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# TURKISH-SYRIAN RE-ENGAGEMENT: DRIVERS, LIMITATIONS, AND US POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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A little over two weeks ago, the defense and intelligence chiefs of Turkey and Syria [met](#) face-to-face in the Russian capital Moscow — the first such meeting in over a decade. In the wake of the Russian-sponsored summit, which was described by participants as “[constructive](#),” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan held a [follow-up call](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed [visited](#) Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. As global media attention intensified around what some called “[a clear sign of normalization](#),” speculation then emerged claiming [plans](#) were afoot for the Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers to meet in mid-January to pave the way for an Erdoğan-Assad meeting, either in Russia or the UAE.

On the surface, this latest flurry of engagement with Assad’s regime is a major development within Syria’s nearly 12-year-old crisis. As the sole remaining backer and guarantor of the Syrian civil, political, and armed opposition, a wholesale Turkish re-engagement with Damascus would be a game-changer. In recent years, the only governments to have decisively re-engaged with the regime — the UAE, Bahrain, and Jordan — have had no discernible influence over dynamics inside the country. Their policy shifts have amounted to little more than symbolism.

Turkey, by contrast, has thousands of troops deployed within dozens of bases and frontline positions across northern Syria.

Turkey’s armed forces and National Intelligence Organization (NIO) are the sole backers of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and its tens of thousands of fighters in northern Aleppo, and the only guarantors of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s (HTS) rule in Idlib. All in all, that equates to de facto control and indirect occupation of over half of Syria’s 900-kilometer border with Turkey and an in-country population of roughly 5 million people. Beyond that, Turkey remains host to at least 3.5 million Syrian refugees — more than half of all Syrian refugees worldwide. Were Turkey to decisively shift its Syria policy, the effects would be dramatic.

## Background

Beyond the hype and speculation surrounding recent developments, Turkey’s decision to participate in the Moscow meetings on Dec. 28 is not altogether surprising and it does not represent a wholesale policy reversal either. Turkey’s Syria policy decisively shifted in mid-2016 when the goal of toppling Assad’s regime was dropped in favor of core and immediate national security priorities: counterterrorism and border security. Ever since launching [Operation Euphrates Shield](#) in August 2016 and failing to prevent the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, Turkey has made no secret of its new, more self-interested agenda. Syria’s opposition has adapted to it too, investing a great

deal more resources on the ground in countering the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) than in challenging the Syrian regime.

What has changed more recently is Turkey's impending elections, scheduled for May or June of this year. Few issues have emerged in polling as more potentially impactful on the outcome than the perceived strains imposed on the Turkish people and economy by Syrian refugees. Suffering from the effects of an inflation rate of [nearly 90%](#), Turks have turned on refugees as a scapegoat. [For years](#), President Erdoğan has been seeking to build a "safe zone" in northern Syria into which refugees would return, and human rights groups are [already](#) accusing Turkey of deporting and forcibly returning some in smaller numbers. But in today's political environment, that does not appear to be enough. Erdoğan's primary rivals in the election campaign, the Republican People's Party (CHP), are already [openly](#) calling for a normalized relationship with Assad's regime in order to facilitate the mass return of refugees. A December 2022 [poll](#) conducted across Turkey indicated 59% of Turks support that position.

The fact that Erdoğan is mirroring such sentiments today is therefore far from surprising, and neither is his primary vehicle for doing so: countering the PKK. From Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016, through [Operation Olive Branch](#) (January 2018) and [Operation Peace Spring](#) (October 2019), Erdoğan has consistently placed combating the PKK — in the form of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the United States' ally in the fight against ISIS — at the top of Turkey's policy priorities in Syria. Since [June 2022](#), Erdoğan has been angling to launch a new incursion into northeastern Syria against the SDF, focused on the towns of Kobani, Manbij, and Tel Rifaat. Until now, Russia's [refusal](#) to greenlight such an operation appears to have stalled Erdoğan's plans, but at the meeting in Moscow, it was the topic Turkey's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar was most keen to focus on.

