



SEPTEMBER 2019

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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This report represents the consensus of the bipartisan Syria Study Group. No member may be satisfied with every formulation and argument in isolation. The findings of this report are solely those of the Syria Study Group. They do not represent the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which was directed by Congress to facilitate the Syria Study Group.

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Letter from the Co-chairs

In this report, the members of the Syria Study Group make the case for why Syria matters for U.S. security and why the American public should care. While some argue that it is too late for a reinvigorated U.S. approach to Syria, we conclude that the United States can still influence the outcome of the Syrian war in a manner that protects U.S. interests. We argue that the United States has meaningful tools of leverage to prevent the reemergence of ISIS and counter other terrorist groups, stop Iran from turning Syria into a forward operating base, provide relief to displaced Syrians and Syria's hard-pressed neighbors, and advance a political outcome that stops Syrian territory from serving as a net exporter of terrorism and instability.

Achieving these outcomes will require a long-term commitment to a sound strategy, the careful balancing of ends and means, and—most importantly—political support at the highest levels. The United States will not be able to rally allies and partners, or achieve unity of purpose within the U.S. government, if we continue to project uncertainty about our commitment to Syria. Although the Syria Study Group believes our proposals offer a viable way forward to secure U.S. interests, we would not counsel engaging in this effort unless it has the support of the President and the Congress, and unless they are willing to make the case for it to the American people. Our troops, diplomats, and aid workers deserve no less.

As co-chairs of the Syria Study Group, we would like to thank all of those who made our work possible. We received numerous briefings in Washington, DC, and in the region from a wide and diverse range of current and former U.S. officials, foreign government officials, nongovernmental organizations and civil society representatives, scholars and experts, and concerned Americans. The U.S. administration was fully cooperative with our effort, for which we particularly thank our designated agency representatives: Ambassador James Jeffrey of the U.S. Department of State, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Kathryn Wheelbarger, National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East Alan Pino, and Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Michael Harvey of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

We also would like to express our gratitude to the Members of Congress who appointed the Group's twelve members during the 115th Congress: in the Senate, Majority Leader

McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Corker and Ranking Member Menendez, and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Inhofe and Ranking Member Reed; in the House, Speaker Ryan and Minority Leader Pelosi, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel, and House Armed Services Committee Chairman Thornberry and Ranking Member Smith. We reserve special gratitude for Senator Shaheen, without whose efforts the Syria Study Group would not have been convened.

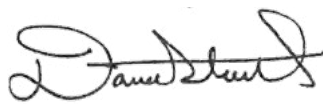
Finally, we are especially grateful to our fellow Group members and the staff of the United States Institute of Peace for the time, energy, and diligence they contributed to this effort.

We urge Congress and the Administration to consider this report carefully and implement its recommendations fully. This was truly a bipartisan effort and a demonstration that there is more that unites than divides us when it comes to advancing the security and prosperity of the United States. This is a consensus document, endorsed unanimously by the Group's members. Although it should not be read to represent each Group member's views in their entirety, it represents a bipartisan blueprint that we hope will win wide support. The report is strictly forward-looking; we did not interpret our mandate to include examining past policy choices. It is unclassified in its entirety.

We are humbled to dedicate this report to the American civilians and uniformed personnel who have served inside Syria or in support of U.S. efforts in Syria, especially those who have lost their lives. We also remember the Americans missing in Syria and hope for their freedom. And we are sobered by the memory of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have perished in eight years of conflict and the millions whose lives will never be the same.



Michael Singh



Dana Stroul

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States cannot avoid or ignore the conflict in Syria. From the outset of hostilities, minimizing American involvement in the war and safeguarding U.S. national security interests have proven to be incompatible goals. This will remain the case for the foreseeable future. The essential question before American policymakers is not whether the United States should keep or withdraw its forces in Syria, but what strategy and mix of tools will best protect the United States from the conflict's reverberations and advance American interests. This report sets out such a strategy.

