

Syria Study Group: Recommendations for U.S. Policy

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Articles & Testimony

The following joint statement was submitted to the House Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism in advance of testimony by Dana Stroul and Michael Singh, the Washington Institute fellows who serve as co-chairs of the [bipartisan Syria Study Group \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-study-group-2019\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-study-group-2019).

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, we are pleased to present the final report of the Syria Study Group, which represents a bipartisan, consensus assessment of the conflict in Syria and recommendations for U.S. policy.

In our [report published last month \(https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report\)](https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report), the Syria Study Group warned that the conflict in Syria was not over, but was entering a new phase—likely a more dynamic and dangerous one. Unfortunately, events since then have borne out this warning. In recent days, the United States has made momentous and troubling decisions that have contributed to a new round of fighting and a new wave of atrocities, civilian flight, and human suffering. In the Syria Study Group's view, these developments will hamper the ability of the United States to achieve critical national security objectives in the Middle East.

The Syria Study Group was unanimous in its view that the conflict in Syria is not simply a far-off tragedy. The United States has compelling interests at stake, and events there will reverberate far into the future, in the Middle East and beyond. Indeed, Syria is a conflict where the two great U.S. strategic concerns—the aggression of revisionist powers and the threat of international terrorism—come together.

The members of the Syria Study Group were also in agreement that the United States has the tools necessary to influence the direction of the conflict in Syria and advance U.S. interests, and that our efforts can not only protect American national security but also alleviate the suffering of those caught up in this conflict and deter those abetting it.

Unfortunately, the withdrawal of American forces from Syria means that we are relinquishing perhaps the most important of those tools—one third of Syrian territory not under Assad’s control and a capable local partner—and thus forgoing an important source of leverage. Moreover, the Syria Study Group noted that the sharp shifts and reversals in U.S. policy undermined U.S. credibility. The latest U.S. decision only further erodes any remaining standing. It is imperative now that U.S. policymakers focus on devising a strategy that can mitigate the consequences of these setbacks. The report of the Syria Study Group offers a bipartisan roadmap for doing so.

The group recognized the limited appetite of the American public for an increase in U.S. military or financial investment in Syria. Therefore, we recommended that the United States strengthen key elements of the current approach to Syria by investing appropriate levels of resources, while elevating resolution of the broader conflict as a U.S. national security priority. Some tools remain in use: a coalition of partners who largely share U.S. objectives, sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and diplomacy. Others have been set aside but remain available: U.S. forces enabling local partners and civilians, and stabilization and reconstruction assistance. We are calling for the administration and Congress to deploy the full range of U.S. policy tools and to appropriately resource them.

The Syria Study Group recommended that the U.S. military withdrawal from northeastern Syria be reversed. This was necessary prior to last week’s developments; it remains necessary but far more complicated today. In addition, we recommended that U.S. sanctions on Assad and his backers be strengthened and be made multilateral to the extent possible, that diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime continue, that U.S. stabilization assistance already authorized and appropriated by Congress for post-ISIS communities in Syria be spent, and that reconstruction aid to the parts of Syria under regime control continue to be withheld. The U.S. must concurrently continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrians inside and outside of Syria, while shoring up vulnerable, refugee-hosting partner countries and host communities on Syria’s borders.

In its final report, the Syria Study Group warned of crisis in the U.S.-Turkey relationship in the event of a Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria. The group recommended that work on the security mechanism in northeastern Syria continue in order to address legitimate Turkish security concerns and prevent Turkish military operations, while encouraging the resumption of Turkey-PKK peace talks as the best path forward for addressing Turkey’s concerns with the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The group did not call for ending U.S. support to the SDF following the territorial defeat of ISIS, but rather transitioning the relationship so that the SDF could wage a counter-insurgency campaign while improving stability and governance in the areas of Syria under their control.

Our group acknowledges that, given recent developments, even a more realistic and effectively resourced strategy faces long odds. The obstacles to influencing an outcome in Syria conducive to U.S. interests were formidable before the U.S. military withdrawal and are even more so now. Assad remains adamantly opposed to any compromise requiring changes in his regime’s behavior, and he stands to consolidate gains from the U.S. military withdrawal by forging a deal with the Syrian Democratic Forces, reentering northeastern Syria, and bringing the population there to heel. Russia is unable to unilaterally deliver a political win for Assad but remained invested in his survival before the U.S. military withdrawal and will capitalize on recent developments by positioning Moscow as mediator of Syria’s disputes while sidelining the United States. Iran has suffered setbacks in the form of sanctions and Israeli strikes but remains determined to entrench itself in Syria for the long term and will now look to link its proxies in Syria and Iraq—a goal previously blocked by the presence of U.S. forces. Turkey and our local partner the SDF are at war with one another, and the result is likely to be the collapse of the SDF, the forced resettlement of Syrian refugees that intentionally alters the demography of northeastern Syria, minimal political or economic gains by Syrian Kurds as their communities look to Damascus for protection, and a new wave of civilian flight setting conditions for the next phase of conflict and instability. ISIS, already reemerging as an insurgency prior to the Turkish incursion, was never fully defeated and will gain new strength and purpose as a result of recent events.

Beyond these challenges, the scale and scope of human suffering over the course of nine years of conflict have set a depraved new standard for twenty-first-century conflict—hundreds of thousands dead, millions missing or displaced, and waves of refugees straining Syria’s neighbors and Europe. The parties responsible—the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia—have faced no meaningful consequences for their use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, torture, starvation, and intentional destruction of civilian infrastructure. The United Nations Security Council has been rendered ineffectual in galvanizing international action in response to Assad’s atrocities by Russian and Chinese protection. These issues are rarely elevated or prioritized in diplomatic discourse or multilateral gatherings on Syria but remain profoundly important to the stakeholders in the conflict who have suffered the most: the Syrian people. Without meaningful attention paid to those issues most important to civilians—protection, accountability, justice—Syrian refugees will not voluntarily return home, Syrians remaining in their country will lack the security to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and no political process will be sustainable.

The Syria Study Group’s report, which provides our full and detailed assessments and policy recommendations, is [attached to this statement \(https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20191016/110096/HHRG-116-FA13-20191016-SD001.pdf\)](https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20191016/110096/HHRG-116-FA13-20191016-SD001.pdf). We believe that the strategy we outline there not only remains relevant, but is more necessary than ever in light of recent events. We hope that the report can serve as a bipartisan roadmap for action toward those ends.

As co-chairs of the Syria Study Group, we wish to thank Congress for supporting the creation of this Group, and special thanks to Senator Shaheen for her leadership in ensuring that the Syria Study Group legislation became law. We also thank the U.S. Institute of Peace for its facilitating role—USIP plays a unique role at the nexus of U.S. thinking and doing across many of the most complex global challenges. Finally, we express our appreciation to the members of the SSG for their collegiality, contributions, and willingness to engage thoughtfully and critically with each other and with our USG and expert briefers on this vital topic. ❖

House Foreign Affairs Committee

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