Russia's role as facilitator is similarly predictable, given the uniquely inter-dependent — and complicated — relationship between Moscow and Ankara, over Syria and much more. With Russia's war in Ukraine a continued disaster thanks in large part to the extensive assistance provided to Kyiv by the U.S. and allies, Putin is aiming to drive a wedge between Turkey and the West and deal a strategic blow to NATO, potentially forcing a U.S. military withdrawal from Syria. Russia therefore appears to be dangling some form of anti-SDF carrot in front of Erdoğan,

as a condition for normalizing ties with Assad. If Russia were to succeed in flipping Turkey on Syria, the knock-on effects could also complicate the mostly useful role Turkey has played over Ukraine, further challenging the geopolitical scales currently in the U.S. and NATO's favor.

## Concern

Unsurprisingly, Turkey's recent moves on Syria have raised considerable concern. This has been felt most acutely in opposition areas of Syria, where at least 4.5 million civilians reside, most having fled regime attack multiple times over the years. Sizeable [protests](#) have recurred across dozens of locales since late December, where the prospect of Turkey siding with Assad's regime would amount to an almost unimaginable catastrophe.

Syrian armed opposition groups and leaders have issued statements of concern and dissent, with HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani [calling](#) Turkey's policy "a dangerous deviation" and vowing that "we will never reconcile." The mainstream Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council, which exerts a considerable guiding influence across the opposition, went even further, [exclaiming](#) that "death from poison is a thousand times easier than reconciling with the criminal gang that destroyed Syria and exterminated its people." When Syrian Interim Government leader Abdurrahman Mustafa appeared to provide partial cover for Turkey's shifting posture toward Damascus, uproar followed and he was forced to [publicly](#) correct himself. Despite voicing no support for normalization, the president of the Syrian opposition coalition, Salem al-Meslet, was violently attacked by protesters in the northern town of Azaz on Jan. 13, who [accused](#) him of being a "traitor."

Further afield, the diplomatic response has been muted, with the exception of [comments](#) by U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price on Jan. 3, in which he reiterated Washington's longstanding opposition to "countries upgrading their relations or expressing support to rehabilitate" Assad's regime. Behind the scenes, however, concern with Turkey's actions has mounted. Senior U.S. officials have made at least one unreported visit to Ankara in the past week, to consult discreetly on Turkey's goals in engaging with Damascus and to continue talks on the SDF's deployments along northeastern Syria's border zones. Syria-focused ambassadors from all 27 EU member states [convened](#) a rare meeting in Brussels on



Photo above: Demonstrators are raising Syrian opposition flags and placards as they rally against a potential rapprochement between Ankara and the Syrian regime in the opposition-held city of Azaz, on the border with Turkey in Syria's northern Aleppo Province, on Dec. 30, 2022. Photo by Rami Alsayed/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

Jan. 17, alongside the U.N. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu is also scheduled to visit Washington, D.C. on Jan. 18, to meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and others invested in U.S. Syria policy. In addition, the U.S., France, and the United Kingdom are attempting to rapidly convene a last-minute meeting of the so-called “International Contact Group” (comprising the Arab League, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iraq, Jordan, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the U.K., and the U.S.) to consult Turkey multilaterally and to deliberate on policy steps ahead.

In the Middle East, the situation is complex. While the UAE has intensified its normalizing activities — visiting Assad in Damascus, aligning with Russia, and pushing to host high-profile summits aimed at restoring ties — Saudi Arabia remains committed to opposing re-engagement, absent serious and irreversible progress on a political process and settlement. Three days after the Moscow meeting, the editor-in-chief of Saudi Arabia’s flagship newspaper, Asharq al-Awsat, even published an [editorial](#) asserting that the “toppling” of Assad’s regime was the only path toward stability for Syria. The timing of that article

was no coincidence and neither was Riyadh’s swift [welcoming](#) of France’s special envoy for Syria, Brigitte Curmi, whose government remains the key to holding together the European Union’s position against Assad. Jordan initiated its own full-scale re-engagement with Assad’s regime in late 2021, but since then Amman has [reversed course](#) following a [torrent of negative effects](#). It is now back to [pushing](#) for a strictly conditional “step for step” process, whereby the regime must discernibly improve its behavior in exchange for sequential confidence-building steps from the international community.

## Perspective

While the meeting of Turkish and Syrian defense and intelligence chiefs in Moscow was an unquestionably significant development, it is also important to take a deep breath and consider things holistically. For starters, the Moscow summit did not signal a wholesale shift in Turkish policy, only an elevation of a pre-existing one. High-level Turkish-Syrian intelligence contact and coordination began several years ago and has continued sporadically since, while military



contact was not entirely new, although it had been previously undertaken mostly indirectly, via Russia.