The Syrian Conflict and American Interests

From the conflict's beginning in 2011 as a peaceful domestic uprising, experts warned that President Bashar al-Assad's brutal response was likely to have serious, negative impacts on U.S. interests. Given Syria's central location in the Middle East, its ruling regime's ties to terrorist groups and to Iran, and the incompatibility of Assad's authoritarian rule with the aspirations of the Syrian people, many worried about the conflict spilling over Syria's borders. These concerns are now a reality. The Syrian conflict spawned a refugee crisis that has encumbered Syria's neighbors and roiled European politics, strained U.S.-Turkish relations to the point of crisis, led to direct hostilities between Iran and Israel, provided a vector for Russia's resurgence in the Middle East, and challenged international norms around weapons of mass destruction and the protection of civilians. Areas of Syria have become safe havens for al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers and home to the largest concentration of foreign terrorist fighters since Afghanistan in the 1990s. The conflict also fueled the rise of ISIS, prompting an ongoing U.S.-led military intervention. Eight years in, the conflict has not been meaningfully contained, nor has the United States been sheltered from its effects.

Events on the ground disprove the narrative that the conflict has been won by the Assad regime. The Syrian war, far from ending, is entering a new phase. As of this writing, the Assad regime and its patron Russia are pressing an offensive against Idlib that could spur a new humanitarian catastrophe and outflow of refugees. Tensions are simmering between the Kurdish element that dominates the U.S.-trained Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria and the Arab populace of some of the areas under SDF control. Turkey is positioning troops to invade northeastern Syria, which would divert the SDF away from the essential task of preventing ISIS's resurgence. ISIS itself, down but not defeated, is already resurfacing as an insurgency and may yet attempt to

