



Syria at the Center of Power Competition and Counterterrorism

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For a lengthy period following the attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. national security priorities focused largely on counterterrorism. That emphasis has waned slightly in the past few years, with American rhetoric shifting toward Great Power competition, given an emboldened China and a revisionist Russia seeking to upset the current order. This rhetorical change has been mirrored in a reallocation of U.S. funding.

Whatever the current focus, counterterrorism and Great Power dynamics converge in one country in particular—Syria—site of the greatest counterterrorism threat to the U.S. homeland and Russia’s largest play to reassert its global influence. It is also the location of Washington’s greatest regional power challenge, deriving from Iran’s push for regional primacy. These dynamics are

at play within Syria, involving a number of actors: the United States and Russia, Turkey and Russia, Turkey and the United States, Iran and the United States, and Iran and Israel, among others. In contrast to the position that casts counterterrorism and Great Power competition as either/or challenges, a closer look shows that they are instead related. Only by understanding this can policymakers hope to resolve the underlying problems in Syria, which has suffered over the past several years due in part to Washington's neglect.

Acronyms

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IS	Islamic State
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SNA	Syrian National Army
YPG	People's Defense Units

Evolution of Syria's War Dynamics

Although for many the wake-up call to Syria's security challenges came with the June 2014 announcement of the Islamic State "caliphate" and the terrorism campaign that followed, the seeds were sown in 2003–4. This was when Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime and his state security apparatus aided the challenge posed by the Islamic State's predecessors to the U.S. presence in Iraq, facilitating the movement of not only Syrians but also foreign fighters—primarily from the Arab world—into Iraq. The regime channeled these fighters through

Damascus and Aleppo, onward to Syria's eastern provinces of Deir al-Zour and Hasaka, and then into Iraq's Anbar and Nineveh provinces.¹

In early 2011, when peaceful protestors in Syria called for freedom and justice, the Assad regime took two specific steps that contributed to the reemergence of the Islamic State. First, it cracked down ruthlessly on the protest movement, imprisoning its key mobilizers.² Second, in late spring 2011, the regime released from prison, as part of its amnesty program, former Syrian Islamists and jihadists who had fought against the United States in Iraq.³ These actions suppressed the original protests, their message, and their internal calls for *silmiya* (peaceful/nonviolent action), while at the same time providing a platform for militant extremists to muddy the message of the demonstrators. The released prisoners loathed the Assad leadership for its Alawite domination of the state and sought revenge for the torture and miserable conditions they had endured while detained at the infamous Saidnaya military prison and other sites.⁴

The activists posed the greater threat to Assad, given their legitimate claims, whereas the extremists offered the regime an excuse to trumpet the falsehood that they were the true opposition and therefore deserved to be annihilated. The Syrian regime peddled this narrative locally as well as to the wider world. As the regime's crackdown on the protests intensified, the United States and Europe called for Assad to step down and begin a political transition à la Tunisia and Egypt.⁵ Unsurprisingly, it was Russia, Assad's strongest international ally, that helped run interference at the United Nations and on other international diplomatic tracks against U.S. and European efforts.⁶

Role of Saidnaya Prison Alumni

The Saidnaya alumni would go on to establish a number of their own anti-regime fighting groups.⁷ For example, Ahrar al-Sham was long a key enabler of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and had its roots in former

Saidnaya detainees, with a much more apparent jihadist orientation in its earlier years.⁸

By comparison, without leadership, money, or fighting experience, those original peaceful protestors who escaped the regime's initial response, entailing imprisonment or death, were poorly positioned to vie with the extremists; they lacked external support or funding, unlike the Islamists and jihadists, who received aid from either states or private individuals in the Persian Gulf.⁹ The nonextremist groups that did emerge had their own early problems, hindering their ability to compete with the extremists: the tendency to form very localized groups, often with a reputation for corruption and criminal behavior, and a corresponding inability to unite seriously under a more formalized structure such as the Free Syrian Army.