Moreover, when Turkey's Syria policy began to shift in mid-2016, a path was paved heading in today's direction. The timing of recent developments has everything to do with Turkish domestic politics, not Syria per se. While Putin and Assad would naturally be delighted, the impending Turkish elections and tight competition between Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party and the CHP-led opposition bloc means all three sides may now share a temporary interest in changing the tone of the public conversation.

But if an opening has been revealed toward a complete Turkish rapprochement with Damascus, it will take *much* longer than a few months before we see it reached. The obstacles to a comprehensive deal are far too cumbersome. In all likelihood, Erdoğan is well aware of this and quite content to play things along. Merely signaling a changed policy may be enough to outplay his opposition rivals. If he is unaware of it, or determined to ignore the considerable complications and surge toward a wholesale normalization, then Erdoğan is paving a highly incendiary path laden with danger, including for his own status in Ankara.

In terms of obstacles, the issue of refugees is most significant. Assuming Erdoğan is principally motivated to re-engage with Assad's regime by a perceived need to achieve a large-scale return of Syrian refugees to Syria, one is confronted with the inescapable reality that the 3.5 million Syrians in Turkey fled Syria in fear of the regime. The idea that a Turkish-Syrian reconciliation would create conditions in which Syrians would return to a Syria with a fully re-empowered Assad regime is a fantasy.

Moreover, in the wake of the Moscow summit, well-placed sources claimed that one offer — or perhaps more realistically, a regime condition — placed on the table was a full Turkish military withdrawal from Syrian territory and a re-assertion of Syrian sovereignty. In other words, Turkish troops would leave, thereby removing the only cover that opposition groups (primarily the SNA and HTS) currently have, either forcing them to concede to some form of "reconciliation" or to face full-scale hostilities. Assad himself reiterated this point on Jan. 12 after a meeting with Russia's special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, [stressing](#) that talks with Turkey could not advance

without an end to its "occupation" and support for "terrorism" (the opposition).

In the wake of the Moscow meeting, Turkish officials were reportedly upset at leaked claims that suggested it was potentially willing to withdraw forces from northern Syria. Rightly so, as such a scenario would not only solidify Syrian refugees' refusal to return, but it would also trigger a catastrophic destabilization of northwestern Syria and a guaranteed mass run on the Turkish border by hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Syrians. That would represent a domestic national security crisis of existential significance for any leader, pre- or post-election, and would infuriate Erdoğan's nationalist allies.

The prospect for a meaningful and game-changing deal between Turkey and Assad's regime also begins to fall apart when one considers the other priority in Ankara: countering the PKK, something that is now more intrinsically linked to the anti-refugee agenda than ever before. For months, Turkey has been threatening to launch a new military incursion into northern Syria, but Russia has effectively blocked it. The Turkish airstrikes and covert operations may be effective methods of pressuring the SDF, but they do not create "safe zones" free of SDF control. Turkey's emphasis in Moscow on counterterrorism, and since then in follow-up calls and public comments, clearly indicates that Ankara is exploring alternative ways of achieving the same goal: removing the SDF from Tel Rifaat, Kobani, and Manbij.

The problem here is that the Assad regime's core underlying condition for engagement with Turkey has long been and continues to be a Turkish military disengagement from Syria. Assuming that principle of sovereignty will remain — and there is no reason to assume it will go away — then a greenlighted Turkish incursion is off the cards. For Russia to greenlight one amid this intensified re-engagement dynamic would fundamentally undermine its client in Damascus. Moreover, Turkey's laser-like focus on getting Damascus to turn forcefully against the SDF through a "counterterrorism" lens is further undermined by Assad's counter demand: that Turkey label all armed groups across northwestern Syria as terrorist organizations and treat the northwest region as a "terror zone." That was met with a [hard "no"](#) from Ankara, for self-evident reasons.