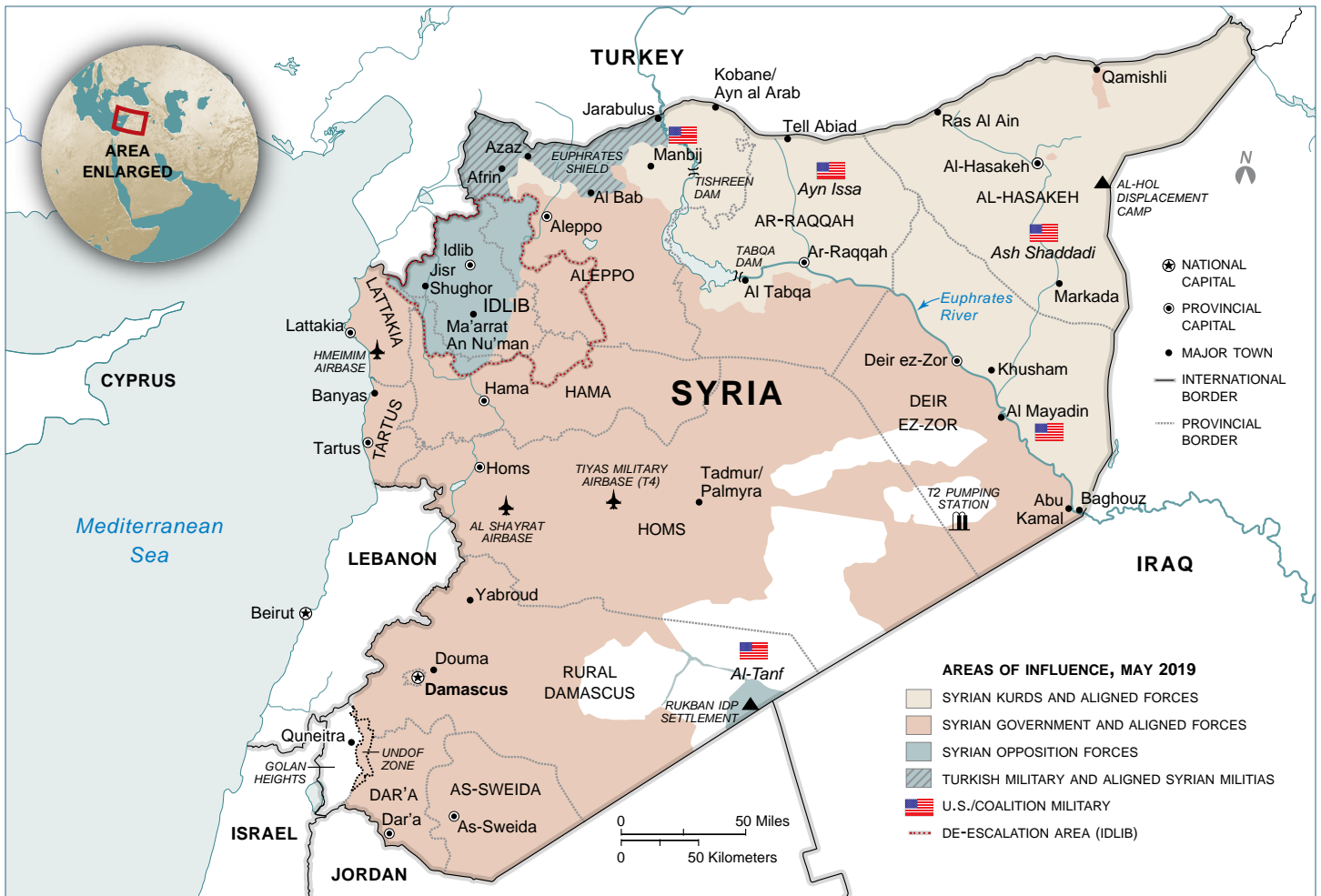


MAP 1: SYRIA.

Source: Based on United Nations map no. 4202 rev. 4, April 2012, <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf>. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

retake territory in both Syria and Iraq. Iran and Israel, already locked in a low-level conflict in Syria, may escalate to open conflict, especially in the Golan Heights. The Assad regime and its partners may seek to cross the Euphrates River, which could in turn breathe life into the ISIS insurgency and allow Iran to consolidate its land routes from Iraq to Lebanon. All of these scenarios become more likely without U.S. forces in Syria and without committed U.S. leadership to avert these scenarios.

The Syria Study Group uncovered no easy solutions in Syria; optimal outcomes were left behind long ago. Yet the Group determined that the threats the conflict in Syria poses—of terrorism directed against the United States and its allies and partners; of an empowered Iran; of an aggrandized Russia; of large numbers of refugees, displaced persons, and other forms of humanitarian catastrophe; and of the erosion of international norms of war and the Western commitment to them—are sufficiently serious to merit a determined response from the United States. The United States and its allies retain tools to address those threats and the leverage



MAP 2: SYRIA, AREAS OF INFLUENCE, MAY 2019.

Source: Based on a map that first appeared in “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,” CRS Report RL33487, Congressional Research Service, updated March 25, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487>, which used data from IHS Conflict Monitor, Jane’s by IHS Markit. The map was updated in an unpublished version in May 2019. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

to promote outcomes that are better for American interests than those that would prevail in the absence of U.S. engagement. Using those tools effectively, however, will require better alignment of ends and means—the former must be more realistic and the U.S. investment of the latter increased—as well as clear, consistent, and high-level political leadership. Sharp shifts and reversals in American policy, and the failure of senior U.S. government officials to prioritize the issue with their counterparts, have undermined American credibility and the effectiveness of U.S. policy.

Assessment of the Current Situation in Syria

While the conflict in Syria is often characterized as winding down, it is the assessment of the Syria Study Group that this is incorrect; in fact, the conflict remains dynamic and dangerous. In particular:

- **The liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group’s threat to the United States.** ISIS no longer holds significant territory in Syria or Iraq, but it is not defeated. The group has morphed into an insurgency with the will, capability, and resources to carry out attacks against the United States. ISIS will seek to take advantage of any opening, whether a reduction in U.S. counterterrorism pressure or discontent among eastern Syria’s Arab population, to recruit new fighters and mount attacks. ISIS’s terrorist ideology, or “brand,” continues to hold global appeal.
- **The ISIS detainee population is a long-term challenge that is not being adequately addressed.** Although ISIS has suffered significant casualties, many of its fighters—including thousands of foreign fighters—remain in detention under SDF management. If released, they will form the core of a new iteration of ISIS or a similar group. In addition, tens of thousands of family members of ISIS fighters are residing in camps in eastern Syria. The SDF has custody of both groups but lacks the resources and outside support to hold them indefinitely. U.S. and allied efforts to deal with this problem have suffered from a lack of political will.
- **Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups remain active in Syria and threaten the United States.** Although ISIS has received far more attention, other terrorist groups are active and control territory, especially in Idlib. Al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has formed a government in Idlib, which is home to numerous other groups, including al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Hurras ad-Din, and a large number of foreign terrorist fighters. The United States lacks freedom of action to conduct a full-fledged counterterrorism campaign in these areas.
- **Despite Israeli air strikes and U.S. sanctions, Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria; Russia and Iran show few serious signs of divergence.** Iran appears to be pursuing a two-track policy of military entrenchment and political and economic activity designed to enhance its power and influence in Syria for the long term. Iran’s activities have reportedly caused discontent among Syria’s population, but the Assad regime is heavily dependent on Iranian support. Israeli officials believe that Israel’s air strikes have disrupted Iran’s attempts to move sophisticated weapons systems into Syria, but Iran’s overall objectives appear unchanged and the risk of broader Iran-Israel conflict remains high. Although Russia has acquiesced to the Israeli campaign against Iran, there are few signs of a wider divergence between Moscow and Tehran regarding aims or tactics in Syria.
- **Assad has not won the conflict in Syria.** The regime has recaptured large swaths of territory and now holds 60 percent of the country. However, its control outside Damascus is tenuous, in part because it lacks the forces to secure the areas it retakes, but also because it pursues punitive policies against local populations. In much of regime-held areas, civilians are subject to conscription as well as arbitrary arrest, torture, and execution at the hands of the regime. Crime and warlordism are rampant. The Assad regime is determined to retake Idlib and is receiving Russian assistance to do so, but so far it has struggled to recapture territory without the help of Iranian ground forces.
- **Progress toward a political settlement to the Syria conflict has stalled, and Assad shows no willingness to compromise with his opponents.** Neither the UN-led “Geneva process” based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 nor the ad hoc “Astana process”

comprising Russia, Iran, and Turkey has yielded progress toward a political settlement to the conflict. While the United States is leading a new effort to break the stalemate, the fundamental obstacle remains the Assad regime's unwillingness to countenance meaningful reform. Presidential elections in 2021 are unlikely to produce a legitimate electoral outcome, because there is little chance that the regime will permit free and fair elections or the credible participation of the Syrian diaspora.

- **The United States underestimated Russia's ability to use Syria as an arena for regional influence.** Russia's intervention, beginning in 2015, accomplished its proximate aim—the preservation of the regime in defiance of U.S. calls for Assad to “go”—at a relatively low cost. Russia has enhanced its profile and prestige more broadly in the Middle East. The extent of Russia's success in Syria is debatable—it has yet to translate Assad's military gains into the political victory Moscow seemingly seeks—but Russia has nevertheless reestablished itself as a crucial player in the region's politics for the first time in decades.
- **U.S.-Turkey relations are strained in Syria by starkly diverging views of the SDF. A Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria would represent a major setback to U.S. aims in Syria and a new crisis for the U.S.-Turkish relationship.** The United States regards its decision to partner with the SDF to fight ISIS as having been necessitated by the lack of a credible and timely Turkish alternative; Turkey regards the SDF as a grave security threat due to its links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a threat made more dangerous by U.S. training and equipping of the SDF. This dispute has played a significant role in the erosion of U.S.-Turkish relations and may yet prompt a third Turkish incursion into Syria, which would severely complicate the U.S. military campaign against ISIS. There is little sign that Turkey intends to relinquish control of the two Syrian areas it currently controls—Afrin and the “Euphrates Shield” area.
- **Although the SDF has been a highly effective partner in the fight against ISIS, it must undergo a transition to ensure stability in northeastern Syria.** The SDF is regarded by the U.S. military as a highly effective partner in the conventional military campaign against ISIS. That partnership faces new challenges with the shift from fighting to governing. The SDF remains dominated by Syrian Kurds—specifically by the People's Protection Units (YPG)—despite its control over large stretches of predominantly Arab territory. This disparity, and the YPG's heavy-handed approach to governing and resource allocation, has led to unrest in Arab tribal areas. Minimal U.S. civilian engagement and the halt in U.S. stabilization funding in northeastern Syria have diminished American influence.
- **The Assad regime's systematic targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure constitutes war crimes and demands accountability, as well as enhanced efforts to protect civilians.** The Assad regime and its patrons, including Russia, have systematically targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure. A UN commission found the regime guilty of crimes against humanity. Syrians have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, and execution at the hands of the regime. Although prospects for accountability are dim in the near term, efforts to document the regime's atrocities are under way.



