

The Struggle for Peace in Syria: A Decade of Decisionmaking

by [Bassma Kodmani \(/experts/bassma-kodmani\)](#), [Robert Ford \(/experts/robert-ford\)](#), [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Bassma Kodmani is a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and Drafting Committee and a founder of the Syrian National Council, the country's first opposition coalition.



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Brief Analysis

Two former U.S. ambassadors and a Syrian opposition official examine the many diplomatic,

geopolitical, and humanitarian lessons the conflict holds for the Biden administration.

On March 5, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Bassma Kodmani, Robert Ford, and James Jeffrey. Kodmani is a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and Drafting Committee and a founder of the opposition Syrian National Council. Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria in 2011-14, is a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute and the Kissinger senior fellow at the Yale Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. Jeffrey has served as U.S. special representative for Syria engagement (2018-2020) and deputy national security advisor (2007-2008); he currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Bassma Kodmani

The situation in Syria is dire. Repression and arrests continue against activists and humanitarian workers alike. The country is also on the edge of a real hunger crisis unless changes are made to the way aid is distributed. For many Syrians, securing food has become the one and only concern, and average citizens cannot even afford bread.

It is unclear to what degree sanctions might be responsible for this suffering, but Bashar al-Assad's propaganda emphasizes the connection heavily. Sanctions are good if the international community is careful to make them "smarter" and go after individuals. But denying reconstruction funds is painful. Syrians need alternative channels—money should be given to a variety of groups outside Assad's control, and "clandestine" border crossings are one option that can be scaled up.

Indeed, it is important to ask whether other tools are available besides sanctions. Is the U.S. goal in Syria just to be obstructionist, to deny Russia victory? That is a strategy seen in the past from Moscow, but not the United States. The problem is that investment by Western countries has been too little, too late, and this indecisive approach has left them with few good options.

The status of the diplomatic process is discouraging as well. There is some hope for change with the Biden administration, and some hope for accountability with the recent German trial of two Syrian war criminals, which may embarrass Assad's allies. Overall, however, there is very little hope for a solution via the current diplomatic track. One major problem is that Assad repeatedly encouraged polarization, and many fell into that. Now the question is, who can people unify behind? This is a time to step back and think about other options, but right now there is no signal from anywhere that space for diplomacy even exists.

The current policy is a recipe for continued warfare, insecurity, and the spread of jihadists. Russia is the decisive power at the moment, so that is why we talk to them. There is no ideal solution, but gradually the country needs to be brought together.

Robert Ford

The Obama administration made two fundamental mistakes at the beginning of the Syria crisis. The first is that we did not understand in 2012-13 that this was a war. We said, and truly believed, that there would not be a military solution to the crisis. But the military balance of power was always the fundamental issue. We were overlooking what Assad was trying to achieve: victory for him was remaining in power. The administration made a bad mistake, and it affected our policy in all kinds of ways.

Second, we depended far too much on the Russians between 2012 and 2014. We thought they could deliver significant political compromises from the Assad government, never really understanding that they were not interested in doing that. It is one thing to say you do not like Assad, which they said repeatedly; it is another to compel concessions. The reliance on Russia was rooted in hope, not analysis.

Other aspects of the crisis warrant additional attention from scholars and historians as well. In 2013, we contemplated a no-fly zone in Syria, but no one advocated for it strongly in the United States. We were very leery of extended, expensive military involvement. In 2015, however, we implemented a no-fly zone east of the Euphrates River, and the costs of maintaining it have been far lower than expected.

Regarding humanitarian issues, many additional civilians died in the war's early years because Assad viewed control over aid as a matter of national sovereignty. It was not until late 2013 that the UN approved the cross-border resolution to route aid through Turkey rather than Damascus. But international law and the limits of state sovereignty are still very open questions, and Syria is a textbook case.

We also assumed that if we put enough pressure on Assad and his clique, he would be forced to negotiate. Yet many analysts have pushed back on that idea, and in retrospect it is not so clear that economic pressure would ever have forced him to negotiate.

Today, the military situation has evolved to the point that reversing it would require a huge investment, and there is no appetite for that. Sanctions will not lead to anything either, because Assad does not care about his people. I agree with the goal of sanctions, but I am skeptical that they are the right tool.

The United States needs to step back and think about what its essential national security interests are. Containing the Islamic State is a core interest, and America also has a moral and perhaps national security interest in helping refugees. But the opportunities Washington had in 2013-2014 are gone. Rather than pushing for implausible concessions from the Assad regime, focusing on core interests would be a logical strategy.

James Jeffrey

From a historical perspective, Syria was a transition conflict. It marked a shift from the customary crises seen after 1989 (e.g., the Bosnian intervention) to internationalized confrontations like those seen today in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Taiwan Strait. Syria became a state-state conflict that put fundamental Middle Eastern security issues in play. Neither of the previous two U.S. administrations could get its head around that problem—a failure of imagination, not just policy.

A related mistake was the U.S. tendency to look at each of the conflict's horrific consequences in isolation. The refugee crisis, the wave of terrorist attacks in Europe, Turkey's fears of a PKK statelet, and many other issues were treated as smaller problems to be addressed individually by various parts of the U.S. bureaucracy. This changed in September 2018, when Assad violated the fifth ceasefire agreement, this time in the north. That was a decisive moment because Washington finally recognized the smaller problems as the product of the same underlying issue: Assad's push for total military victory, which he was on the cusp of achieving at that time.

The Trump administration took the position of not letting Assad advance that goal any further. We settled on a low-risk response that echoed the U.S. approach to Iranian interference in Iraq and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—that is, we were unwilling to invest the resources needed to create a solution, only enough to deny victory to the other side. The hope was that this would lead to a compromise capable of thwarting Iranian and Russian goals in the region. We brought all of our resources together, and it was enough to freeze the conflict. The United States still wants more than a stalemate, but the dangers of Iranian-Russian victory are too great, so that is how the conflict is being addressed for the time being.

The Biden administration does not yet have an overarching Syria policy. Its inclination, at the middle to high working level, is to focus on the Islamic State and refugee policy because those are things the United States can do effectively. The problem is that both issues remain manifestations of the underlying crisis, so they will be difficult to solve in isolation.

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