For these reasons, Turkey's number one ask here — for a Turkish incursion or Russian-sponsored regime crackdown on the SDF — does not look to be a realistic one. If Ankara were willing to accept that hard truth, a unilateral intervention around any or all of Kobani, Tel Rifaat, and Manbij would almost instantly kill the track of re-engagement with Damascus, thereby weakening Erdoğan's electoral standing at home. If Ankara were to take a more patient approach and consider, for example, a potential offer by Damascus to contain the SDF and perhaps share intelligence for targeted strikes against PKK cadres, would that be enough to assuage domestic pressures at home for Turkey to act decisively? Unlikely. The Syrian regime hardly stands out as the well-resourced, professional military and intelligence actor that such a deal would require.

## Outlook

At the end of the day, the recent elevation of contact between Turkey and Assad's regime represents the latest phase of a particularly long process that began in mid-2016. The subsequent surge in [speculation](#) about the framework of a grand deal and the prospects for a comprehensive shift in Turkey's posture in Syria has been driven not by facts or logic, but by the potential near-term interest of all actors involved to present a narrative of major change. Erdoğan is acting in his own self-interest; Russia is ever the opportunist; and Assad will continue to play hard ball, safe in the knowledge that his departure is no longer in the cards. Ultimately, the obstacles to a game-changing deal are enormous, and insurmountable within a period of a few months — even more so if they are brought forward to late April or May, as was [recently suggested](#).

It is evident that for domestic reasons, Erdoğan needs to demonstrate clear signs of a changing policy on Syria. High-level meetings with the regime have shaped a narrative of change, attracted media attention, and driven helpful speculation. In the coming weeks and months, Russia will be driving forward a track of closed-door diplomacy aimed at refining principals, conditions, and red lines through a series of [“follow-up committees.”](#)

Despite the somewhat hysterical predictions of an imminent meeting of Turkish and Syrian foreign ministers, any such meeting appears still to be weeks, if not months, away. Not only are there considerable obstacles in place to slow or prevent a substantive reconciliation, but the process by which

we reached recent events — in particular, the role of the UAE and the exclusion of Iran — may also kill it off.

Ultimately, self-interest — even if driven by illogical goals — may prove to be the best explanation for the UAE's determination to normalize Assad's regime and its clear desire to play a lead role in doing so. As it turns out, that blind pursuit of self-interest may actually prove destructive. Russia's lead role in facilitating the initial elevation of Turkey-Syria contact was to be expected, but the UAE's subsequent attempt to muscle itself in alongside Moscow — in replacement of the Astana format — has reportedly angered Iran.

Despite Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian's public expression of “happiness” over the Turkish-Syrian dialogue, he may in fact have been concealing a deep sense of anger in Tehran. The first sign of such sentiment emerged through [leaks](#) that followed a Jan. 10 [visit](#) to Iran by Syria's deputy prime minister, Ayman Sousan. It was during that meeting that Amirabdollahian allegedly expressed Iran's *unhappiness* at being excluded from recent developments, while Sousan reportedly explained that the meeting of defense and intelligence chiefs came about because Damascus was under Russian pressure to do so.

It was only after that meeting between Sousan and Amir-Abdollahian — and a call between Amir-Abdollahian and Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad — that Damascus began speaking publicly about reconciliation with Turkey, and the tone was not “constructive.” On Jan. 13, [Assad himself](#) spoke publicly on the issue, insisting that any talks with Turkey needed to be “coordinated in advance between Syria and Russia” and that no “results” would be possible without Turkey “ending” its occupation and all support to the opposition. The following day, Foreign Minister Mekdad reiterated that tough line while standing alongside the Iranian foreign minister, [stressing](#) that “we cannot talk about resuming normal ties with Turkey without them removing the occupation.”

As part of a whirlwind diplomatic tour, Amir-Abdollahian was then scheduled to visit Moscow on Jan. 17, but that leg of the trip was abruptly cancelled [as a result](#) of a “rift” resulting from the UAE's “major role” in attempts to normalize Assad and the exclusion of Iran from those efforts. He visited Ankara instead. In a press conference, he [repeated](#) his public statement “welcoming” the recent Turkey-Syria contacts, but followed it up with something



Photo above: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (R) meets UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (L) in Damascus on Nov. 09, 2021. Photo by UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

more revealing as to his views, claiming the development was a result of “the efforts that began years ago by the Islamic Republic.” Such an emerging geopolitical rivalry, and Iran’s clear ability to exert influence over Damascus’ decision-making, could easily scupper the “constructive” nature of talks. After all, Syria is on the verge of a catastrophic economic collapse, the trajectory of which is primarily being determined by Iran’s [recent decision](#) to increase the price it is charging for fuel supplies to Assad’s regime and its unprecedented insistence that Damascus pay cash for it, not credit. That policy shift alone triggered a collapse of the Syrian pound in late 2022, with crippling knock-on effects for the cost of living for ordinary Syrians. Coincidentally, Iran’s tougher stance on such issues has been [attributed](#) to its frustration at Damascus’s growing ties with the UAE and its attempts to foster a rapprochement with Turkey.