A U.S. military convoy drives on a highway from Kobane to Ain Issa in northern Syria on September 29, 2017. (Photo by Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images.)

- **Syria’s humanitarian crisis, not least the challenges posed by internally displaced people and refugees, will reverberate for decades. Most refugees are unlikely to return voluntarily given current conditions in Syria.** The Syrian conflict has provoked the most serious human displacement since World War II; 6 million Syrians are internally displaced, and nearly 6 million more are registered as refugees outside the country. Refugees have placed a heavy economic burden on host countries, especially Syria’s neighbors; pressure is increasing, particularly within Lebanon and Turkey, for nonvoluntary returns. Inside Syria, a large proportion of the population relies on humanitarian aid, over which the regime seeks to exercise control in order to enhance its power.
- **Despite these challenges, the United States maintains leverage to shape an outcome in Syria that protects core U.S. national security interests.** The Group identified several key points of leverage held by the United States, particularly if used in coordination with allies and partners: influence over northeastern Syria; sanctions against the Assad regime and its backers; the withholding of reconstruction assistance desired by Assad and Russia; and the ongoing diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Despite its daunting assessment of the situation in Syria, the Group believes that the United States is still able to exercise influence over the conflict's trajectory, and that it must do so given the threats the conflict poses to American interests. The Group believes that the best end state in Syria is one in which a Syrian government is viewed as legitimate by its own population and has the will and capability to end Syria's dependence on foreign forces and to prevent terrorist groups from thriving on Syrian territory. This in turn requires conditions in which Syrian citizens live free from fear of the Assad regime and of Russian, Iranian, and ISIS brutality and within an updated political and social compact based on decentralized governance and equitable resource allocation.

Recognizing that such an outcome is a distant prospect, the Group recommends a strategy that makes a negotiated political settlement in Syria more likely yet also allows the United States to defend its interests even if a political solution is not found. None of those consulted by the Group believe that withdrawing U.S. forces would make ISIS less likely to regroup, Iran less likely to entrench itself, or a negotiated settlement more likely. Although the U.S. military mission in Syria is often lumped together with the Iraq and Afghanistan missions in the “forever war” category, the Syria case offers a different—and far less costly—model. A small U.S. military footprint, supported by U.S. air power and other high-end capabilities, reinforced by a global coalition of like-minded allies and partners, rallied a local partner force many times its size to liberate territory from a terrorist group. What U.S. forces and their partners have gained in Syria should not be discarded with a premature withdrawal.

To that end, the Group recommends that the United States, working in concert with allies and partners, continue its military mission in order to maintain pressure on ISIS and other terrorist groups while maintaining and strengthening pressure on the Assad regime and its backers until conditions are conducive for a political settlement that ends the Syria war. In particular, the Group recommends that the United States:

- **Halt the U.S. military withdrawal; consolidate gains following the territorial defeat of ISIS; and support communities liberated from ISIS in forming an alternative model for governance, resource allocation, and security in Syria.** The Group recommends that the United States (1) update its military mission to head off an ISIS insurgency; (2) adequately prepare for various contingencies and escalation scenarios; (3) return a U.S. civilian presence and stabilization funding to northeastern Syria; (4) press the SDF to govern more inclusively; (5) elevate the ISIS detainee problem set; and (6) prioritize diplomatic and military engagement in Iraq.
- **Until conditions inside Syria improve, deny the Assad regime and its backers all avenues for normalization by enforcing the regime's diplomatic isolation and a rigorous sanctions architecture.** Among other steps, the United States should continue to press allies and partners to refrain from reestablishing diplomatic ties with the Assad regime, to withhold reconstruction assistance, and to strictly enforce sanctions and seek to expand them. In addition, the international community should begin preparing the ground now for

the eventual accountability of those responsible for war crimes in Syria, without imposing accountability as a precondition for a political settlement.

