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Policy Memo

# FREEZE AND BUILD: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO SYRIA POLICY

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Cover photo: Syrians stage a demonstration against Bashar al-Assad regime within the 10th anniversary of the Syrian civil war in Idlib on March 15, 2021. [Photo by Muhammed Said/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.](#)



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While Syria diplomacy may have appeared poised for a period of renewed investment in early 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting collapse in U.S. and European diplomatic relations with Moscow mean Syria diplomacy is now all but dead.
- An unprecedented humanitarian crisis now appears to be imminent. To adapt to this new environment, the international community must consider a comprehensive change in approach, prioritizing the freezing of conflict lines and a more strategic use of aid, stabilization, and targeted rebuilding in areas free of Assad regime rule.
- Having committed every possible war crime and crime against humanity, Bashar al-Assad has survived — but he stands atop the ruins of a state. His regime and its brutal security apparatus serve as a potent deterrent to *any* meaningful refugee return.
- The existing U.N. cross-border mechanism that permits the provision of aid into Idlib is up for a renewal vote in July and the chances of a Russian veto have never been greater.
- Conflict in Ukraine will exacerbate an already crippling wheat crisis in Syria, making a famine highly likely. This will be compounded by spiraling inflation and fuel shortages. In this grave situation, Assad looks set to become acutely vulnerable.
- A “freeze and build” strategy would not be a policy of partition and it would *not* consider UNSCR 2254 dead or weaken international commitment to it. In fact, this policy would strengthen international resolve and increase leverage to pursue UNSCR 2254's goals.

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S., in concert with likeminded allies, must launch a determined “freeze and build” strategy for Syria, pivoting away from tactical emergency assistance and toward strategic stabilization and targeted rebuilding across areas of northern Syria not controlled by Assad's regime.
- While sustaining aid to the millions of civilians in northern Syria is vitally important, the priority must now be to focus on designing a superior and more sustainable alternative to the existing U.N. cross-border mechanism — seeking to foster durable calm and civilian self-sufficiency.
- In order to do so, the U.S. and Europe must work swiftly and determinedly to exploit current strains in Turkey's relationship with Russia in an attempt to bring Ankara closer to our Syria policy orbit. Despite Turkey's concerns

about the SDF, there is a chance for a substantive quid pro quo arrangement with Ankara, focused on aid and stabilization work in Syria's northwest and northeast.

- Recent work undertaken by the U.S., U.K., and France to consider alternative methods of delivering aid into northern Syria must be inserted into high-level talks with Ankara.
- There is an opportunity to finally take advantage of the large and well-resourced exiled Syrian business community, which has long wanted to invest into areas not controlled by Assad. The U.S. and Europe should consider introducing sanctions waivers across northwestern *and* northeastern Syria, to create conditions that would be more amenable to a commercial aid effort.
- The U.S. should continue to publicly commit to maintaining its existing troop presence in northeastern Syria aimed at combating ISIS. The U.S. should also publicly and consistently signal that those troops retained the right to self-defense and would guarantee existing lines of control.
- The U.S. and Europe should also commit to maintaining the existing sanctions against the Assad regime and associated actors implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria. Sanctions should be framed as punitive in nature, while authorities should continue ongoing efforts to assess and minimize unintended consequences.
- The U.S. and Europe should remain hard-nosed when engaging with allies in the Middle East and make it clear that re-engaging with and normalizing Assad and his regime will damage their standing in our capitals.
- The U.S., Europe, and likeminded allies must also place far greater pressure on the U.N. to address the deep structural issues associated with its Damascus-based aid effort. The international community cannot continue to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into a system manipulated to such an extent by Damascus that only 49 cents of each dollar goes toward aid, and that aid is then diverted away from those in need or stolen by regime operatives.

