

Assad Is Giving Biden Every Reason to Prioritize Syria

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Brief Analysis

Even if the growing regional and geopolitical stakes were not sufficient on their own, the regime's domestic negligence, illegitimacy, and criminality provide ample reason to shake up Washington's approach.

As President Biden ponders Washington's best approach to the Syrian quandaries that bedeviled the previous two administrations, it can confidently draw at least one conclusion: Bashar al-Assad's regime has abdicated all levels of responsibility as a legitimate ruler. Part of this conclusion stems from the regime's vast portfolio of human rights violations; as Stephen Rapp, the former ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues under the Obama administration, asserted in a recent *60 Minutes* segment, "We've got better evidence against Assad and his clique than we had against Milosevic in Yugoslavia...Even better than we had against the Nazis at Nuremberg." Yet the regime has failed Syria and its people in far more comprehensive ways as well, ensuring that destabilization, regional spillover, and exploitation by U.S. adversaries will only grow if the Biden administration sticks with status-quo policies.

Failed Healthcare System

The inhumane military and diplomatic steps taken by Assad and his foreign allies over the years have brought Syria's healthcare crisis to a head. First, Damascus and Russia's deliberate bombing of hospitals and other medical facilities has destroyed infrastructure that is indispensable to public health for wide swaths of the

population. Their forces have also murdered healthcare workers—nearly 1,000 of them since the war began, according to a 2020 report by Physicians for Human Rights.

As a result, millions of Syrians are now reliant on external humanitarian aid to meet their healthcare needs. Here, too, the regime has failed the people, since any aid shortfalls now pose a major health challenge. In a January 2021 UN briefing, officials noted that of the 13 million Syrians in need of such aid, the UN-coordinated humanitarian effort was reaching only 7.6 million. Most of the blame for this shortfall lies with Assad and Moscow, who have **prohibited greater UN access (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/humanitarian-aid-and-biden-administration-lessons-yemen-and-syria>)** via border crossings that the regime **does not even control (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regime-has-failed-restore-full-sovereignty-over-syria>)**.

Assad's **mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-three-governments-confront-coronavirus>)** has only exacerbated the overall health crisis. As of March 2, the regime claimed that Syria had suffered only 15,696 cases and 1,039 deaths. Yet these are vast underestimates—according to a January 14 report by Syria Direct, information suppression and testing challenges ensure that only 1.5 percent of deaths are reported. The government has no plans to vaccinate more than 20 percent of the country this year, and these limited supplies will no doubt be restricted to Assad's inner circle and core Alawite constituency.

Troubled Economy

Some observers have blamed foreign sanctions for Syria's **economic woes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-economic-crisis-sparks-rare-protests-regime-territory>)**, and such messaging is a key part of the regime's propaganda efforts. Yet Assad himself admitted on November 4 that “when the banks in Lebanon closed, we paid the price. This is the essence of the problem.” Such statements highlight the risky degree to which the Syrian economy is intertwined with Lebanon's economy and banking system, virtually guaranteeing that any financial instability across the border will affect the situation at home.

Moreover, as a consequence of the pandemic, a UN report found that 45 percent of Syrian families had lost at least one source of income as of December 2020, making a bad situation much worse. Poverty and unemployment remain extremely high, with the Red Cross reporting that 80 percent of the population lived below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day as of June 2020.

Inflation has been a major problem as well. With the exchange rate spiraling from 47 Syrian pounds per U.S. dollar before the war to 3,590 pounds as of last month, inflation has averaged around 200 percent over the past year, making basic staples brutally expensive for the average citizen.

Environmental Degradation

The regime's deficiencies in central control and state capacity have made it difficult to address domestic environmental challenges. Some of these failures began under the rule of Hafiz al-Assad, Bashar's father, such as the poorly planned bid for food self-sufficiency that began in the 1980s but wound up spurring a crisis in the wheat industry, causing substantial environmental degradation, and contributing to the unrest that evolved into the 2011 uprising. Yet more recent challenges fall entirely on his regime, which has proven unable or unwilling to address them—and in some cases has deliberately exacerbated them.

The list is long and growing. Last year, a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs blamed climate change for Syria's intensifying wildfires, which left eighty people hospitalized and thousands displaced in October alone. Elsewhere, increasingly frequent and intense droughts have plagued the agricultural sector and raised the stakes of Turkey's new dam construction projects—especially since Syrian groundwater aquifers were

stretched to the breaking point even a decade ago, according to a prewar report by the Wilson Center. The country has also lost nearly 20 percent of its already depleted forest cover since 2000. According to Syria Direct, this is partly a result of increased illegal logging in Idlib, Latakia, and Aleppo, a trend that surfaced after the regime shut off electricity as collective punishment against areas that rose up against its rule. And in the central Badia steppe/desert region, overgrazing and droughts have destroyed the smaller plants that prevent erosion and feed livestock.

Indefinite Refugee Displacement

Assad is still the main barrier to millions of Syrian refugees returning home from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries. Many of them fear being arrested or killed in retribution for allegedly associating with the uprising, or even for simply fleeing regime territory in the first place. Moreover, the large-scale infrastructure destruction wrought by regime and Russian forces, coupled with widespread property seizures by loyalist and Iranian/proxy elements, have left many Syrians with no homes to return to.

Correcting Past U.S. Mistakes

Months before he was named as President Biden’s secretary of state, Antony Blinken told *Face the Nation* in May 2020 that he and other members of the former Obama administration needed to acknowledge “that we failed” on Syria policy. He concluded, “It’s something that I will take with me for the rest of my days. It’s something that I feel very strongly.” If the new administration is serious about making up for these mistakes and restoring America’s global standing, it must avoid the flawed strategic assumptions that led to them.

This includes the notion that Syria policy can be safely subsumed under—and essentially sacrificed for—Iran nuclear negotiations. Washington should instead operate under the converse assumption: that Syria is the fulcrum of Iran’s regional policy, so pursuing a more active, adroit U.S. policy there can create **additional leverage against Tehran** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/bidens-warning-iran-and-its-proxies-implications-syria-strike>). Without the Assad regime, Iran’s entire regional foreign policy would be undermined, since Syria is a central span in the Iran-Iraq-Lebanon land bridge that holds the so-called “axis of resistance” together.

To be sure, the Assad regime’s domestic negligence, mismanagement, illegitimacy, and criminality provide sufficient reason on their own to shake up Washington’s approach. Yet reinvigorating a serious U.S. policy toward Syria is crucial even from a purely realpolitik, **power competition** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-center-power-competition-and-counterterrorism>) perspective, if only to curb the advance of American adversaries in Tehran and Moscow.

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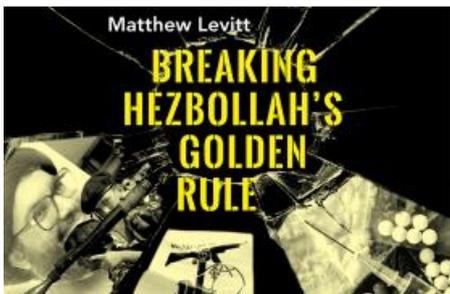
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