- **Test and verify Russian willingness to support political settlements acceptable to the United States but continue activities that increase the costs to Russia for its actions in Syria.** Many observers believe that agreement between the United States and Russia is a prerequisite for progress toward a political settlement, yet Russia has consistently failed to deliver on its commitments in Syria. The United States should require concrete actions of Russia pursuant to any discussions of a political settlement and, absent such actions, should avoid making concessions to Moscow or legitimizing its positions. Concurrently, the United States should pressure Moscow, in part by highlighting Russian complicity in war crimes.
- **Remain focused on expelling Iranian forces and proxies from Syria but recognize that this is best accomplished in phases.** The key near-term goal should be to prevent further entrenchment of Iran and its many partners and proxies while raising the cost to Iran for its actions in Syria. To this end, the United States should continue its support of Israeli air strikes; enforce sanctions aimed at undermining Iran's ability to fund its proxies and partners in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq; maintain the U.S. military presence at the al-Tanf military base; and support efforts to expose Iranian influence efforts in Syria. The United States should insist that any political settlement require the withdrawal of Iranian forces and proxies from Syria.
- **Seek areas for cooperation with Turkey and address legitimate Turkish security concerns while pressing Turkey to avoid any incursion into northeastern Syria and to improve conditions in the Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas.** U.S. efforts to reach agreement on a security zone or security mechanism along Turkey's border with northeastern Syria should continue, and every attempt should be made to isolate Syria from other problems in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. The United States should encourage the resumption of Turkey-PKK peace talks, which hold the best possibility of leading to a détente between Turkey and the SDF. The United States should press Turkey to improve conditions and access in the areas of Syria it controls.
- **Seek to avert a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib while addressing the presence there of terrorist groups.** The United States should explore avenues to increase the pressure on terrorist groups in Idlib that may be plotting external attacks. At the same time, the United States should seek to deter the Assad regime and its partners from continuing to target civilians in the territory. In preparation for a renewed humanitarian and refugee crisis in Idlib, the United States should press Turkey to facilitate the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) serving the population.
- **Energize efforts to address the humanitarian crisis inside Syria while taking steps to shore up countries hosting Syrian refugees.** The United States should work to ensure the continued provision of humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations inside and outside Syria. The United States should press for the renewal of the UN "cross-border resolution," rally other states to fund humanitarian appeals for Syria, and work with international financial institutions to support refugee-hosting countries. The United States should stand firmly against efforts to forcibly repatriate Syrian refugees and should resume accepting Syrian refugees in the United States.

WHY SYRIA MATTERS

The conflict in Syria, now in its ninth year, started as a peaceful domestic uprising against an autocratic dictator. Over the course of the war, the Syrian theater has evolved into the crucible for a complex series of intersecting conflicts that have distracted and diminished U.S. allies and partners, positioned adversaries and competitors to shape the future of the Middle East, victimized millions of Syrians, and fast-tracked a race to the bottom for the conduct of future wars. (For a detailed timeline of the conflict, visit <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.)

Syria under the Assad regime has long posed a threat to U.S. national security interests. In 1979, the United States designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. The Assad family has survived in power by operating at the intersection of criminal webs and terrorist networks. Before the 2011 uprising, Bashar al-Assad's Syria provided a permissive environment for both al-Qaeda and Iran, another State Sponsor of Terrorism. Assad facilitated and encouraged the movement of al-Qaeda operatives to Iraq to conduct attacks against U.S. forces.¹ At the same time, Assad allowed Iran to extend its Shia militant network across Syria and into Lebanon in order to threaten Israel.