## Introduction

Late 2021 and early 2022 had presented some reason for possible optimism with regards to diplomatic moves aimed at tackling Syria's long deadlocked political process. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed everything. Syria diplomacy as we know it is over and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis appears to be imminent. To adapt to this decidedly new environment, the international community must consider a comprehensive change in approach, prioritizing the freezing of existing conflict lines and a more strategic use of aid, stabilization, and targeted rebuilding in areas free of Assad regime rule.

The paper that follows and the policy recommendations contained within it would have represented a smart and strategic pivot for Syria policy before events in Ukraine, but in today's current context, they offer the only meaningful response to a markedly different environment and a series of resulting challenges. Should the international community remain on its current path on Syria policy, the plethora of worst-case consequences and destabilizing international effects will become all but guaranteed. The past decade of Syria's crisis ought to be a lesson to the world that leaving it alone to fester only brings costs.

As Syria's crisis enters its twelfth year, the human costs associated with over a decade of conflict and instability only continue to rise. More than half of Syrians are currently displaced, making Syria the largest [displacement crisis](#) since World War II. At least 90% of Syrians are currently [living](#) in poverty and 11.1 million [require](#) humanitarian aid. More than 12.4 million Syrians are food insecure (a 56% rise from the year prior), including 1.3 million who are [severely food insecure](#), meaning they regularly miss meals due to a lack of access to affordable food. Twenty percent of all children inside Syria under the age of five [suffer](#) from sustained malnutrition. Nearly 8 million Syrians lack meaningful access to doctors or medicine and more than [2 million](#) children have no access to education.

There are many, many more such statistics.

Eleven years of conflict have left Syria interminably broken. Estimates for the cost of reconstructing Syria's immense levels of destruction range between [\\$250 billion](#) and [\\$400 billion](#).

After three years of stagnation and latent conflict, that figure is likely even higher today. Notwithstanding the practical impossibility of raising such a mammoth sum, Syria lacks the basic infrastructure to even begin to implement a rebuilding effort of such a scale. In fact, [more than half](#) of Syria's basic infrastructure currently stands destroyed or unusable.

Standing at the helm of this disaster is Bashar al-Assad, the architect of Syria's catastrophic decline into ignominy. Having committed every possible war crime and crime against humanity, Assad has [survived](#) — but he stands atop the ruins of a state. His regime and its brutal security apparatus serve as a potent deterrent to *any* meaningful refugee return, as all [polling](#) consistently indicates. In fact, Syrians continue to [flee](#) regime areas, in search of a better life elsewhere.

The widespread suffering, desperation, and frustration that now prevails augurs very poorly for Syria's future stability. While roughly one-third of the country remains out of regime hands, the two-thirds purportedly under its control is highly insecure. Beyond persistent criminality and warlordism, [localized insurgency](#) and anti-regime [protest movements](#) have also emerged. Though it was intended to exemplify a Russian-led effort to "reconcile" former opposition areas, southwestern Syria remains the [most unstable](#) area of the country, nearly four years after its violent subjugation in mid-2018.

Perhaps the most compelling illustration of what Assad's regime promises to represent for Syria lies in its newfound status as a [narco state](#). In 2021, at least [\\$3.5 billion](#) worth of Captagon — produced in a network of factories run largely by associates of Assad's powerful brother [Maher](#) and his [4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division](#) — was seized by authorities abroad, from [Greece](#) and [Italy](#), to [Jordan](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), and as far afield as [Malaysia](#) and [Sudan](#). That sum alone represents more than five times Syria's [entire legal exports in 2021](#). According to two international law enforcement and intelligence sources, the scale of unseized Syrian-made narcotics is likely to have been at least five times larger, meaning a minimum of \$17.5 billion. Such money is now literally the backbone of a shadow economy, keeping Assad and his regime clique afloat and personally enriched, and Syria's people subjugated and poorer than ever.

