to reassert America's credibility and deterrence power and to re-enhance the counter-ISIS mission before ISIS's resurgence west of the Euphrates begins to negatively impact the security situation in the U.S.-administered zone east of the river. Just as important, this recommitment to the mission and re-assertion of U.S. power would augment Washington's diplomatic clout to address two vitally important problems. First, the U.S. needs to urgently push for a renegotiation of air and ground deconfliction lines with Russia in Syria's northeast, to avoid the kinds of unpredictable incidents witnessed in recent months. Prior to and concurrent with that, the U.S. needs a leader capable and willing to resolutely call out Russia and the Assad regime for unwarranted acts of aggression, while credibly stressing that U.S. troops reserve the right to respond militarily in self-defense.

Second, a re-enhanced U.S. posture in eastern Syria would strengthen America's hand vis-à-vis Turkey and its continued hostility to the SDF, as a result of its links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Though an immediate Turkish threat to the SDF inside the Eastern Security Zone appears to be kept at bay for now, the wider dynamic of hostility needs addressing more meaningfully. The U.S. should build upon and reinforce pre-existing tracks of back-channel dialogue between associates of the SDF and the Turkish-backed opposition with the goal of negotiating a détente and cease-fire. By de-escalating dynamics

inside Syria, the U.S. should also consider re-exploring the prospects for confidence-building measures and agreed-upon deconfliction mechanisms between the SDF and Turkey, while simultaneously offering to help catalyze and endorse resumed talks between Turkey and the PKK. These collectively represent long-term objectives, but charting a path headed in their direction remains crucial for any sustainable U.S. presence in eastern and northeastern Syria, to securing long-term aid throughout northern Syria, and to de-escalating a diplomatic crisis with Turkey that diminishes America's potential leverage on wider Syria questions.

Beyond the need to sustain the counter-ISIS mission and insulate our SDF partners from hostile adversaries, America's Syria strategy should acknowledge that diplomatic leverage does not merely emanate from our presence on Syrian soil but also from the ability of the SDF to exert itself as a consequential political-military actor in and of itself. To that end, and in conjunction with the above steps in relation to Turkey, the U.S. should insist that the SDF gain a seat at the Syrian negotiating table. It makes no sense to continue to refuse — or fail — to secure our own partner a role in negotiating the future of a country in which they currently control over a quarter of the territory. This too would strengthen America's hand more broadly.

IDLIB

Though a delicate cease-fire remains in place, the situation in Idlib and peripheral areas of western Aleppo, western Hama, and northeastern Latakia continues to represent an acute humanitarian crisis, particularly with winter approaching and COVID-19 slowly spreading. With over 3 million civilians squeezed into a pocket of territory accounting for no more than 3 percent of Syria, a resumption of hostilities would be catastrophic. The Syrian regime continues to shell targets on an almost daily basis and joint Russian-Turkish patrols of the M4 highway have been hit by several small-scale attacks claimed by irreconcilable jihadists vocally opposed to the cease-fire. Turkey's air campaign in March 2020 imposed unprecedented costs on Syrian regime forces and coerced Russia into a full 180-degree shift in pushing for negotiations and a cease-fire. There are lessons to be learned here, as to what *does* impact regime calculations. Nevertheless, for how long the Syrian regime will continue to be deterred remains to be seen. Though Turkey could step up again militarily in an attempt to reinforce the cease-fire, it could also re-open refugee channels toward Europe, as it did in February 2020 — particularly if faced by a panic-induced flow of internally displaced persons from Idlib into Turkey.

Though the U.S. has far less influence over the situation in Idlib, it must remain vocally and determinedly supportive of the cease-fire and active in contributing toward

ameliorating the continued humanitarian crisis — particularly through the winter and amid COVID-19. Should hostilities resume, American statements of concern and delicately worded support for Turkey will not be a sufficient response to what will fast become the most significant humanitarian crisis witnessed in nearly a decade of conflict in Syria and something that undermines the prospects for any resolution to the wider crisis. Such an outcome would also threaten to catalyze internationally destabilizing refugee movements and create a chaotic situation easily exploitable by terrorist actors.