Syria is now a breeding ground for terrorist organizations committed to attacking the United States, the front line for Iranian power projection, and the main stage for Russia's return to the region. Each of these actors is now better positioned to influence Syria's future than the United States and its allies and partners. Meanwhile, massive refugee outflows from Syria—whether fleeing the Assad regime's brutality or ISIS's depravity—are exacerbating the economic fragility of Syria's neighbors and influencing electoral outcomes in Europe.

And yet, despite presenting these dangers, the war in Syria is increasingly on the margins of public attention. Some observers may assume that the arc of the Syria crisis is trending downward: ISIS no longer controls territory, Assad is on the cusp of victory, and U.S. military forces can soon withdraw, having achieved their principal counterterrorism mission. Unfortunately, while many Americans consistently hoped that the conflict in Syria could simply be contained, over the years the most dire predictions for the conflict have in hindsight proven conservative.



Syrians walk through the destruction of the Salaheddine neighborhood in eastern Aleppo, northwestern Syria, January 18, 2018. (Photo by Hassan Ammar/AP/ Shutterstock.)

From the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Americans have consistently underestimated its longevity, severity, and impact on core U.S. national interests. It is the assessment of the Syria Study Group that they continue to do so now.

Five principal threats to the United States emanate from Syria. First, despite the liberation of Syrian territory from ISIS's grip, the danger of terrorist attacks from Syria remains. Second, Iran has effectively exploited Syria's implosion to advance its bid for regional hegemony and open a new front in its campaign against Israel, increasing the risk of igniting a broader regional conflict. Third, Syria has been a strategic windfall for Russia, which has likewise taken advantage of the war to insert itself as a credible rival powerbroker to the United States in the Middle East. Fourth, Assad's brutal ongoing campaign of violence against the Syrian people has unleashed vast numbers of refugees—a humanitarian tragedy that has had destabilizing political and social effects in multiple countries, including within the NATO alliance. Fifth, the ongoing violation of fundamental international norms that the United States has historically championed has eroded perceptions of American power and credibility worldwide while setting alarming precedents for future conflicts.



U.S.-backed SDF fighters stand guard next to men waiting to be screened after being evacuated from territory held by ISIS, near Baghouz, eastern Syria, in February 2019. (Photo by Felipe Dana/ AP/ Shutterstock.)

These threats, moreover, are both intertwined and mutually reinforcing. U.S. policy, however, has sought to disaggregate the Syrian problem set—with the lion’s share of American attention focused on the terrorist threat given the unique danger it has posed to the U.S. homeland and American citizens.

ISIS and al-Qaeda

ISIS is on the run, but it is not yet defeated. Over the past five years, the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has liberated ISIS-occupied territory in Iraq and Syria. Yet ISIS has already transitioned to an insurgency and, in the absence of effective pressure against it, will utilize its Syrian sanctuary for organizing, instructing, and inspiring external attacks. The group has made clear—in both statements and continued attacks—that it will continue to fight. Ad hoc prisons housing thousands of ISIS fighters could strengthen the group in the event of prison breaks, just as they did during ISIS’s initial rise in 2014.²

ISIS is not the only terrorist threat based in Syria. Hezbollah—Iran’s proxy in Lebanon and present militarily in Syria since 2012—is a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In northwestern Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, previously known as the Nusra Front, another FTO, is in effective control of Idlib Governorate. Other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Hurras ad-Din, are also present in Idlib and committed to external operations. Many analysts describe Idlib as containing the largest concentration of foreign fighters since Afghanistan in the 1990s.³

Iran

Over the course of the Syrian war, Iran’s deployment of its own forces and proxy militias recruited from other countries has been decisive in the Assad regime’s reversal of territorial losses to the Syrian opposition. As a result, Iran now has wide latitude to pursue its own geopolitical agenda on Syrian territory, including the introduction of sophisticated weapons systems that will enable Iran to open a new front against Israel and threaten freedom of navigation in the eastern Mediterranean.⁴ Should Iran ever acquire nuclear weapons, Israel worries it could find itself facing a predicament not unlike that confronting South Korea: threatened by a foe with both a massive conventional arsenal and a nuclear capability that could deter outside partners such as the United States from coming to its aid in the event of conflict.