The Assad regime's emergence as a global narcotics exporter is an apt illustration of the long-standing lesson from Syria's

# “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has changed everything. Syria diplomacy as we know it is over and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis appears to be imminent.”

crisis: [what happens in Syria never stays in Syria](#). Over the past decade, global stability has been [negatively impacted](#) by a Syrian-induced refugee crisis, which itself emboldened Brexit, provoked disunity across Europe and challenged transatlantic ties like never before. Syria’s neighbors have seen their economies crippled by refugee populations who look likely now to become permanent components of their societies. ISIS took advantage of Syria’s instability to grow into a global terror movement; NATO’s second-largest standing army is now more at odds with the alliance than in unity with it; the norm against the use of chemical weapons has been flouted [more than 340 times](#) by Assad’s regime; and more than [500,000 people](#) are dead. There can be no understating the geopolitical costs of Syria’s crisis for the world over the past 10 years. That Russia felt emboldened enough to invade Ukraine in 2022, precipitating the most significant conflict Europe has seen since World War II, was in large part a consequence of [lessons](#) it learned from Syria.

## Ukraine’s Poison Pill

While Syria diplomacy may have appeared poised for a period of renewed investment in early 2022, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the resulting collapse in U.S. and European diplomatic relations with Moscow mean Syria diplomacy is now all but dead. According to U.S. and European diplomatic officials, the only active diplomatic channel with Russia is now in Vienna, where talks over a nuclear accord with Iran continue apace — everything else is off. In fact, even the U.S.-Russian military deconfliction line for Syria is thought to be inactive, since Russia stopped taking calls on it in early March, according to two European officials. When asked to confirm these claims, a senior U.S. official said only that Russia’s “actions around U.S. forces in Syria” have become “more unsafe and unprofessional” than prior to the invasion of Ukraine.

It is all well and good that the U.S. and close allies are convening and consulting again on Syria policy on a regular basis, but without an open and constructive diplomatic channel

with Russia, there is little hope for any diplomatic progress — on issues of micro or macro importance. To continue to pursue a “step for step” process, or indeed any other diplomatic effort aimed at resolving or settling Syria’s crisis under the current conditions would be a meaningless endeavor.

While the trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine remains unclear, there appears to be little chance of it being swiftly resolved. If there are any lessons to be learned about Vladimir Putin’s resolve from cases like Chechnya and Syria, it is that far from being humiliated into concessions, he is more likely to press on. Should Russia continue its assault, as should be expected, it can be assumed that U.S.-Russian and Russian-European relations will continue to deteriorate. This places the international community in a distinctly new strategic environment, in which long-standing multilateral institutions and mechanisms traditionally relied upon to mediate and de-escalate are more or less impotent. The U.N. Security Council had little value before the invasion of Ukraine, but it is now worthless.

Beyond its fatal impact on Syria’s political process, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine looks likely to catalyze a series of unprecedented and imminent humanitarian challenges in Syria. One particularly acute strategic concern relates to the threat likely posed to cross-border aid access in northern Syria. The existing U.N. cross-border mechanism — mandated by [U.N. Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2585](#) — that permits the provision of aid into Idlib via the Bab al-Hawa crossing is up for a renewal vote in July and the chances of a Russian veto have never been greater. Such a prospect would create an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, with 2.4 million civilians immediately being cut off from assistance that they are “[entirely](#)” dependent upon to survive. Aid agencies have warned that a severing of cross-border aid would almost immediately result in a [75-80% deficit](#) of food needed to feed the northwest’s population of [4.2 million people](#).

Beyond cross-border aid, Syria will also now suffer from a dramatic reduction in wheat supplies — considered [the](#)



Photo above: A Syrian family living in Khaled Ahmad Camp in Idlib during heavy rain and cold weather in Syria on November 04, 2020. [Photo by Muhammed Abdullah/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.](#)

[most vital](#) food product on the Syrian market. As a result of [desertification, successive droughts, and conflict-induced damage](#) and mismanagement, Syria's wheat crop in 2022 is already expected to be [less than 25%](#) of its average annual crop yield of 4 million tons. 2021 alone saw Syria's domestic wheat production decline by [more than 60%](#), while the Syrian pound's dramatic collapse — from a pre-war value of SYP 50 per dollar to roughly [SYP 3,850 today](#) — cripples Damascus's capacity to purchase domestically, from the agricultural belt located in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled northeast.