These conditions proved fertile for what would be the Islamic State of Iraq, the Islamic State's predecessor. Using the same smuggling routes it employed nearly a decade earlier, except this time in reverse, from Iraq to Syria, the group dispatched leaders who in August 2011 secretly founded JN and publicly announced themselves in 2012.¹⁰ Providing the enabling space for JN were the Saidnaya releasees, who shared some common ideological ground with the budding group, even if they sometimes differed on more specific beliefs and tactics. The groups led by the ex-Saidnaya prisoners similarly acted as enablers for the Islamic State when it announced its Syrian presence in April 2013 in an attempt to subsume JN.¹¹ By January 2014, however, IS would earn the repudiation of other Islamist and jihadist insurgents and form its own fiefdom in eastern Syria.¹²

Enter Iran and Hezbollah

Even before the emergence of IS and JN in Syria, the Assad regime sensed trouble, having lost territory to local insurgent groups as well as the better-resourced and trained Islamists and jihadists. The regime therefore requested military help from its Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah allies in 2012.

At first, their intervention was rather low-key, but it became more overt during the course of 2013. As it became apparent that the regime was losing and needed to secure key areas around its capital and along the border with Lebanon, Iran-backed networks helped facilitate the recruitment of large numbers of Shia foreign fighters from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and elsewhere to fight on the regime's behalf, helping entrench a broader sectarian narrative to the conflict.¹³

The Iran-Hezbollah entry had the additional effect of pulling Israel into the conflict, given concerns of a second front alongside Lebanon in a future war, as well as new types of terrorist actions. Israeli leaders worried likewise about the simple proximity of Iranian forces to its border. Ultimately, Iran's attempts to use Syrian territory to move precision-guided missiles to Hezbollah prompted an Israeli "campaign between wars," whereby Israel has conducted more than a hundred airstrikes inside Syria against this infrastructure.¹⁴

In response to the increasingly sectarian nature of Assad's loyalists and outside backers, Islamists from the Gulf began to view the Syrian conflict through the prism of their rivalry with Iran. This led Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the world's best-known living Islamist ideologue, to call for jihad as an individual duty in late spring 2013, which legitimized foreign fighting on a scale exceeding the typical jihadist mobilization.¹⁵ In the end, however, the most extreme elements benefited from this development, with the majority of foreign fighters first joining JN and later IS.¹⁶ In turn, the underfunded, undertrained original local rebel formations suffered, whereas the Islamist and jihadist formations spread their influence over multiple governorates.

After the infighting that pitted IS against JN and the Saidnaya alumni groups, the former carved out space for itself first in Raqqa and then in eastern Syria as a whole, which it would use to bolster its ranks and capabilities. At the same time, the group exploited Sunni Arab discontent in Iraq and carried out high-profile prison breaks, while seizing parts

of Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar in January 2014. These events set the stage for the IS seizure of large parts of northern and western Iraq in summer 2014, including the city of Mosul. These alarming advances, combined with the attempted genocide of the Yazidi population, ultimately prompted the U.S.-led international campaign against the jihadist group.¹⁷

U.S. Partnership with Syrian Kurds

On the Syrian side of the border, the United States likely would have preferred to work with CIA-vetted rebel groups as its main local partners to fight the Islamic State. However, these groups were relatively weak and suffered from their own internal divisions. Further, their primary focus was on fighting Assad—the purpose of their CIA support—and they were either too far removed from IS territorial frontlines or had working relationships with extremist groups that were deemed problematic.¹⁸ As a result, Washington chose instead to partner with the People’s Defense Units (YPG)—the armed wing of the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD). Through partnerships with smaller Arab and Syriac Christian groups, the United States helped the YPG create a broader coalition branded as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), although with the YPG remaining its primary component.¹⁹ The SDF was created partly because the YPG is the armed wing of the PYD, which is essentially the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and an enemy of U.S. ally Turkey, situated across the Syrian border. This American alignment with a fighting force deemed a security threat to Turkey would have consequences down the line, after U.S. forces and the SDF helped clear eastern Syria of all IS territorial control by March 2019.

Jihadist Strength, Russian Force, and Turkish-Kurdish Competition

The stronger anti-regime insurgent forces—primarily JN and Ahrar al-Sham—banded together in early

2015 to create the Jaish al-Fatah alliance, with the goal of taking over Idlib governorate in northwest Syria.²⁰ The insurgency’s external backers had hoped these advances would pressure the Assad regime to consider a political transition, but the ultimate outcome was to facilitate the dominance of JN and its successors over northwest Syria. Indeed, JN and its successor group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have slowly isolated, coopted, or coerced other insurgent factions in Idlib, bending them to their will.²¹ HTS now has an effective monopoly on violence in the sections of Idlib it controls and in western parts of Aleppo governorate, while backing the civilian-led Syrian Salvation Government in its day-to-day administration of those areas²²—areas that are simultaneously under de facto Turkish protection. In contrast, attempts by JN and its allies to recreate the success of Jaish al-Fatah in southern Syria failed.