Instead, the U.S. should message publicly *in advance* that any military action leading to mass civilian casualties — and not necessarily limited to chemical weapons use — risks inviting punitive U.S. military action. In this instance, U.S. interests align closely with those of Turkey, a state whose military action just months ago against Syrian forces demonstrated palpably how it is possible to deter regime aggression and coerce a reversal of its policies of aggression. More broadly, the U.S. must be prepared to consider imposing targeted sanctions against entities associated with the Russian Armed Forces and affiliated defense industry. To date, Russia has escaped Syria-linked sanctions, despite its demonstrated¹⁴ and U.N.-verified¹⁵ history of war crimes — including bombing hospitals and public markets — and its instrumental role in continuing to facilitate, enhance, and cover diplomatically for pro-regime military actions. That should change if Idlib is reignited.

Beyond the Idlib-wide situation, the U.S. also maintains a vital counterterrorism interest in northwestern Syria, where senior ISIS remnants and an array of global jihadists associated with al-Qaeda continue to operate. After a prolonged period of inaction caused by a de facto Russian ban on U.S. access to northwestern airspace, the U.S. resumed drone operations in mid-2019. Whether that is a reflection of a formal but unacknowledged deconfliction arrangement with Russia or an American assumption of increased risk remains unclear, but the strikes continue to be crucially important. Following the defeat of its territorial “caliphate,” some portion of ISIS’s senior leadership appears to have fled and gone to ground within the complex environment of northern Aleppo. Of equal or more import are the activities of al-Qaeda operatives, some existing within the jihadist movement’s affiliate Tanzim Huras al-Din and others within smaller outfits, but all of which are actively exploring opportunities for external operations.

To sustain this counterterrorism campaign aimed at protecting the American homeland, U.S. citizens, and U.S. assets overseas, the U.S. should seek to negotiate a formalized deconfliction arrangement with Russia allowing for as-needed operational access to airspace. A dedicated deconfliction hotline and agreed upon rules of operation would tackle today’s important and unanswered tactical challenges — thereby reducing risks to U.S. aircraft. The U.S. might also be wise to consider building upon the national security-level bilateral Counterterrorism Working Group

still in existence between Washington and Moscow. While U.S.-Russia ties remain severely strained and areas of mutual interest are minimal, countering terrorism is perhaps the single area where some form of limited cooperation and confidence building might be possible.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Syria remains a severe humanitarian crisis and the U.S. should sustain its status as the world’s leading provider of aid and assistance. By mid-2020, American humanitarian aid to Syria and Syrians had amounted to over \$11.3 billion, but refugee admissions onto American soil were at an all-time low. The U.S. should reverse the latter trend swiftly. In 2019-20, approximately a third of in-country assistance provided through U.N. channels was to areas controlled by the Assad regime. That policy should be continued, although in concert with likeminded allies in Europe and beyond, the U.S. should work assertively with the U.N. secretary-general’s office to better enforce existing mechanisms and put into place conditions to better ensure aid entering via Damascus actually reaches those who need it and not those deemed most loyal to Assad’s regime.

Neither Damascus nor its Russian and Iranian backers can afford to support those living under their control in Syria and they therefore rely on foreign aid (and

American money) to avoid a revolt and to keep loyalist NGOs — many linked to militias associated with war crimes — in business. No country should ever have to consider cutting humanitarian aid to places where it is needed, but the Syrian regime's well-established policy of diversion and financial and political exploitation of foreign assistance should not be allowed to continue unchallenged.

The U.S., in collaboration with its many like-minded allies, must also urgently begin planning for the very real likelihood that in mid-2021, all cross-border aid into Syria will no longer have the approval of a U.N. Security Council resolution (UNSCR). In July 2020, Russian action at the U.N. (via UNSCR 2533) restricted *all* cross-border aid into Syria to a single border crossing at Bab al-Hawa (into Idlib) for 12 months, thereby placing extreme limitations on aid assistance to the at least 7.8 million civilians living across Syria's north and east — in the U.S. and SDF-administered east and the Turkish-administered west. It is highly unlikely that that 12-month period will be extended, given Russia's stated desire to see *all* humanitarian assistance channeled through Damascus (and thus be subjected to regime manipulation and direction). Should northwestern, northeastern, and eastern Syria remain out of regime hands in mid-2021, all those residing there would become wholly dependent on the regime being willing to direct valuable aid and assistance to those who stand in open opposition to it — an unlikely prospect.