While the Assad regime had reportedly negotiated the acquisition of [1 million tons](#) of wheat from Russia, those deals are now almost certainly null and void. With the Black Sea export route now an active warzone, Ukraine having [banned all exports](#), and the Russian and Ukrainian wheat

markets (which combined account for [at least a third of the global supply](#)) either damaged or turned inwards amid war and sanctions, Syria's worst-case scenario is now a reality. Damascus has now banned almost all food exports and placed unprecedented financial restrictions on banks and citizens. The Assad regime appears to have sabotaged its own plans to prioritize wheat production, by failing to prevent the disappearance of at least [40% of seeds](#) through corruption and sale abroad on the black market. Even the World Food Programme (WFP) will struggle to assist Syria now, as most of its wheat supply is obtained [from Ukraine](#).

The prospect of such a catastrophic wheat shortage promises a possible famine across Syria later this year. None of Syria's 11 years of unparalleled humanitarian crises will compare with what may now be all but inevitable for 2022.



It is therefore time for the U.S. and likeminded allies to fundamentally reconsider the foundational priorities for Syria policy. To continue to invest time and resources into a lifeless political process would not just amount to a policy of “kicking the can down the road” — it would be to repeatedly open up an already infected self-inflicted wound, bit by bit. In truth, a step for step process never really had a feasible chance of success; it is simply not in the Assad regime’s DNA to consider concessions. The Constitutional Committee, meanwhile, has long been an endeavor intended only to keep the mirage of a political process alive. To pursue these processes now, amid a total diplomatic impasse, would have no other effects beyond degrading our own credibility and leverage over time.

## A Momentary, Fleeting Diplomatic Push

When the Biden administration came into office a little over a year ago, there had been some hope that a clear and assertive push to resolve Syria’s crisis might emerge. President Joe Biden’s public emphasis on [placing](#) human rights and diplomacy at the center of his foreign policy, assertion of America’s primacy in great power competition, as well as a campaign track record of [strong statements](#) on Syria all seemed to point in a hopeful direction.

For almost a year, the Biden administration claimed privately to be engaged in a deliberative Syria policy review. Yet with the exception of a [high-level investment](#) in securing a United Nations Security Council extension for cross-border aid into northwestern Syria in July 2021, that review was increasingly perceived as cover for Syria’s precipitous decline in policy importance. U.S. allies in Europe grew increasingly exasperated and in the Middle East, long-time American partners saw the Biden administration’s apparent disinterest and [began to re-engage with](#) Assad’s regime. Even international organizations like the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and [Interpol](#) quietly re-integrated Syria into their networks and positions of responsibility.

The Biden administration changed posture in late 2021. After completing its Syria policy review, it announced that U.S. policy would be oriented around three priorities: a continued campaign against ISIS in northeastern Syria, along with an accompanying troop deployment; a focus on sustaining

humanitarian access and providing aid to those in need; and a diplomatic push for a nationwide ceasefire. Pursuing accountability efforts and a future settlement shaped by [UNSCR 2254](#) were described as “constants.”

With the revelation of this policy, the U.S. began to intensify diplomatic consultations with likeminded allies. The so-called “Small Group” was brought back to life, convened in-person in [Brussels](#) in December 2021 and again just recently, in [Washington D.C.](#) in early March 2022. The sudden re-emergence of the U.S. onto the Syria diplomatic stage was met by U.S. allies with relief and optimism.

High-level moves by Jordan, the UAE, and others in the region to normalize Assad’s regime, and the wave of outcry that then followed, appears to have helped catalyze the U.S. government’s sudden return to the “table.” It also aligned with a parallel push by senior U.S. officials to privately pressure these regional states to cease and desist from their “brotherly” engagements with Assad’s regime. With time, those normalization moves had resulted in little to nothing beyond symbolic statements. Despite a flurry of reported [investment deals](#) with the UAE, not a dollar appears to have changed hands and Jordan’s re-engagement with Assad has brought [more instability](#) along its border and no meaningful change in trade.