Far from helping bring about a political transition, rising pressure on the Assad regime, and its control of no more than one-quarter of Syrian territory, led the Syrian president in fall 2015 to call for direct Russian intervention. The entry of Russian military assets, including advisors, fighters, and jets, slowly began tipping the scales toward the regime in southern, central, and parts of northern Syria.²³ Turkey backed various rebel and insurgent factions against the Assad regime during the conflict, an approach that brought Russia and Turkey into each other’s crosshairs, especially after Turkey shot down a Russian jet in late November 2015.²⁴ Even more important, as a consequence of the regime’s reclaiming territory with Russia’s help, millions of refugees fled to Turkey, seeking safety from the military onslaught and creating new dilemmas for Turkey’s Syria policy.²⁵ Since then, a delicate state of affairs has existed between Turkey and Russia in northwest Syria, given its status as the only redoubt where forces are still fighting the regime.

The success of the anti-IS campaign conducted mainly by the SDF, with U.S. backing, escalated Turkey’s issues with both, because the majority-Kurdish forces now controlled a large swath of territory on the Turkish border.²⁶ The history of

PKK terrorism and worries over another successful Kurdish administration in Syria, alongside Iraqi Kurdistan, were viewed as factors that could once again embolden secessionist Kurds in Turkey. Between 2016 and 2019, these concerns led to three Turkish military operations—Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring—via Syrian rebel groups that had previously been weakened by jihadists. As part of this effort, in 2017, those groups coalesced into the more formalized Syrian National Army (SNA), officially affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which was established in 2013 and is tied to the Turkey-based political opposition coalition.²⁷

The operations carried out by these groups were intended to clear areas along the Turkish-Syrian border of SDF and IS remnants, but they also led to the displacement of Kurdish populations from Afrin and other northern Syrian border localities such as Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.²⁸ In turn, the Turkish government helped establish the SIG in the locales it took over in northeast and north-central Syria.²⁹ Although opposition backers hoped the SIG could be a viable civilian government alternative to the HTS-backed Salvation Government,³⁰ whose influence and legitimacy the SIG disputes, the SIG has shown no sign that it can meaningfully compete with the Salvation Government in Idlib and its environs, and its actual control in the areas where it is the official governing authority is questionable.³¹ Geopolitically, the Turkish-backed operations against the SDF complicated the efforts of the anti-IS coalition; indeed, they hemmed in U.S. areas of operation because the SDF called for Russian and Assad-regime help to block Turkey's aim of completely removing the SDF amid American passivity during the Turkish campaign.³²

The Current State of Play

As of early 2021, a number of frozen and low-boiling conflicts still appear where power competition and

terrorism issues overlap. On the one hand, years of conflict since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, with a juncture in Syria in 2011, have created an environment conducive to airing grievances and committing violence, in which terrorist groups can thrive. On the other hand, terrorist organizations—and the threat they represent to adversarial countries—have been tactically engaged by a number of actors. Many of these organizations have served as proxies (Iran and its Shia militia network) or been seen as enablers (the Assad regime and the Sainaya alumni). Others have acted as de facto partners (Turkey and HTS) or used despite their past associations (U.S. forces and the SDF). Thus, power competition is connected to terrorism because both exert regional influence over local actors. The United States has tried to disconnect terrorism from geopolitics by rendering it the ultimate nonstarter in international relations, but Washington's own errors in Iraq and Syria have made such a break impossible. Indeed, many actors continue to consider terrorist groups as proxies constituting either part of their own statecraft or that of their adversaries.

So, where do things stand between these various actors at the beginning of 2021?

UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA. Both countries want to influence Syria's future polity, but they have competing visions of what counterterrorism efforts should focus on. The United States worries about a newly strengthened Islamic State, an external operations network for al-Qaeda, and the prospect of Iran's proxy network gaining more power in the region. Russia views the rebel elements fighting the regime, including HTS, as the primary remaining problem. Russia would also like to establish Assad's claimed military "victory" as a *fait accompli* within the international community, specifically by legitimizing the regime to those countries that have abandoned diplomatic relations with it over the past decade and by assisting with reconstruction efforts.

