

# SYRIA: TWO VIEWPOINTS

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## ISSUES

- U.N.-sponsored talks about the Syrian constitution are deadlocked and, in any case, do not address the underlying issues that sparked the 2011 uprising and subsequent escalation to civil war. The U.N. talks are a fig leaf hiding a stalemate on reaching a political solution.
- Russia has expanded its logistical hub and military penetration of the Syrian army in the past four years. However, Russia intervened to save the Assad regime, and it will not seek to force destabilizing concessions on Assad and his clique. Instead, Moscow wants to see Damascus reassert control across Syria with its help.
- The Russians are not comfortable with increased Iranian influence in Syria, and they green-light sustained Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets. The Russians do not want, however, Israeli airstrikes to undermine the Syrian government's fragile stability.
- Russia and Turkey coordinate to a limited degree around embattled northwestern Syria, but they are far from reaching any kind of enduring settlement for opposition-controlled Idlib Province.
- Turkish antagonism toward the American-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia is not based on security concerns. Rather, Ankara worries about its long-term territorial integrity because of sympathies among Turkish Kurdish communities toward their Syrian Kurdish cousins, as seen in 2014 pro-YPG demonstrations. Ankara will try to block the YPG and its political front from joining any major political negotiation track.
- Over four years the American military deployment and control of the small oilfields in eastern Syria has never translated into useful leverage. The Russians, Iranians, and Assad government will wait out the Americans. Over time, the growth of the YPG

statelet in eastern Syria under an American military umbrella will drive Ankara and Damascus to cooperate against it with Russian encouragement.

## US INTERESTS

- Syria has never been vital to America's standing in the Middle East. For 40 years Damascus has been aligned with Moscow and Tehran.
- Hope is not analysis. The reality is that American control of eastern Syria and complementary financial pressure will not extract reform from a weakened but unrepentant Assad government whose allies will not accept its collapse.
- Israel can contain the Iranian missile program in Syria unilaterally and Russia is implicitly helping. A U.S. military presence in Syria is not needed to help Israel.
- Remaining ISIS bands in eastern Syria do not pose an immediate threat to homeland security. However, U.S. forces in Syria risk attack from militias aligned with Damascus, Tehran, and Ankara and those governments, not the U.S., will determine any future escalation.
- It is marginally beneficial to the U.S. to see Russia compelled to commit more of its limited resources to contain ISIS in Syria and prevent ISIS from gaining ground there.
- Syria refugee flows into Europe in 2015 boosted anti-democratic populist movements in European allied states, and another surge would cause new political problems.
- Cessation of Russian and Syrian attacks in northwest Syria would help international stability.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Military forces will never totally destroy ISIS because they cannot address the political, economic, and social grievances that spawned it. Thus, the U.S. should seek to have ISIS adequately contained in Syria by other actors whose greater interests in Syria will drive them to deploy more forces to contain ISIS.
- Work with Ankara and Moscow to finalize a security arrangement whereby the Russian government assumes control of eastern Syria and its oilfields in coordination with the Syrian Kurdish YPG faction and the allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Russia will need to send more forces. Then withdraw all U.S. forces.
- In return for ending support to the Syrian Kurdish YPG-led autonomous region, secure Ankara's acceptance to verifiably block movement of extremists from Syria to the West.
- Provide political and indirect military support for Turkish efforts to deter Syrian and Russian government attacks on the large displaced civilian populations in northwestern Syria.
- If Moscow blocks U.N.-directed cross-border aid into northwestern Syria, suspend U.S. assistance for U.N. humanitarian operations out of Damascus, leave Russia to take full responsibility with its Syrian government ally for feeding the populations under their control while the U.S. and its allies assume the U.N. management role for cross-border aid into northwestern Syria. Assuming this role will be a major challenge for USAID and the State Department.
- Boost spending on refugee assistance in Lebanon (priority), Jordan, and Turkey to forestall another refugee movement surge.