In parallel to this late U.S. push, U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen also spent the latter half of 2021 engaged in an intense period of consultations with key stakeholders aimed at exploring the prospects for a step for step diplomatic process on Syria. A quiet months-long U.S.-Russian bilateral dialogue — between U.S. National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin — was also thought to have been exploring the scope of a possible step for step process.

Instead of pushing for a formalized at-the-table peace process, a step for step effort would seek to engage in a largely transactional negotiation with Assad’s regime, demanding meaningful concessionary steps (such as prisoner releases, or aid access) in exchange for reciprocal measures from the West (like sanctions relief). By early 2022, Pedersen’s efforts were thought to have advanced to a point at which the process itself might soon begin — provided all the relevant stakeholders deemed it to have been worth the effort. When Pedersen briefed the Small Group on his work

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in early March 2022, he was met with a decidedly muted response — a clear reflection of newfound concerns and skepticism following on from Ukraine.

## Freeze and Build: A Strategy Focused on Aid and Development

With diplomatic efforts dead in the water and multinational institutions in a state of paralysis, the time has come to think outside of the box when it comes to Syria policy. To rely on years-old frameworks and assumptions would be dangerously short-sighted. The international community must now pivot toward a far more strategic approach to Syria — one focused on freezing existing lines of conflict and building zones of control and influence into self-sustaining regions of stability.

The time of reactive, short-term policy in which problems are treated with bandages must now be replaced by something constructive, seeking to stabilize areas of Syria and enhance our collective diplomatic leverage. By embracing a policy of strategic patience, the U.S. and allies would seek to create new realities in northwestern and northeastern Syria that would exist in parallel and stand in stark contrast to the life offered by Assad’s regime.

With a grave humanitarian crisis and economic collapse in the cards, and with Russia both distracted by Ukraine and now considered an international pariah in line with the likes of Kim Jong-un’s North Korea, Assad looks set to become acutely vulnerable. That is an opportunity that can only be exploited through a wholesale shift in policy approach.

It is important to state at the outset that this would *not* be a policy of partition, a prospect long greeted with deep hostility by Syrians of all stripes. This would also not be a policy that declared or considered UNSCR 2254 dead, or that served to weaken international commitment to it. Ultimately, this would be a strategic approach that at its core, acknowledged the long-standing reality that Syria’s conflict is already largely frozen and

that worked to stabilize and improve the lives of the millions of civilians living in areas under our influence or control. At the center of this approach would be a determination to get strategic about aid and stabilization work and to use it to enhance our leverage, rather than to weaken it in the way that our short-termist and reactive approach has until now.

A “freeze and build” policy would actually serve to strengthen collective international resolve and to increase leverage aimed at pursuing UNSCR 2254’s goals. In doing so, the U.S. and allies would be far better placed to engage in meaningful diplomacy aimed at settling Syria’s crisis, whenever conditions to do so became more amenable.

## Some things will stay the same

Before exploring what ought to change, it is worth emphasizing what would remain the same within an effective freeze and build strategy. The U.S. would continue to publicly commit to maintaining its existing troop presence in northeastern Syria aimed at combating the persistent challenge posed by ISIS. The U.S. would also publicly signal on a consistent basis that those troops retained the right to self-defense and would serve to guarantee the existing lines of control separating territories governed by our SDF partners and areas controlled by pro-regime forces and by Turkish-backed opposition groups. The U.S. — and covertly deployed allied special operations forces — would remain engaged in the counter-ISIS campaign, advising, assisting, and training SDF partner forces, while collecting intelligence and conducting counterterrorism operations.