TURKEY AND RUSSIA. The United States has taken a back seat in the broader Syria conflict, its focus being primarily on counterterrorism against IS and

to a lesser extent on al-Qaeda. Thus, a competition for regional influence not only in Syria but also in Libya, the southern Caucasus, and likely elsewhere has been brewing between Turkey and Russia. These two rivals have also been on opposite sides of the Syrian civil war, with Russia backing the regime and viewing any of its opponents as terrorists. Turkey has backed many of these rebel factions. It also effectively supports the HTS governance project in northern Idlib and western Aleppo. Moreover, the competition between Turkey and Russia reinforces each country's power by excluding other actors. Although they fight through their proxies, both countries understand the benefit of striking short-term arrangements that block the way for other players, including the United States and European nations.

TURKEY AND THE UNITED STATES.

Washington's emboldening of the SDF to fight the Islamic State provided a platform for significantly expanding the Autonomous Administration established by the PYD in 2014,³³ and now called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). In light of U.S.-SDF ties, relations between Washington and Ankara, two formerly close allies, have become quite strained. The YPG's historical ties to the PKK, and the latter's low-level terrorism campaign in Turkey over the past few years, have created a U.S.-Turkey impasse, given Washington's view that the SDF is the only serious fighting force capable of holding off IS in eastern Syria. This was not a foregone conclusion; it emerged because of the inability of rebel forces (e.g., Liwa al-Hamza and Liwa al-Mutasim) to serve as effective ground partners against IS and Turkey's repeated unfulfilled promises to destroy IS strongholds.³⁴ This passivity led Washington to conclude that the Turks were more focused on the PKK than on the Islamic State. In the end, the SDF actually delivered.³⁵

IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES. A broader Iran-U.S. regional competition has existed since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The United States wants to limit Iran's trans-regional revolutionary aims; in eastern Syria specifically, Iran wants to grind away

at the U.S. sphere of influence by undermining the area's security. Iran aims to achieve this through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Shia militia proxy network, which have a foothold in Deir al-Zour province, on the opposite side of the Euphrates River from the SDF and U.S. presence. Because the SDF is unpopular in these more Arab and tribal areas, unattributed assassination campaigns undertaken by Iran's proxy network—and possibly Russia's local allies too—against tribal figures can destabilize security measures, potentially giving more lifeblood to the Islamic State through undermining trust in the SDF's ability to safeguard the peace. These destabilizing conditions provide leverage for Iran by undermining the U.S. mission, which is significantly affected by domestic opinion. Thus, if Iran succeeds in driving the United States to withdraw even beyond the measures it took in October 2019, Islamic Republic forces and their allies could push the SDF farther into northeast Syria, ultimately securing the Syria-Iraq border to connect its networks in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

ISRAEL AND IRAN. These archenemies are currently competing over primacy in the Levant. Israel, for its part, sees a growing network of Iranian proxies at its border, a bolstered Lebanese Hezbollah with new warfare capacity, and the group's potential for more precise weaponry as redline threats.

Toward a Smarter, More Sustainable Syria Policy

There are no easy solutions in Syria, partly because of the dynamics just described. Any attempt to limit or, alternatively, empower one country or faction creates a potential opening for another. Thus, it is important for policymakers to precisely identify U.S. interests in Syria before marshaling resources and specific approaches to achieve those ends.

At the core of Syria's problems is the regime itself, which created an intelligence and police state that

still presides today. The state, in turn, provides no avenue for citizen redress because of the stratified economy and regime corruption. Indeed, the moment in early 2011 when regime forces shot at peaceful protestors directly precipitated the current national deterioration. After a decade of civil war, well over a half-million people have been killed, and refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria account for at least one-third of the country's prewar population.³⁶ Tens of thousands have also likely been executed and tortured to death in the regime's prisons since 2011. The Assad regime must never be legitimized or normalized, considering the crimes against humanity—and its own people—it has committed.