Given the palpable risks and clear precedents, the U.S. should not accede to the regime's demand for full control over aid provision. Instead, the U.S. should explore two parallel policies, which together would best provide for any potential outcome. First, the U.S. should immediately begin diplomatic work advocating for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs cluster in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep to be maintained as the core mechanism for continued cross-border aid and assistance into northern Syria, via (at minimum) the Bab al-Hawa crossing, in exchange for the continued significant level of U.S. support for aid operations in Damascus. Second, with an eye further into the future, the U.S. and allies should also plan for the possibility of having to resume non-U.N.-authorized cross-border aid into non-regime-held areas, as was standard practice from 2011 to 2014. This would represent a very heavy undertaking and would require the full cooperation of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government, as well as the Turkish government. Given its hostilities with the SDF, this would require extensive preparatory negotiations that seek to address the SDF issue writ large (as outlined in the ISIS section, above).

The U.S. must also resume stabilization support and revitalize and tighten inter-agency processes involved in providing critically important aid, assistance, stabilization, civil society support, and development work in eastern Syria. Within this effort, the U.S. must revive the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) program and redeploy START

Forward teams into SDF-controlled areas in eastern Syria — actions that are of critical importance but have been shuttered since a 2018 Trump executive order. The region is home to extensively damaged infrastructure after years of ISIS occupation and the counter-ISIS campaign that followed. This is space urgently in need of and deserving of stabilization.

From basic services, to education and health care, the U.S. has clear and present strategic interests in ameliorating the poor humanitarian situation in eastern Syria — both to enhance and sustain the SDF's status in Syria and to remove the root causes of radicalization and violent extremism that, if left untouched, will surely be exploited by the likes of ISIS. In conjunction with re-energized efforts to reform the SDF's inner structures and the representation and rights of Arab-majority

bodies within it, the U.S. must also act more assertively to prevent Turkey from continuing to cut vitally important water supplies to northeastern Syria through the Alouk water station and via dams inside Turkey.

If the U.S. is to realize its objectives — both small and big — in Syria, it will require leverage and credibility. Neither of those will be possible should we continue to abandon our own partners and their communities to fend for themselves amid destruction that we ourselves had a hand in engendering. Should the U.S. take an initial lead in seeking to stabilize SDF territories, allies will surely follow suit. As events in recent years have demonstrated, sustainable and meaningful burden-sharing does not begin when the prime partner ceases to contribute altogether. Moreover, by taking



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the initiative and then building a coalition of partners and allies, the U.S. will advance its wider leverage and goals in Syria.

SANCTIONS

Like the European Union, the U.S. maintains an extensive array of sanctions against the Syrian regime, founded upon the country's long-standing status as an international state sponsor of terrorism and expanded upon by its criminal brutality amid the crisis that began in 2011. As with any other malign actor, those sanctions should remain in place until the criminal actions that engendered them are corrected and in some cases, when accountability is realized.

Sanctions remain one of several important economic and diplomatic tools short of military action that the U.S. government has at its disposal to enhance rightful demands for justice and accountability, to restrain or deter war crimes, and to push for a political settlement in line with the international standard: UNSCR 2254. The recently implemented Caesar Act, a piece of legislation drawn up in Congress in an unusual example of bipartisan unity, represents a potentially powerful stick to wield as part of wider U.S. efforts to prevent regime war crimes and discourage financial support of the Syrian regime. Until now, Caesar's implementation has not lived up to its billing — targeting mid-level businessmen and figures already under EU

sanctions — but it nonetheless remains a potent instrument in America's non-military arsenal.

However, sanctions are not a magic solution and they certainly will never work alone. They are but one “stick” of many that ought to be enforced as part of a more holistic diplomatic strategy that also clearly identifies and offers potential carrots in exchange for positive change, or concessions. This is what the Trump administration has arguably failed in most starkly — the lack of diplomacy as the leading face of Syria policy. Back-channel meetings with Russia are not enough. As the past nine years have demonstrated, non-military sticks alone do not even put a dent in the Syrian regime's recalcitrance and barring what would be an unwise military intervention, what remains is hard-headed diplomacy, backed with formidable sticks and clearly delineated, sequenced carrots.

As part of that diplomatic effort in which sanctions play a role, the U.S. must also do better to control the narratives surrounding its Syria sanctions policy. This has been especially problematic surrounding the Caesar Act, which as congressionally passed law, will likely remain in place for a significant period of time. Named after a Syrian military defector who smuggled thousands of gruesome photographs detailing the Syrian regime's industrial-scale torture and execution program in place in its prisons, the Caesar Act is designed to protect civilians — hence its full title: the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. Its primary purpose is to prevent or deter all foreign assistance or financial

support to the Syrian regime, which would directly or indirectly free up domestic resources to continue or escalate military suppression of the population.