Freezing existing lines of control across northern Syria ought not to be a controversial issue. Though imperfect, northwestern Syria has enjoyed the longest-lasting ceasefire of the entire 11-year conflict — now more than two years old. That relative calm was founded upon a bilateral arrangement between Turkey and Russia, following an unprecedented Turkish air assault against Syrian regime forces in late February and early March 2020. Though not officially a ceasefire per se, northeastern Syria also

enjoys relative calm thanks to a series of deconfliction and lines of control agreements involving the SDF, Russia, Turkey, and Damascus. Though tit-for-tat violent incidents continue to occur across lines in the northwest *and* northeast, there has been no meaningful threat of major and sustained hostilities for at least two years.

The U.S. and European allies would also commit to maintaining the existing array of sanctions against the Assad regime and associated actors implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria. Sanctions would be clearly framed as punitive in nature, while the U.S. Treasury Department and its counterparts in Europe would continue their ongoing efforts aimed at assessing and minimizing unintended negative secondary consequences. The U.S. and Europe would also work to consistently and determinedly counter an expected intensification of anti-sanctions rhetoric from Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran. At the core of that counter-narrative would be an assertion of the long-standing central truth: that a variety of other factors — such as regime corruption; the collapse of Lebanon’s economy; the enormous scale of destruction meted out by the regime since 2011; and a refusal of the regime’s primary external backers to contribute significant financial assistance — are of far greater consequence to Syria’s economic collapse and continued struggle than any effect of sanctions.

The U.S. and Europe would also commit to continue, if not double down on ongoing accountability efforts, including and particularly those utilizing powers of universal jurisdiction in Europe. The international community should be under no illusion that committing war crimes and crimes against humanity is not a temporary accusation, but a permanent one.

Likewise, the U.S. and Europe should remain hard-nosed when engaging with allies in the Middle East and make it clear in no uncertain terms that re-engaging with and normalizing Assad and his regime will damage their standing in our capitals. The recent restructuring of the Syria Small Group appears already to have sent that signal to some in the region — the phrase “you are with us or against us” comes to mind.

However, the U.S. must also be cognizant of the very real likelihood that should a nuclear deal be reached with Iran, the resulting dissent from traditional U.S. allies in the Gulf is likely

to cost our leverage over their respective Syria postures. Any recent progress in convincing the likes of the UAE to slow their re-engagement with Assad is likely to be scuppered by the furor following a new Iran deal. It may also serve as a sufficient motive to push Saudi Arabia into the re-engagement camp.

## Some things need to change

At the core of this freeze and build strategy is an urgent need to finally get strategic about aid and stabilization work in northern Syria. In order to do so, the U.S. and Europe need to work swiftly and determinedly to exploit the current strains in Turkey’s relationship with Russia in an attempt to bring it closer to our Syria policy orbit. Recent discussions with senior Turkish officials indicated a clear, highly unusual but potentially slim window in which to explore alternative strategic arrangements in northern Syria. Despite Turkey’s clear and well-known concerns about the SDF and its linkages with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), those discussions signaled a chance for a substantive quid pro quo arrangement with Ankara, focused on aid and stabilization work in Syria’s northwest and northeast.

Even before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there existed acute levels of concern about the prospect for a cross-border aid extension in the UN Security Council in July. Those fears are sky high now. For that reason, recent exploratory work undertaken by the U.S., U.K., and France to consider alternative methods of delivering aid into northern Syria must be inserted into a high-level discussion with Ankara. For Turkey, sustaining aid supplies into the northwest is an issue of existential importance, given the crippling instability that would inevitably result from any cut-off and the subsequent refugee flows that would then follow. For the West, any meaningful cross-border effort conducted independently from a U.N. mandate would require full Turkish participation and facilitation — so that discussion must begin urgently. Perhaps it was raised by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, during her [recent visit](#) to Ankara — the most senior U.S. visit to Turkey in some time.