Policymakers must also attempt to truly understand the regime, instead of simply hoping for the best outcome. The regime in Syria is engaged in an existential struggle to survive, so it would be naive to think that Assad and his family would ever simply resign and step away. Thus, a purely diplomatic approach to the regime will fail to exact justice for the millions of Syrians affected by its industrial-scale killing and the associated psychological trauma.

Simultaneously, policymakers must be conscious of the American public's wariness of war, especially after two decades of stalemate with the Taliban in Afghanistan, a wrongheaded invasion of Iraq that helped empower both IS and Iran, and a poorly planned intervention in Libya, whose civil war persists today. To be sure, an intervention in Syria resembling any of those cases would be unlikely to succeed, but certain lines of effort can be exerted that would significantly increase discomfort for the regime and its allies, among them diplomatic, humanitarian, legal, economic, and military approaches.

Certainly, some of the ideas to be laid out here would be more difficult to implement than others. But there is no use in recycling stale policies that have failed in the past or are misaligned with current realities. Indeed, out-of-the-box thinking will be necessary, given the weak position Washington finds itself in

following years of faulty Syria policy. Policies should not be determined according to one's understanding of the situation in 2011, 2013, 2015, or even 2019. In fact, Syria's ever-changing dynamics over the past decade render nimble policies and ideas more necessary than ever for exacting a particular outcome that not only benefits Syrians but also helps advance U.S. interests.

Diplomatic Approach

An effective diplomatic approach will require that the United States get its own house in order vis-à-vis its regional allies. Two key players on the war's northern and eastern fronts—Turkey and the SDF—are U.S. allies, yet they regard each other with distrust and at times enmity. Given this challenge, U.S. diplomats should bring together emissaries from both Turkey and the SDF to seek to resolve their outright opposition to each other. In particular, the United States and Turkey can attempt to draw on lessons from past dealings between Ankara and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. For example, the SDF would be wise to stop allowing the PKK safe haven in the territories of the AANES. The fact that SDF head Mazloum Kobani Abdi is very much aware of this issue not only underscores the SDF's opportunity to address it, but also confirms it is not being ignored.³⁷ In turn, the Turkish government should stop its attacks against the SDF and those Kurdish communities under control of the Syrian Interim Government. Additionally, the United States should urge both sides to stop allowing the use of child soldiers, whether they come to an agreement or not.³⁸

First of all, such an agreement between Turkey and the SDF could create new space for economic exchange between Turkey and the AANES, which would benefit both—but especially Turkey, given its current economic problems. Second, an agreement would further separate the economy of the Assad regime from the Kurdish areas of northeast Syria, undermining the regime's power. Third, an agreement could ease the tension between Turkish-backed

groups and the SDF, which would promote stability in northern and eastern Syria and create the possibility of improved governance. In time, more services would be provided to area populations, helping eliminate the grievances that motivate individuals to join the Islamic State. Such expanded governance could perhaps present an alternative model to that of the Assad regime, which maintains that only it can govern Syria, when in truth different governance models implemented by various actors over the past decade suggest otherwise. This type of agreement would also free up SDF resources, because the group would no longer have to protect its territory from Turkish-sponsored SNA attacks and could instead focus on rooting out IS cells in eastern Syria.

Furthermore, a sustainable ceasefire could open up negotiations between the AANES and the SIG, which over time could benefit both civilian governments. The SIG could help the AANES improve relations with its Arab communities,³⁹ while the administration could help the SIG engineer its governance structure to combat the corruption and instability that have plagued rebel areas since the SIG took them from the regime.⁴⁰ Successful symbiotic dealings between the civilian governments could also foster a stronger bloc, eventually delegitimizing the extremist HTS governance project so that the SIG could assume governance of northern Idlib and northern Aleppo, backed by the SNA and SDF. With SDF assistance, this structure could be reinforced by the SIG and SNA's agreeing to return Afrin to AANES control and allowing Kurdish residents to return to their homes.

In addition to pursuing internal diplomatic tracks, the United States and its European counterparts should push their Gulf allies—in particular, the United Arab Emirates and Oman—to avoid establishing diplomatic enterprises in Damascus.⁴¹ Moreover, Washington must dissuade countries such as Tunisia and Egypt from readmitting Syria to the Arab League.⁴² There is no reason to give the regime any hint of legitimacy after all the destruction it has wreaked over the past decade. Furthermore, Washington should discourage all outside actors

from helping reconstruct regime-held territory. In fact, State Department officials should remind the UAE and Oman that the Caesar Act, a U.S. sanctions measure signed into law in December 2019, applies not just to Syrian-regime officials but also to those who assist the regime, including American allies. If successful, these efforts would prevent Russia from propagating the idea that the Syrian conflict is over and that, absent an alternative, countries should reengage the Assad regime.