For now, therefore, Assad appears [wholly opposed](#) to a foreign minister summit without comprehensive Turkish policy changes, including a military withdrawal and a full cessation of support to the Syrian opposition. If Moscow manages to find some room for

compromise between the two and convinces Iran to play ball, these engagements may then come to resemble a diplomatic extension of the Astana process, with Iran likely brought into the deliberations. The inclusion of Assad’s regime within the Astana format would, from an Iranian perspective, level the playing field somewhat. Like Assad, Iran has demonstrated a greater willingness to play spoiler in Syria diplomacy over the years and including Damascus within a quartet would give it a greater hand to play hardball when it comes to longer-term considerations.

More immediately, the substance undergirding Russian-facilitated talks between Syria and Turkey will likely remain thin. Though immensely complicated and laden with risk, it is possible to envision progress being made on opening access to the M4 highway between Aleppo and Latakia. The Syrian military may be added as a third component of Russian-Turkish patrols that currently operate in sections of northern Syria’s border region. Working groups, military coordination rooms, and similar mechanisms are also likely to take form, with time. Trade routes linking regime areas with Turkey may be opened along key roadways in SNA and HTS areas. Agreements over

shared principals are also likely, covering issues like terrorism, sovereignty, refugee return, and economic ties.

But when it comes to any consideration of a wholesale reversal of Turkish policy, reality will inevitably kick in. The issue of refugees will dictate what is realistic and what is not. As Turkish Defense Minister Akar [made clear](#) on Jan. 1, “We host around four million Syrian brothers and sisters. A new wave of refugees is not acceptable. We cannot take in more refugees.” If seeing Syrian refugees return to Syria is a priority, then preventing new refugees from crossing into Turkey is a matter of the greatest importance. Turkey will therefore not take any step that risks destabilizing northwestern Syria, a fact [clearly stressed](#) by Erdoğan’s chief advisor and spokesperson İbrahim Kalın on Jan. 6: “Today, there are more than three million people stuck in Idlib. ... If these people take action as a result of pressure, pressure from an attack by the regime ... Turkey will be the only place they can go. But Turkey’s ability to take in more refugees is no longer in question.”

As complications mount and the Assad regime’s obstinacy reveals itself once again, Turkey’s posture along its southern border is likely to harden. On Jan. 13, [clashes](#) erupted between Turkish and Syrian troops outside al-Bab in northern Aleppo, leaving one Turkish soldier dead. The following day, senior Turkish official Kalın [reasserted](#) his government’s intention to launch a new military incursion “at any time” into northern Syria. [According](#) to SDF leader Mazloum Abdi, their intelligence sources have suggested that without marked progress in Turkey-Syria talks, a Turkish military incursion was likely to launch in February. Tensions have risen elsewhere too. In Idlib and northeastern Latakia, meanwhile, HTS has markedly escalated military attacks on regime positions, launching at least four behind-enemy-lines raids in the past week. Even Ahrar al-Sham, whose activities are tightly controlled by Turkey, launched a deadly raid of its own.

Zooming out beyond this Turkey-Syria dynamic, one has to ask what there is to be gained by any government seriously re-engaging and normalizing ties with Assad’s regime. Syria’s economy is in free-fall, with spiraling inflation, crippling electricity shortages, and more than [90%](#) of Syrians living under the poverty line. Food costs have [risen](#) by 30% and fuel prices have [surged](#) by at least 44% in the past three months alone. In regime-held areas of Syria, living conditions are now

worse than at the peak of armed hostilities in 2015. A good day in Damascus brings two or three hours of electricity. An average civil servant in the city now earns enough in a month to [buy](#) 20 liters of gasoline, and nothing else. The working week has been cut to four days and working overtime has been banned. Yet amid such economic collapse, the Assad regime has managed an illegal international drug trade worth [over \\$50 billion](#) a year since 2021. None of those proceeds have gone toward assisting Syrians in need.