But that discussion alone is not enough. While sustaining aid to the nearly 4 million civilians in northwestern Syria is vitally important, the emphasis must shift from emergency aid toward stabilization and targeted reconstruction. Moreover, that more strategic approach to assistance must also extend

across northern Syria, to encompass Turkish-influenced areas of northern Aleppo and the expansive SDF region in the northeast. There is no doubt that any decision to pivot toward a heavier emphasis on stabilization and reconstruction in SDF areas will be a source of concern for Turkey, but so too could a sudden cessation of Western support to the Turkish-influenced northwest. Despite the apparent diplomatic challenges, there would seem to be a deal to be had here, based on the principal of mutual strategic reciprocity.

Accomplishing such an ambitious agenda will require more than formidable deal-making with Turkey — it will also necessitate a surge in fundraising, at a time when European governments are bracing themselves for the humanitarian impact of the war in Ukraine. To confront this challenge, the policy and donor discussion must pivot away from fulfilling emergency needs toward stabilization efforts aimed at fostering a durable calm and civilian self-sufficiency. To put it in blunt terms: the international community must cease supplying tents, blankets, and food baskets and begin constructing semi-permanent housing for displaced peoples and provide investment for small businesses and agriculture, as well as sustainable resources like solar power. This aid would be delivered by a coalition of allied government aid agencies, with a central role assumed by USAID in the northeast of Syria, and in all likelihood, by Turkey's AFAD in the northwest.

This will present a challenge for an already stretched international donor community, but it is also an opportunity to finally take advantage of the large and well-resourced Syrian exiled business community. Many highly successful Syrian businessmen and women, based elsewhere in the Middle East and Europe, have long wanted to invest substantial sums of money into areas not controlled by Assad. Yet complications posed by U.S. and E.U. sanctions and a prioritization of emergency relief over stabilization and reconstruction have prevented any meaningful direction of funds into northern Syria. It is time that changed.

The U.S. and Europe should therefore consider introducing sanctions waivers across northwestern and northeastern Syria, to create conditions that would be more amenable to a commercial aid effort — driven by external investments into stabilization, reconstruction, local business, education, and civil society. The Biden administration is poised to implement a Caesar Act waiver to northeastern Syria, but for now at least,

it appears to have excluded the northwest from a similar arrangement. That is short-sighted and a missed opportunity to deal with Turkey.

The U.S. government may claim that a sanctions waiver in the northwest is impossible due to the fact that the area is under the de facto control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated terrorist organization. Yet the northeast is under the control of the SDF, which continues to be dominated at a leadership level by veteran operatives of the PKK — also a designated terrorist organization. If the Biden administration wanted to accomplish a north-wide waiver, it could do so. The considerable legal obstacles that would have been raised in 2014, when the decision was made to arm, equip, and partner with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) — [at that time](#), labeled publicly by the U.S. government as the PKK's Syrian affiliate, and thus as a terrorist organization — were pushed aside, after all.

In the northwest today, some donor governments have already provided non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implementing their assistance the necessary permissions to work around and, when necessary, to negotiate with HTS — but many others remain hesitant. One major issue impeding meaningful aid work in northwestern Syria is donor concerns around funding the work of NGOs inside areas controlled by HTS, [despite the fact](#) that the majority of U.N. assistance into the region is implemented by local NGOs.

There are at least 3.5 million displaced people across northern Syria, 2.5 million of whom are in the northwest. [Of those 2.5 million](#), more than 80% have been displaced at least six times and some as many as 25 times. A displacement crisis of this scale, and over such an extended period of time, requires more than short-term emergency assistance. These communities will not return to regime areas and unless the international approach to aid changes, they will remain displaced and acutely vulnerable.

There is also a powerful argument to be made that a more strategic approach to aid and development assistance to northwestern Syria is the most potent chance we have to challenge the primacy of a group like HTS. In January 2022, HTS rolled out a concerted public relations effort to show off how its "Salvation Government" had constructed a 2-mile road linking two towns in Idlib. The roadway, equipped with dozens



Photo above: 35 U.N. humanitarian aid trucks enter northwest Syria through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey on June 1, 2021. [Photo by Muhammad al-Rifai/NurPhoto via Getty Images.](#)

of street lamps, was lauded by HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani as a “[revolutionary achievement](#).”