Another area to pursue is outreach to activists within Syria's Alawite, Druze, Christian, Ismaili, and other minority communities. Historically, the State Department has preferred working state to state, or with an official government body, but the reality of Syria, and many parts of the Middle East, is that understanding broader society requires engaging with informal networks. Although obscured by current realities, the early 2011 uprising saw more than Sunni Arabs taking part. However, the dynamics outlined earlier meant that those who spoke out against the regime were silenced through murder or arrest. Others self-silenced to survive. But the Alawite community—despite constituting the backbone of the Assad regime—and other minority groups are not necessarily pleased with the status quo.⁴³ Thus, for those seeking to undermine the regime's credibility and legitimacy, understanding the key players in these communities is critical.

To avoid putting individuals who remain in Syria in harm's way, Washington should seek counsel from those who have fled. This outreach could help U.S. policymakers map the "archipelago of dissent" more accurately by drawing from former community insiders themselves. From there, Washington should coordinate with the majority—Sunni Arab and Kurdish activists to discuss the potential for a future coalition, if the regime were to fall. It would be worthwhile here to consider the Tunisian opposition-in-exile before the January 2011 fall of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Tunisia's various political parties—all with dissimilar ideologies—were well-positioned for compromise, because they had already worked together and established a level of

trust in the decade before the fall. That cooperation, which contrasts with the more chaotic process seen in Egypt after 2011, helped smooth the initial transition in Tunisia.⁴⁴

Humanitarian Approach

A more stable northern and eastern Syria—beyond the grip of the regime and its allies—would necessitate a push for greater aid in those areas. Healthcare systems have suffered mightily during the war, especially in the northwest, where hospitals and health clinics have been ravaged by regime and Russian airstrikes. Further, Russia’s recent intransigence at the United Nations with regard to delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria has severely limited what aid is even available.⁴⁵ Channeling aid primarily through the regime is a nonstarter, because such aid will not be delivered to areas the regime is fighting to recover or that it no longer controls.⁴⁶ In fact, the regime has used such aid as a revenue stream, selling food and supplies to residents for the past decade. Thus, outside UN bounds, the United States and other willing partners in the West, the Arab world, and elsewhere must develop a mechanism with Turkey and the KRG to deliver unfettered aid to northern and eastern Syria. Because of the regime’s propensity for bombing health system buildings, all aid convoys should be escorted by U.S. and Turkish armed drones. An arrangement of this sort would asymmetrically undercut Russia’s attempt to limit aid to the areas that need it most, ultimately undermining Russia’s power projection on the world stage while diminishing the regime’s ability to destroy lifesaving aid.

In addition to orchestrating the realignment of aid distribution in northern and eastern Syria, Washington must consider the situation in al-Tanf. The Syrian border crossing is home to a U.S. garrison and to Jaish Maghaweer al-Thawra, the U.S.-allied force providing de facto cover for the Rukban IDP camp, which straddles the Syria-Jordan border. Washington cannot turn a blind eye to the humanitarian catastrophe currently engulfing those

at Rukban.⁴⁷ Because the United States is the strongest actor in that area, Washington should ultimately take responsibility and provide more significant aid in an effort to relieve the pain and suffering experienced by the area’s IDPs.

Likewise, instead of shutting the door to U.S. residency, Washington should once again allow more Syrian immigrants to enter the United States. In particular, it should prioritize those who have assisted the United States in its fight against the Islamic State, who under the Trump administration have been denied access in recent years.⁴⁸ The executive order recently signed by President Joe Biden ending the so-called Muslim ban should help facilitate this. Moreover, Syrians who are college-educated or who have experience in a white-collar field should be considered ideal candidates, given that they can immediately take part in American life, have a greater chance of assimilating, and have the requisite background to succeed in the country’s knowledge-based economy. Of course, the United States should also consider those without such credentials, in light of the traumas many Syrians have faced in the past decade.