Even if the international community entirely set aside its morals and re-engaged with Assad’s regime tomorrow, no government or investor in their right minds would see Syria as a credible market for investment. The prospect for meaningful reconstruction in a Syria run so centrally by a corrupt elite is non-existent. It is an international pariah and a narco-state of global significance. That is what makes the increasingly central involvement of the UAE in Russia’s efforts to bring Assad in from the cold so troubling.

Shortly before UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed paid his [first visit](#) to Assad in Damascus in November 2021, Abu Dhabi sent a prior warning to the U.S. State Department, as a courtesy. A concerted series of phone calls from Washington [followed](#), including one from Secretary of State Antony Blinken, urging the Emiratis to cancel the visit. According to one well-placed source, at least two former senior members of the Trump administration were even drafted in to make their own pleas to the UAE. But to no avail — the visit went ahead.

Four months later, the UAE rolled out the [red carpet](#) for a state visit by Assad himself. This time around, the U.S. was given no prior warning, with senior officials discovering the news on social media. The State Department was livid, with spokesperson Ned Price [saying](#) he was “profoundly disappointed and troubled” by the UAE’s attempt to “legitimize Bashar al-Assad, who remains responsible and accountable for the death and suffering of countless Syrians, the displacement of more than half of the prewar Syrian population, and the arbitrary detention and disappearance of over 150,000 Syrian men, women, and children.” Not long after, the UAE was removed from the International Contact Group and [multiple](#) UAE-based entities have since been sanctioned and challenged by the U.S. Treasury for financially engaging with the regime.



Unless the goal is to save Assad and his regime from complete economic collapse and possible implosion, there are no real-world gains to be made. For an ally to be so actively and publicly doing the geopolitical bidding of Putin, not to mention Assad — [against whom](#) the world has more evidence of war crimes than was available against Hitler and the Nazis at Nuremberg — should be raising some serious concerns at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Whether driven by misplaced economic opportunism, or a perception of shared values (a visceral opposition to political Islam or an objection to the influence of Turkey and Qatar), the UAE’s sympathy for Assad’s regime and open desire to sidle up alongside Putin’s Russia should present an acute challenge to a decades-old relationship with the U.S.

## Policy Implications

Even though a wholesale Turkish normalization of Assad’s regime remains unlikely in the near term, the recent engagements are yet another result of the decision by the U.S. and likeminded allies to deprioritize Syria policy to a virtual afterthought. While some attention is given to the need for cross-border aid access every few months, when an authorization vote at the U.N. comes up, it is only the campaign against ISIS that appears to receive genuine and meaningful policy investment — and much of that comes from the Defense Department, which has no role in shaping wider Syria policy.

The resulting vacuum has killed off what was an already frail political process. Without a meaningful, determined, and united international effort to pursue any form of change and justice in Syria, the regime and its allies have no reason whatsoever to seriously engage. No wonder a handful of regional states have grown tired of Syria’s stagnation. Whether driven by shared ideological values, geopolitical opportunism, or a desire to put the Arab Spring behind them, there is no denying that some have returned to Damascus and re-engaged in recent years. Until now, however, none of that re-engagement has been more than symbolic.

However, this trend of unconditional re-engagement with the Assad regime presents only challenges and potential threats to U.S. interests. For nearly 12 years, Syria’s crisis has consistently demonstrated a potent capacity to negatively affect the stability of its immediate neighbors, the Middle East at large, and the world beyond. What happens in Syria never stays in Syria. Policymakers know this well, but “fatigue” and

a sense of hopelessness have taken over and the decision to treat the crisis’s symptoms (like ISIS) and to contain its effects (like refugees) has all too often been perceived as the easier option.