Given the evolving context in which the act was introduced and as part of its “maximum pressure” approach, the Trump administration has shifted the narrative (but not the legislation) surrounding the Caesar Act toward blocking regime reconstruction. That has heightened concern about the act having an indiscriminate or unintended detrimental effect on the humanitarian situation in regime-held areas. Moreover, the act’s wording targeting financial transfers into bodies associated with the regime has also raised concerns of banking over-compliance, increasing the risks for NGOs operating across Syria (which depend on foreign transfers to sustain their activities) and civilians inside the country (who rely on remittances from abroad to survive).

All of these concerns are legitimate and the U.S. should do more to shape a narrative that better suits policy and advances its goals. After all, banking over-compliance has been a consistent problem for NGOs operating in Syria, it is not a challenge anew. Moreover, the State and Treasury Departments should develop more flexible and focused monitoring mechanisms and two-way reporting hotlines through which sanctions would avoid adverse effects that undermine U.S. strategy and unduly impact otherwise innocent civilian communities or humanitarian activities. Given the significant overlap between U.S. sanctions and similar measures imposed by the

European Union and individual European allies, there should also be a dedicated channel through which U.S. sanctions policy is maintained and measured in close coordination with Europe. More broadly, the U.S. must continue to convey the fact that it remains the world’s leading provider of humanitarian aid and compare that to the regime’s closest allies. Russia, by contrast, has provided less humanitarian aid to Syria and Syrians than IKEA and has acted in order to block others’ assistance from reaching Syrians inside the country.

DIPLOMACY

In recent years, Syria’s political process has been relegated to the distant sidelines — in large part due to the collective retreat of the international community from the Syria file. Russia’s response to that retreat, along with Western acquiescence to Russia’s “reconciliation” proposals, was to methodically and brutally recapture large swathes of opposition territory and then formalize new realities within a new “Astana process,” whereby diplomatic efforts were replaced by a trilateral military construct bringing Russia, Turkey, and Iran together. Once regime conquests had been consolidated, Russian pressure helped catalyze a UN-run Constitutional Committee consisting of 150 members — 50 from the regime, 50 from civil society, and 50 from the opposition — to begin re-

writing Syria's constitution. That process is on life support while a meaningful diplomatic process is nowhere to be seen.

In truth, this unfortunate reality exists by choice. The Trump administration and America's allies around the world have decided to take a step back and have avoided pushing seriously for something more meaningful. There is no doubt that the leverage that can be brought to the table is not what it was several years ago, but the tools available to us today remain strategically significant. Russia would not spend so much time and energy challenging American troops in northeastern Syria; blocking and challenging air access; vetoing diplomatic statements at the U.N.; and disseminating extraordinary volumes of disinformation and propaganda if the U.S. and its allies were of little importance in the Syrian context.

Russia has been signaling clearly for some time that it seeks an eventual political settlement, and it needs the U.S., Europe, and others as signatories. A recent high-level visit to Damascus also made clear¹⁶ the extent to which Moscow perceives Syria's intractable financial ruin and the U.S. and SDF's control of vitally important resources as an issue of existential policy importance. Ultimately, we can rubber-stamp a deal authored in Moscow assented to in Damascus, Tehran, and Ankara, or we can take a collective stand with allies and push for something we believe will better safeguard stability, security, and our own interests. It will take a substantial secretary-level effort to recuperate this state of affairs,

but given the stakes involved and the costs of allowing the status quo to remain, the U.S. has every interest in trying.

The initial phase of this substantial effort would focus on putting the foundations together for an eventual diplomatic push. From the outset, the U.S. should expend every effort to ensure that the Constitutional Committee and the U.N.'s efforts to keep it moving are supported and kept alive. Though the committee is not going to achieve change in Damascus, let alone see Syrians achieve justice and accountability, its true importance for now is in keeping the mere concept of a U.N.-run Syria process a living reality. While supporting that effort, the U.S. should begin actively exploring — both publicly and also with Russia privately — the prospects for progress on confidence building measures such as a nationwide cease-fire, the release of prisoners, and improved levels of aid and assistance throughout Syria, including to “reconciled” areas that have remained largely untouched by any form of assistance since mid-2018.