Legal Approach

Because of the many human rights abuses committed by the Assad regime and its allies, the United States should work with its European partners to build cases against the perpetrators, to be filed with the International Criminal Court. In addition, if any such individuals have foreign residency or have money in foreign banks—especially in Europe—their assets should be frozen and their travel banned. Such measures will hold the offenders more accountable, for example, by preventing them from committing a flagrant crime one day, only to take their family on a European holiday the following weekend.⁴⁹ Similarly, if any Assad-regime-affiliated figure linked to human rights abuses has ties to a different country, then Western nations, alongside Washington, should bring that individual to trial, as is currently happening in Germany.⁵⁰ Further, Syrians harmed by the regime

who are now refugees or residents of other countries should be able to sue offending individuals within the regime. If such cases go forward against regime figures accused of murder, torture, rape, or other heinous crimes, Western governments can draw upon the accused's frozen assets to bring greater justice to those who have suffered. Indeed, no corner of the West should be assumed a safe haven by the regime, or by those who enable it from other countries or from nonstate actors.

Economic Approach

To promote an alternative order in Syria free of Assad-regime control, the United States and its allies should assist with reconstruction efforts, but only in areas the regime does not control. In some areas, especially in the north and east, the anti-IS coalition actually destroyed parts of cities and villages in its fight against the jihadist group.⁵¹ Thus, U.S. aid for the rehabilitation of such locales seems only appropriate. This could also provide an alternative for the Emirates and other Gulf states looking to help with reconstruction, instead of assisting the regime in its reconstruction and rehabilitation tour. The United States and its allies should also consider assisting in places that did not see coalition fighting but instead were destroyed by the regime's collective punishment campaign against insurgent opposition forces and civilians.⁵² Such gestures of goodwill would certainly help rebuild residents' lives in affected areas.

Military Approach

To further bolster the U.S. position in eastern Syria, and to facilitate better relations between the AANES and local tribes, particularly in Deir al-Zour province, the United States and SDF should create "Awakening Councils" similar to those in Iraq that pushed back against the Islamic State's predecessor group. Indeed, a more effective structure would not only permit more centralized governance vis-a-vis Arab tribal dynamics, but also stem the emergence

of a stronger IS insurgency. A secondary positive effect would be protecting those areas of Deir al-Zour that are free of the Iranian, or Iranian proxy, control that predominates across the Euphrates. The past year has seen several assassinations of tribal figures and leaders on the eastern side of the river; these murders have not been attributed to IS, but rather were likely committed by this Iranian network, which is attempting to destabilize the area by sowing mistrust between the majority-Kurdish SDF and the local population. Because the local tribes have family members on both sides of the river, Awakening Councils could, over time and with the right resources and training, push Iran and its Shia militias farther west. This would ultimately provide more breathing room for the AANES and allow the tribes to live more freely, without security vacuums. Such a move is more urgent than ever, given that Iran and its network, as well as the Assad regime, have started reaching out to the tribal population in an effort to expand their influence—and to undermine the regional stability that the United States and the SDF have worked toward for the past few years.⁵³ The individuals with whom Iran and the regime are attempting to collaborate could create another locus of attack against local forces—alongside the IS challenge—similar to Iran's proxies in Iraq against the United States.⁵⁴

If such military efforts come to fruition and are implemented correctly—in concert with the diplomatic efforts mentioned earlier—Washington should seek out the Druze leadership in Suwayda, with the hope of forging a deeper Syrian Druze relationship with Jordan and Israel. The Druze community has a history of significant grievances against the regime; these range from the ascension of Hafiz al-Assad and his takeover of the Baath Party, which resulted in the purging of Druze officers from the Syrian military, to more recent developments.⁵⁵ In addition, growing resentment among the Druze with regard to the greater Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian presence in southern Syria constitutes an opening. The Druze would, ideally, prefer to link up with Jordan through a supply corridor, versus remaining vassals of the Syrian regime. Thus, a

joint opportunity exists for the United States, Jordan, the UAE, and Israel to draw the Druze away from Bashar al-Assad by offering assistance, including weapons.