Were international funds directed toward rebuilding Idlib’s basic infrastructure, educating its children, and fostering the local economy, it would quickly overshadow anything HTS was capable of achieving, and HTS’s unchallenged primacy would swiftly dwindle. Were HTS to attack or obstruct foreign stabilization and development efforts, it would reveal its self-interested priorities for all to see and risk losing everything. Far from emboldening HTS, a concerted international effort to be more strategic about aid and development work in Idlib would present a formidable and likely insurmountable challenge to the group’s dominance. It may also coerce it into continuing its [current path](#) of pragmatic moderation. [Repeated and concerted foreign pressure](#) against HTS in response to allegations of

interference in aid provision and allocation since 2019 has consistently seen the group step away and concede. HTS needs foreign aid to continue far more than it needs to control or benefit directly from it.

Beyond a determined effort focused on “building” local capacity and infrastructure across northern Syria, the U.S., Europe, and likeminded allies must also place far greater pressure on the U.N. itself to address the deep structural issues associated with its Damascus-based aid effort. The international community cannot continue to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into a system manipulated to such an extent by Damascus that only [49 cents](#) of each dollar goes toward aid, and that aid is then diverted away from those in need or stolen by regime operatives. No longer can the U.N.’s aid mission in Damascus [continue](#) to pay millions of dollars to regime-linked

military companies associated with war crimes, or channel aid through entities owned and run by members of the Assad family. If left unchallenged, this situation means donor money is more likely to contribute toward regime crimes than to help those truly in need.

## Facing Reality

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the precipitous collapse of U.S. and European relations with Moscow, the chances of meaningful progress being made in a Syrian diplomatic process were distinctly slim. The Constitutional Committee was considered largely dead — and was never a particularly serious endeavor to begin with — and discussions around a step for step initiative were being met with acute concern in many European capitals. That some regional states had re-engaged with Assad's regime under the guise of step for step but failed to achieve anything beyond subjecting themselves to international ridicule and condemnation, undermined the concept before the U.N. even got it started. Pursued in that style, a step for step process would only have [rewarded](#) Assad's regime by granting it legitimacy while plunging yet another dagger into an already enfeebled and largely illusionary diplomatic effort.

Today, the international community faces two choices when it comes to Syria policy. One option would be comparatively easy — to sustain the status quo, expressing support for diplomatic efforts that require the full, continuous, and constructive investment of all key stakeholders, while continuing to combat ISIS and hoping that aid may still be delivered to some of those in need, despite acute problems in Damascus and a likely Russian veto at the U.N. in July. Notwithstanding the many risks ordinarily associated with this years-old approach, the circumstances now prevalent with war in Europe mean that at best, this approach equates to “kicking the can down the road,” but at worst, it would be a policy that guaranteed a gradual degradation in leverage and a probable death knell for any meaningful resolution in the future.

The alternative approach, as laid out in this paper, requires a bold shift in posture. The U.S., Europe, and likeminded allies must acknowledge that Syria's diplomatic process is currently paralyzed and in order to maintain and possibly

enhance our collective leverage for whenever it comes back to life, we need to freeze conflict lines and get strategic about aid. In doing so, this policy would seek to stabilize northern Syria and help rebuild its basic infrastructure, offering more sustainable and credible alternatives to regime rule. This approach would necessitate intensive multilateral groundwork to prepare the necessary conditions and mechanisms to implement such a tactical-to-strategic pivot, but the potential benefits are manifold.

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine may provide a catalyst for this policy shift, in truth, it represents a strategic adaptation that has long been necessary. On today's current path, the international community is sleepwalking toward irrelevance or capitulation on Syria and that promises only to reward war crimes and guarantee long-term instability. Providing band-aids to the many symptoms of Syria's crisis has never been a sustainable solution, least of all today.





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