While undertaking these early efforts, the U.S. public messaging on Syria should consistently declare both America's determination to realize an eventual settlement defined along the lines of UNSCR 2254 and its desire to engage in a diplomatic effort in which America would be willing and capable of deploying sticks and offering carrots. A communications strategy based solely on “maximum pressure” kills off any prospect of constructive diplomatic action from our adversaries in Syria and

should be balanced in such a way that reflects America's most consistent policy demand: a political process.

As such, another immediate step the U.S. must take is to begin re-mobilizing a diplomatic coalition of allies and partners who share America's interests in Syria, principally in demanding a negotiated settlement that paves a path toward resolving at least some of the core root causes of the crisis. Particular effort should be expended on engaging with U.S. allies in the Middle East, ensuring that the region acknowledges the need for, at minimum, some element of change in Damascus and that without that, instability, suffering, and security threats will continue. Indeed, Syria's crisis is far from over and the new phase that it appears to be entering arguably presents a more complex array of challenges and

security threats than we have faced before. This coalition mobilization should be undertaken with a sense of urgency and with the express aim of revitalizing the idea of a major international diplomatic effort aimed at resolving Syria's crisis.

By regaining diplomatic momentum and re-asserting America's leading position in constructively mobilizing the international community, the U.S. will be better placed to initiate or refocus bilateral talks with Russia onto Syria diplomatic issues. At the outset, the U.S. and Russia share an interest in seeing Syria achieve a political settlement and in terms of moving in that direction, the U.S. should turn early bilateral discussions toward shaping the confines of a future process, negotiating red lines, and determining minimum goals. The U.S. should insist on a four-way process,



"Russia has been signaling clearly for some time that it seeks an eventual political settlement, and it needs the U.S., Europe, and others as signatories." (Photo by DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images)

allowing space for negotiating teams from the regime, independents, the SDF, and the opposition. Having put into place the other four aspects of proposed policy laid out in the abovementioned sections, the U.S.'s ability to help initiate a meaningful process will be far greater than it is today.

Within this exploratory bilateral process, the U.S. must avoid falling into trap of legitimizing or backing Russian proposals that appear constructive on the surface but that are in fact acutely destructive. The 2013 deal to remove and destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles appeared to provide a way out of military action, but in fact rescued the regime from a U.S. response that, even if limited, had the potential to strike a debilitating blow to regime confidence and unity. Before that deal was proposed and as Syrians braced for American missile strikes, roughly half of Syria's parliamentarians fled to Lebanon along with almost the entire elite business community — a clear sign of what a credible U.S. threat of punitive force is capable of. Similarly, the U.S. decision years later to endorse and take part in forming Russian-proposed "de-escalation zones" in 2017 looked like a key to winding down the war and saving lives, but instead, it was a cunning scheme aimed at cutting support to the opposition and forcing it to cease-fire, while providing the Syrian military with the time and space to brutally conquer them one by one.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the U.S. must acknowledge that despite the costs, effort, and risks involved, determinedly dealing with the crisis in Syria presents far more favorable prospects for reducing threats to U.S. interests than leaving the file alone or dealing with it at arm's length. The last nine years serve as shockingly clear evidence of what the costs of insufficient action look like, and far from being over, Syria's crisis is merely evolving. That it has not ended demonstrates how important it continues to be to address the root causes, rather than the symptoms.

Should Syria's economic collapse continue, restlessness within neutral and loyalist communities is almost certain to gradually rise, which promises a continued degradation of Syria's societal structures and many more opportunities for conflict and intractable instability. Worse still, after nine years, the Syrian state is entirely incapable of addressing the rising number and expanding scale of security challenges it faces, from fully formed armed opposition in the northwest, to fledgling insurgency in the south and a resurgent ISIS in the central desert. That fact, paired with the regime's obstinate insistence on still fighting, guarantees further war and continued humanitarian suffering for the foreseeable future. Leaving Syria and its allies to deal with these challenges alone could not be more short-sighted.

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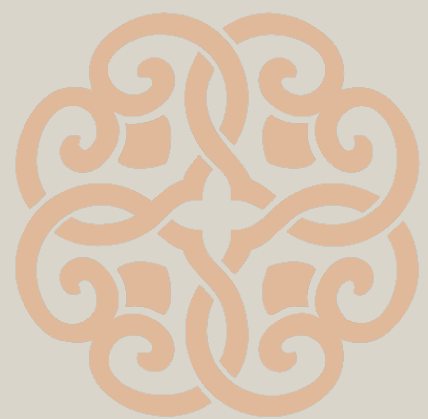
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