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## ISSUES

- After a decade of intense conflict, Syria is now a failed state divided roughly into four competing geographic zones of control:
  1. Regime areas in the west, center, and south (~63%)
  2. The “Eastern Security Zone” controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by U.S. troops (~28%)
  3. Rural northern Aleppo, governed by the Syrian National Army, backed by Turkey (~6%)
  4. Territory administered largely by former al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the northwest (~3%).
- While in control of nearly two-thirds of the country, Assad faces a series of security challenges that continue to worsen as his regime’s inability to secure, stabilize, govern, or provide for communities under his rule becomes ever clearer. In fact, the most unstable zones of Syria in 2020 were areas violently recaptured by the regime in 2018, which underlines clearly that regime “victories” won through siege, starvation, and carpet bombing, and followed up by claims of Russian-mediated “reconciliation,” are not being met.
  - In the regime-controlled central desert, ISIS continues a slow resurgence, launching increasingly significant attacks on Syrian, Russian, and Iranian positions and demonstrating a desire *and* ability to temporarily capture populated territory. ISIS attacks have increased in frequency and scale for consecutive months dating to mid-2020. In SDF-controlled eastern Syria, ISIS has not achieved similar results.
  - In southern Syria, Russia’s 2018 “reconciliation” deal with surrendered opposition factions is crumbling, as former rebels now under Russian tutelage continue to launch attacks on regime and Iranian positions with increasing frequency. Multiple days-long battles have occurred in recent months, involving tanks and heavy artillery. More than 500 attacks have been recorded in the past 18 months.
- Covert insurgent activity continues to target regime positions and personnel in the capital Damascus and other urban centers throughout regime territories.
- The Druze-majority governorate of al-Suwaida remains restive, with large and vocal components of urban communities frequently protesting en masse against the regime, its corruption, brutality, intimidation, and incompetence.
- The Israeli Air Force continues to launch night-time strikes against Iran-linked targets across western, central, and eastern Syria, and there remains no prospect for any cessation of such unilateral actions.
- Syria’s economy has been crippled after 10 years of conflict and paralyzed by financial collapse next-door in Lebanon. Spiraling inflation has devalued the Syrian pound and severely curtailed access to foreign currency — damaging trade, hampering access to oil and key staple products like wheat and flour, and limiting the availability of electricity. Damascus’s decision to print money and produce larger cash notes has only exacerbated the economic crisis and effectively eliminated Syria’s middle class altogether.
- With 50% of Syria’s basic infrastructure destroyed and with the regime sustaining its status as an international pariah, there is no prospect of any meaningful reconstruction. For ordinary Syrians, there is no light at the end of the tunnel and today’s “post-war” reality brings far greater challenges than the height of military conflict in earlier years.
- Economic collapse, government corruption and incompetence as well as the regime’s continued hostility to “reconciled” areas leaves Syria in a humanitarian crisis. This is particularly acute in the north and east — regions controlled by the regime’s adversaries. In July 2021, Russia is expected to veto any further cross-border aid into the north, an action that would leave nearly 5 million civilians without urgently needed aid.
- 5.7 million Syrian refugees remain outside of the country and 6.2 million are displaced inside Syria. With displaced people

now representing a majority of Syrians, it is very concerning that recent, extensive polling has indicated that few, if any, are willing to consider returning without substantial political changes *and* reforms in Damascus.

- 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 vital alliances with Russia and Iran, Syria's regime maintains close ties to North Korea, while Syrian intelligence also has a documented history of cooperation with al-Qaeda and ISIS, dating to the early 2000s.
- Syria has recently emerged as a major producer and exporter of narcotics to markets in the Middle East and Europe, highlighting the increasing influence of the regime's involvement in transnational organized crime, and indeed its financial dependence on it.
- 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 EU sanctions.

## US INTERESTS

- Syria 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 past decade 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 or its allies and interests from the effects of Syria's instability and the threats that will inevitably spill from it. Worse still, when Syria's crises once again challenge global stability, a withdrawn U.S. will have no relationships or tools to return.

- The U.S. has an immediate interest in continuing to combat ISIS in Syria and to prevent the group's resurgence. In sustaining this effort, the U.S. contributes toward sustaining a meaningful region of relative stability, in which the survival of a credible SDF entity offers us discernible leverage to address broader Syria policy questions.
- In an era in which great power competition looks set to play a defining role in determining U.S. foreign policy, the U.S. cannot afford to fall by the wayside in demanding accountability and meaningful reforms in Syria. More broadly, given the inevitable surge in instability that would follow a premature U.S. disengagement from Syria, America's credibility and alliance convening power are at stake.
- Given its position in the heart of the Middle East, the U.S. has a clear interest in — at a minimum — limiting instability in Syria and its capacity to destabilize its neighbors and foster threats to U.S. security at home and abroad. So long as Syria remains the same or worse, the presence of nearly 6 million Syrian refugees within Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq places an unsustainable strain on vital American allies that risks catalyzing serious, secondary consequences that could change the region forever.
- The U.S. has an interest in re-asserting the norm against the use of chemical weapons — something eroded by nearly 350 such attacks in Syria since 2011. Syria's violation of the 2013 deal to eradicate its stockpiles is a serious concern, including at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which continues to accuse Damascus of concealing information from its inspectors, including surrounding discoveries of Sarin components at a previously undisclosed site.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. must acknowledge that (1) an effective Syria policy that protects U.S. interests and allows the U.S. to continue to influence and/or contain 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 deeper instability and would remove any U.S. ability to manage, contain or neutralize the 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 and preventing its resurgence.
  - Exploit this presence to contain and deter hostile actors from attacking the SDF, undermining the fight against ISIS and exacerbating drivers of instability.
- Complement counterterrorism activities with increased 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 planning external attacks.
- Enforce the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act to prevent economic assistance to the Syrian regime and to deter continued war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Utilize all aspects of U.S. influence and leverage to enhance international pressure on the 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.