

Syria

Note: On the issue of Syria there were significant differences of opinion between MEI scholars and we have presented two different perspectives for consideration.

Syria: The Case for Staying

ISSUES

- Syria is a failed state that after nine years of civil conflict remains unable to exert anything close to a monopoly on the use of force in the 62% of the country that it claims control over. Syria's ability to control its borders remains negligible, and the regime's capacity to sustain an advantage remains entirely dependent on Russia and Iran.
- ISIS is resurgent, especially in the regime-controlled central desert. Al-Qaeda maintains a potent and globalist faction, Tanzim Huras al-Din, in the northwest, which is actively seeking to plot external terror attacks. Meanwhile, former al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, appears best-placed to manage a long-term insurgency in Syria in the future.
- Syria remains one of the world's most significant state sponsors of terrorism, with ongoing strategic alliances with Iran's Quds Force, Hezbollah, and an array of designated Shi'a militant groups. In addition to its alliances with Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime maintains important diplomatic and military ties with North Korea. Syrian intelligence also has a documented history of cooperation with al-Qaeda and ISIS since the early 2000s.
- The economy has been effectively destroyed in recent years, worsened by financial crisis in Lebanon, with the exchange rate fluctuating between SYP2000 and SYP2500 to the USD in August 2020 and nearly 85% of the population living in poverty. A famine may be on the horizon. There is no prospect of meaningful reconstruction, meaning vast swathes of the country will remain in ruins, with public services in former conflict-affected areas virtually non-existent.
- 6.2 million people (approximately 36% of the in-country population) remain displaced inside Syria and a further 5.7 million are refugees outside the country. With displaced people now making up a majority of Syrians, their continued demand for political change has profound implications. At least two-thirds of Syrians in-country depend on aid, but cross-border aid access is being restricted by Russia.
- The Syrian regime seeks to use force to regain control of 38% of the country currently governed variously by the Syrian opposition, Turkey, and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), but it is likely to lack the manpower to do so for some time.
- Given its lack of capacity, the Syrian regime is facing — and failing to confront — an escalating insurgency in the south, responsible for more than 400 attacks in the last year.

- The Syrian regime has committed an extensive list of war crimes and crimes against humanity. To date, it has faced no accountability, beyond U.S. and E.U. sanctions.

US INTERESTS

- Syria already looks set to be mired in civil conflict for many years, providing an environment ripe for terrorist organizations whose existence is defined by an ambition to attack America and Americans. If there is one rule that has remained true over the last nine years of Syria's conflict, it is this: "What happens in Syria does not stay in Syria." By disengaging and ceding leverage for little if anything in return, the U.S. cannot and will not be capable of isolating itself from the effects of Syrian instability and threats inevitably emanating from it. Worse still, when internal conflict again challenges international stability, a withdrawn U.S. will have no relationships or tools to return.
- The U.S. has an interest in maintaining a meaningful hand in Syria, centered around our continued fight against terrorism and desire to foster, at a minimum, areas of stability. The U.S. cannot afford to cede hard-earned influence and sources of leverage.
- Syria's geopolitical position makes it the crucial determinant of regional stability and security; if it is left to rot and fester, the Middle East as a whole will suffer.
- The U.S. partner, the SDF, is a viable political alternative, or competitor, to the regime.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Acknowledge that: (1) an effective Syria policy that protects U.S. interests and allows the U.S. to continue to influence developments in Syria requires a sustained, measured, and consistent U.S. presence and policy engagement; (2) this is possible with a low-cost, light-footprint approach that is financially, militarily, and diplomatically sustainable and incomparable to parallel campaigns in Iraq or Afghanistan; and (3) that disengagement guarantees further instability *and* removes any U.S. ability to manage, contain, or neutralize the inevitable threats that would result.
- Maintain a military presence — approximately 1,000 personnel — in the eastern "security zone" to continue training, equipping, and partnering with the SDF in combating ISIS's attempt to resurge.

- * Exploit this continued presence to contain and deter hostile actors — Turkey, Syria, Russia, and Iran — from attacking the SDF, undermining the fight against ISIS, and exacerbating drivers of instability.
- Complement counter-terrorism activities with meaningful stabilization aid — buttressed by coalition pledges — to ameliorate root causes of violence and radicalization.
- Enhance intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance over northwestern Syria to identify and neutralize al-Qaeda operatives engaged in external attack planning.
- Enforce the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act to prevent economic assistance to the Syrian regime and deter continued war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Utilize all aspects of U.S. influence and leverage to enhance international pressure on the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran to engage meaningfully with a political process defined by UNSCR 2254.
- Ensure allies remain committed to a policy of non-re-engagement with the regime, absent substantial progress in the above.

ISSUES

- The future of the small U.S. military force still operating in eastern Syria and the U.S. air force no-fly zone there.
- Managing the remaining, long-term ISIS problem.
- Addressing the huge humanitarian crisis, especially the 5.4 million Syrian refugees.
- Israeli sensitivities to Iranian missile deployments in Syria.
- The future of U.S. sanctions that are causing sharp economic pain in Syria but not compelling the Syrian government to make compromises on Western demands for reform.
- At this late stage in the war, the U.S. cannot guarantee Syrian Kurdish autonomy without permanent stationing of U.S. forces in Syrian Kurdish towns.

US INTERESTS

- Syria is not now, and never has been, critical to American standing in the Middle East. For 40 years Damascus has been aligned with Moscow and Tehran.
- The presence of a small American military force in eastern Syria has never provided leverage to reform Assad's government and will not do so in the future; Russia and Iran will escalate to ensure survival of the Assad government.
- Sanctions are hurting the Syrian economy, the elite, and the impoverished general population, but Assad's key security elements are still loyal and the government is not signaling any willingness to meet Western demands for reform.
- Israel can contain the Iranian military presence in Syria unilaterally and does not need a U.S. military presence in Syria.
- The remaining ISIS elements scattered around Syria, both inside government-held lands and in eastern Syria, do not pose a large, immediate threat to homeland security, but U.S. forces in Syria are exposed to attacks from militias aligned with Damascus and Tehran.

- Syria refugee flows into Europe in 2015 boosted anti-democratic populist movements in European allied states, and another surge would cause new political problems.
- Deterring future atrocities like those by Assad's government in Idlib would help international stability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work with Ankara and Russia to finalize a security arrangement whereby the Syrian government and its Russian allies resume control of eastern Syria so that they, not ISIS, control territories and oilfields, and then withdraw all U.S. forces.
- In return for ending support to the Syrian Kurdish autonomous region, secure arrangements that ensure Ankara verifiably tightens border controls and forestalls movement of extremists from Syria to the West.
- Political and indirect military support for Turkish efforts to deter Syrian government attack against Idlib.
- If Moscow blocks cross-border aid to northwestern Syria, suspend U.S. assistance for UN humanitarian operations inside Syria, push for Damascus and its allies to take full responsibility for feeding the population in Syria while the U.S. and its allies assume the UN logistical role in maintaining cross-border aid into northwestern Syria.
- Boost spending on refugee assistance in Lebanon (priority), Jordan, and Turkey to forestall another refugee movement surge.