Furthermore, though some Druze leaders would consider cooperating with the SDF, the fact that Druze and SDF territories are not contiguous makes that prospect rather tricky. If, however, the United States could create a coalition of the Druze, SDF, and aforementioned Jaish Maghaweer al-Thawra in al-Tanf—which is located between Suwayda and eastern Deir al-Zour—then that alliance could eject any regime, Iranian, or proxy force in its territory. First, under protection of armed drones, Druze allies and Jaish Maghaweer al-Thawra could link their territories to the U.S. base at al-Tanf; from there, Jaish Maghaweer al-Thawra could move up the Syria-Iraq border, toward the AANES side of the Euphrates, with SDF assistance.

The area between Suwayda governorate and the AANES along the Syria-Iraq border is mainly desert and more or less unpopulated. Movement through this area by a U.S.-backed coalition should not have a large-scale effect on refugee or IDP flows, a development that concerns Jordan. Indeed, limited focus on a single area that hugs the border will have less humanitarian impact than did past efforts by local Sunni Arab rebels in Deraa, who attempted to fight the regime to Damascus. Such an operation, if successful, could thereby establish the Autonomous Administration of North, East, and South Syria—a democratic system that would be free from the regime and exert further pressure on it. That very administration might then embolden others in different parts of Syria to join such a framework. An expanded Autonomous Administration would also further limit the influence of Iran and its Shia militias by effectively cutting off the Iraq-Syria border, thereby blocking a supply line from Iran to Lebanon. This, in turn, would enhance Israel's ability to secure its own borders against cross-border attacks or precision-guided missiles transferred to Lebanese Hezbollah. It is clear that a new Syria can be built, piece by piece, but this time under the rubric

of a free and democratic order that is unlike the theological visions of the Islamic State or the Assad regime's police and intelligence state.

Similarly, the United States should encourage Israel to once again engage in Syria's Deraa region, beyond its airstrike campaign, and to be more proactive in developing local contacts to deter Hezbollah ambitions. Indeed, Israel could do a great deal in southern Syria by exerting its fiscal might and security influence, as it did in previous years. Israel's more recent policy, however, has been to barricade itself behind its border fence. One way Israel could act would be through efforts to cooperate with Ahmad al-Awda, a former anti-Assad rebel and current commander of the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade—a subdivision of the Fifth Corps—which Russia has used to help rebuild parts of the regime's army.⁵⁶ Notably, many of those in the Fifth Corps are "reconciled" former Syrian rebels who once fought against the regime. A significant number were forced into such a position to avoid execution, imprisonment, or harm to their families; thus, there is little loyalty to the regime or esprit de corps among this fighting force. There is, however, major resentment in Deraa toward the regime, and even violence against it.⁵⁷ With that leverage, Awda could demand Russian assistance against Lebanese Hezbollah, further undermining the Assad regime and keeping Israel's border quieter.

Conclusion

All these policy prescriptions must contend with pushback from adversaries of various stripes. But if these policies were seriously considered and implemented in concert, the United States could regain leverage within this conflict space. That leverage would be more aligned with American interests than with the interests of adversaries Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. It could also facilitate more pressure on Assad and—potentially—lay the groundwork for the transfer of power to a

more representative and democratic Syrian leadership. In addition to improving U.S. leverage, the aforementioned policies could bolster the American-led alliance structure on the ground by uniting a large cross section of people from different ethnic groups, while also calming the fears of bordering U.S. allies such as Turkey, Jordan, and Israel. Outside Syria, such policies could inspire diaspora activists of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to band together in support of a more robust opposition, if the regime does fall. Taken together, that alliance structure and external support could frame future reconstruction efforts under U.S. and European supervision, which would consider a broad spectrum of groups and factions, focusing not on particular locales but instead on all of Syria.

Further, the proposed policies laid out here would

strengthen counterterrorism efforts and increase gains within broader power competitions between the United States and other countries, and between U.S. allies and other countries. Addressing the roots of terrorism requires that Washington reinvest attention in Middle East geopolitics, however weary U.S. politicians and the American people may be of this enterprise. Without doing so, the United States will continue pursuing policies similar to those of the past two decades. Those very policies have caused situations in the region to stagnate (at best) or to become entirely unmanageable (at worst). None of these prescriptions is easy, and all would require significant time, resources, effort, and coordination. Yet if the United States wants to reimagine its policies in the Middle East—and to set itself up for greater strength in an era of power competition—Syria would be the best place to start. ❖

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