Looking ahead and before addressing what needs to change, the U.S. must first maintain several lines of policy. ISIS remains a persistent and [possibly resurgent](#) threat in Syria and the deployment of 900 U.S. troops in northeastern and eastern Syria plays a vital role in maintaining an impactful campaign to contain the terrorist group. In 2022 alone, over 780 ISIS militants were [killed and captured](#) by U.S. troops and our SDF partners in Syria, including ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. More is needed in this regard, though supplementing the U.S. investment should be the responsibility of likeminded allies, particularly some in Europe. The U.S. must also sustain, alongside the U.K. and the EU, its array of sanctions against the Assad regime, while simultaneously maintaining a constant emphasis on the need for an international commitment to address the growing humanitarian crisis in Syria.

When it comes to areas for change, the need is substantial. At the outset, the U.S. must clearly signal to its allies, rivals, and foes that Syria policy is becoming a greater priority. This should start with President Joe Biden appointing a high-profile diplomat as the U.S. government’s envoy for Syria — a figure capable of mobilizing and uniting a coalition of nations committed to seeing a negotiated settlement for Syria finally realized.

Such leadership is needed not only to re-energize and refocus Syria policy into something genuinely impactful, but also to situate that elevated Syria policy within a wider geostrategic adaptation to today’s evolving world order. As dynamics in the Middle East shift and the war in Ukraine remolds the alliances and rivalries that have defined international affairs in recent decades, Syria finds itself at the heart of tectonic changes. With or without a new nuclear accord, Iran’s rising role in security dynamics stretching beyond the Middle East looks set to become a defining geopolitical challenge in the years ahead. Syria is both the jewel in the crown for Iran’s regional ambitions, but also where its greatest potential vulnerabilities lie.

While major hostilities in Syria have not occurred for several years, there is always the prospect for sustained conflict to



resume. In cooperation with partners and allies, the U.S. should initiate a concerted diplomatic push through the United Nations to formalize the de facto [freezing](#) of Syria's various frontlines. It should be in the interests of every stakeholder in Syria to realize this goal, but no effort has ever been made to achieve it.

In tandem with the freezing of conflict frontlines, the U.S. should also reorient the international community's humanitarian aid response from one intended to provide tactical emergency assistance to an effort defined by a more strategic goal: to stabilize. This would require no discernible change in donor commitment but would see funds directed toward stabilization activities, [building](#) the capacity of local communities across northern Syria to sustain themselves and become zones of genuine stability. With time, these settled regions would inevitably begin to form avenues of connectivity, weakening the sources of tension and hostility that currently define them. Already today, the living conditions in regime-held areas are worse than elsewhere in Syria, but this more strategic approach to aid policy would widen that gap even further — increasing pressure on the regime to deal more constructively with diplomacy.

On the issue of diplomacy, the U.S. must shift its underlying goal on Syria policy from one of containment (tackling select symptoms of the crisis) to one aimed at comprehensively settling the crisis by resolving its root causes. After several years, it ought to be clear now that a policy of containment is insufficient and has created a vacuum into which malign actors have stepped, seeking only to normalize the crisis's foremost root cause and the principal driver of continued instability, in Syria and beyond. It surely cannot be in U.S. interests to see a failed state and global pariah, one that resembles a combination of some of the very worst aspects of Somalia and North Korea, persist and consolidate in the heart of the Middle East.

For many years, a debate has raged over whether the U.S. and allies have sufficient “leverage” to influence the crisis in Syria and the regime's willingness to negotiate. Since 2011, the regime has rarely “blinked” in the face of pressure and the few times it has, have been in response to decisive military threats — in the days leading up to expected U.S. military strikes in August 2013 and following an unprecedented Turkish military intervention in Idlib in February 2019.

The prospect of a U.S. military challenge to Assad are long gone, but the regime's most serious vulnerability today arguably lies within its trade of the illegal narcotic, Captagon. In both 2021 and 2022, this regime-sponsored and protected cartel is [thought](#) to have exported at least \$50 billion worth of Captagon — a sum that is nearly 10 times Syria's national budget in each of those years. Drugs have now become the glue that binds Assad's regime together and without it, his world would almost certainly come precipitously crashing down. Thanks to Congressional attention on this issue, the Biden administration must develop and present a strategy to counter Assad's narco-state within the next months.

Unlike a previous Congressionally mandated requirement to assess the wealth of the Assad family, which was embarrassingly thin on detail and wildly off in its conclusions, the administration must not be allowed to treat the Captagon issue as an inconvenience. Tackling the issue head on could well prove to be the long-missing key to achieving real change for Syria.

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