

A New “Working” Agenda to Solve the Syrian Puzzle

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Mar 5, 2021

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Brief Analysis

There are several steps the Biden administration can take to strengthen its allies in Syria and promote a peaceful solution.

Over the past few years, U.S. policy in Syria has stumbled in achieving its goals, namely the end of Iran’s presence in the country and the eradication of the remnants of the Islamic State (ISIS) in territories east of the Euphrates controlled by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-control-terrain-map-march-2018>). As a result, the United States has lost credibility and status among Arab communities where the threat of ISIS is a present concern. Such a policy failure also leaves these SDF-controlled regions, which make up approximately a quarter of Syria, unstable and mired.

Regarding these policy challenges, Charles Thépaut put forward a number of important proposals for the Biden administration to resolve the Syrian crisis in an article published by The Washington Institute titled, “A Short-Term Diplomatic Agenda for the Syrian Puzzle (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/short-term-diplomatic-agenda-syrian-puzzle>).” These proposals emphasize the need for the administration to make some simple adjustments to previously existing policies that hampered the achievement of the stated goals of the U.S. presence in Syria. This article proposes several additional initiatives that build on Thépaut’s proposals to promote a more effective U.S. Syria policy that addresses some of the critical challenges currently extant on the ground.

Current issues negatively impacting U.S. goals in Syria have to do with divisive SDF practices and ethnic dynamics in SDF-controlled regions of Syria. The SDF shows a clear preference for its Kurdish elements in leadership and decision-making. This preference has meant a lack of practical and effective participation for Arabs, who make up some 85 percent of the area’s residents (https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/storage.arab-reform.net/ari/2013/10/02101305/Arab_Reform_Initiative_2013-10_Research_Paper_en_the_impossible_partition_of_syria.pdf), in decision-making and leadership in civil administrations. Partially because of such ethnic marginalization, civil institutions in the SDF have generally lost legitimacy among local people and stand as “brittle facades” for a governing body that has failed to properly protect

or govern the people of the region.

Part of this failure has also been the SDF's inability to resolve security issues that emerged after the major withdrawal of ISIS. Such unresolved threats have led to an **increased number of unsolved assassinations** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/12/syria-sdf-deirzor-arabs-opposition.html>). Moreover, the SDF has used the threat of ISIS to accuse critical nationalist voices of ties to ISIS with no tangible proof, a practice ironically similar to those of the Assad regime.

In addressing these issues, the new United States will need to take practical and effective measures in Syria. In developing "strategic patience," as Charles Thépaut says, the United States will need to focus on eradicating corruption and empowering democratic systems in Syria.

Firstly, the United States and its partners should exert more pressure and sanctions against the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers to comply with international resolutions. Ultimately, the United States and partners should continue to assert that Assad must not remain in power and help bring him and those around him to international courts for human rights abuses and war crimes.

In creating a new Syrian government, as Charles Thépaut notes, there is a need to "set a deadline for the constitutional committee," as "this UN-led committee has produced no appreciable results after more than a year of existence." It should be emphasized afterward that drafting the constitution is a matter for the Syrian people to ultimately decide—the regime and its structure does not currently allow for participation. The drafting of a new constitution will necessitate the appropriate conditions for forming a "**transitional governing body**" (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>), as defined by UN Resolution 2254, to lead the process. That constitution is to be later confirmed through transparent elections by Syrians both at home and in countries of asylum under the supervision of the United Nations and the powers active on Syrian soil. The most prominent of these, in our view, are the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the countries of the European Union.

As for its presence on the ground and its support of the SDF, the United States should consider the borders of SDF-controlled areas to be temporary boundaries that will become obsolete with the end of the "Syrian crisis" in accordance with the requirements of United Nations Resolution 2254. The incoming administration should consider these areas to be an inseparable part of Syrian territory and not support or encourage separatist claims, which Syrians reject.

To achieve its security goals, the United States should cooperate with Turkey to recruit Syrian military experts with clean humanitarian records and nationalist leanings to create an armed body assigned with expelling Iran-backed militias and ISIS from Syria. Regardless of ethnic or sectarian backgrounds, the members of this body should adopt a spirit of competence and Syrian nationalism under a single banner: the "independence flag," which Syrians adopted in their revolution and which they paid for with a river of blood. Other flags that are sensitive for Syrians should be removed.

In addition to this military body, the United States should encourage and aid in the creation of a professional, non-repressive security force comprised of police and security institutions. By ensuring public safety in populated areas, this force will provide the necessary conditions for residents to have a safe life that would help them return to their affairs. It is critical that the force honor human rights and international law.

As well as law enforcement, the United States should emphasize the need to form a professional and effective judicial body made up of Syrian judges and lawyers. This judiciary would be based in Syrian law, after freezing the implementation of laws issued by the Assad regime to justify its criminal practices against the Syrian people and the criminal practices of its security apparatuses. This body would take the place of the Sharia judiciary, the People's

Courts, and other judicial bodies adopted by parties to the conflict in areas outside the control of the Assad regime.

The United States should also direct profits from oil production to provide for the needs of territories “liberated” from control of the Assad regime, Iranian militias, and Russian-backed militias. Critically, the administration must support transparent oversight of the returns from surplus production so it does not end up on the hands of remaining ISIS sleeper cells. In addition, the administration should prevent the SDF from selling money to the Syrian regime through the Qatirji Company, which is on the [US Treasury list of supporters of terrorism \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm474\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm474), and cut the supply of electricity from the Euphrates Dam, which helps the Syrian regime evade the consequences of the Caesar Act sanctions.

The funds from oil production should then be used for the reconstruction of vital services in these areas. These projects should focus on building schools with anti-extremist curricula and specialized teachers, as well as improvements and repairs to the currently crippled healthcare system so Syrians can manage the spread of Covid-19. Critical to such projects is the activation and sufficient funding of civil service administrations and municipalities.

In addition, assurance that such contracts for reconstruction projects are handled by competent civil servants without signs of corruption is essential. In seeking competent, capable public servants, the United States and its local actors should coordinate with the governments of countries of asylum for Syrian refugees so that Syrians in asylum, especially those with medical and scientific skills, can return. This would help stop ongoing demographic change processes and accelerate the reconstruction Syrians are waiting for.

To further ensure a lack of corruption in the development of civil services, the United States should encourage the unification of the parties responsible for distributing civil, relief and military support. Such unification should take place under United Nations oversight and standards. Many media reports have pointed to the trafficking of relief supplies and have warned of weapons reaching organizations that are designated terrorist groups.

Finally, in further efforts towards unification of relevant parties, the United States should work with its allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia to provide the necessary conditions to establish a political body as an alternative to the Turkey-backed National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee, and the US-backed Autonomous Administration Councils. This body would propose a national project taking into account the goals the Syrian revolution came out to achieve while affirming the unity of Syrian soil and that Syria is a nation for Syrians, regardless of their ethnic or sectarian affiliations. It would be established to build balanced relationships with the world and implement a clear and courageous plan for relations with neighboring states, including Israel.

These proposed steps are practical, requiring the “strategic patience” proposed by Charles Thépaut. It is possible to establish the beginning of a solution that can end with the stability of the region, the expulsion of Iranian militias, and the safe return of refugees. These proposals are not final. They need to be developed, which can only be achieved through transparent dialogue. If implemented correctly, these proposals should help achieve U.S. goals of eliminating the remaining ISIS operatives in the country, protecting oil wells, directing oil profits to help revive the region, and providing security when U.S. forces accomplish their mission. ❖

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