An overt war between Iran and Israel is just one of the secondary conflicts that could be spawned by the conflict in Syria. The threat to Israel posed by Iran in Syrian territory has motivated Israeli leaders to seek accommodation with Russia. Jordan and Lebanon are likewise now courting closer relations with Moscow, worried by Iran’s presence, by growing instability in Syria’s southwest, and by increasing uncertainty over U.S. policy.

Russia

Prior to Russia’s intervention in Syria, most countries in the Middle East maintained productive relations with Moscow while looking to Washington for leadership, economic ties, and security partnerships. Now, governments in the Middle East are deepening ties to Russia across multiple sectors—military, diplomatic, economic, and energy—to hedge against perceptions of U.S. retrenchment and unreliability. Russia is working to consolidate its role as not only the key arbiter of the Syrian conflict but also the power center shaping outcomes for issues ranging from the Israel-Palestinian conflict to global energy prices. Even among Assad’s opponents, Moscow’s steadfast commitment to the Assad regime’s survival is often portrayed in flattering contrast to Washington’s perceived inconstancy.

Russia’s perceived success and growing influence across the greater Middle East, moreover, is likely to have consequences far beyond the region. Moscow will seek to leverage its great



Syrian refugee children attend a class at a makeshift school at an informal tented settlement near the Syrian border on the outskirts of Mafraq, Jordan. (Photo by Muhammed Muheisen/ AP/ Shutterstock.)

power status across the region in its relations with Europe, intensifying frictions and divisions within the NATO alliance (including Turkey).⁵ Globally, Russia will portray itself as a reliable and consistent alternative to the United States.

Refugees

More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 21 million are now either registered refugees (5.6 million) or internally displaced persons (6 million).⁶ Syrian refugees have strained their host communities in neighboring countries—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.⁷ European countries are also hosting roughly 1 million Syrian refugees, including more than 580,000 in Germany alone.⁸ The World Bank estimates that the mean stay for a refugee in a host country is just over ten years, so the burden for host countries will be not only heavy but also enduring.⁹

Indeed, the status quo is already unsustainable for Syria's neighbors. Their governments are struggling to provide services during a time of economic contraction and resource strains,

Forced or premature refugee returns to Syria will fuel more violence in Syria, which may spill over into neighboring countries.

increasingly inhospitable. Few of these refugees want to return to Syria unless conditions there improve markedly, but antirefugee rhetoric and policies may soon reach a boiling point. Donor governments have fallen short in providing sufficient aid to refugee-hosting countries shouldering the burden. Forced or premature refugee returns to Syria will fuel more violence in Syria, which may spill over into neighboring countries.

rendering them more insecure and less able to work with the United States on shared goals. Syrian refugees face barriers to services and employment, and conditions in their host communities are becoming

Inside Syria, the al-Hol camp houses thousands of ISIS family members—primarily children. This challenge—if left unaddressed—could sow the seeds for even more extremism in the decades to come.

International Norms

U.S. leadership has been critical in establishing and enforcing a system of international norms that has benefited U.S. security interests and increased American prosperity. Throughout its prosecution of the war, the Assad regime’s employment of systematic torture, unlawful detentions and disappearances, and starvation and medical deprivation sieges, as well as its use of mass casualty weapons, including chemical weapons, against civilians, have eroded these norms. Russia, too, has committed war crimes in Syria, including the bombing of humanitarian aid convoys and civilian structures such as hospitals.¹⁰

Conduct during the war in Syria has established a precedent in which civilians can be targeted and bombed without meaningful international repercussions. Assad has seen and understood this, as have Russia, Iran, and the rest of the world. A world that accepts this precedent would be antagonistic to American values, hostile to U.S. interests, and dangerous to our national security. Such a world would routinize mass civilian homicide as a survival strategy for dictators and raise recruits for extremists around the world.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SYRIA

It is the assessment of the Syria Study Group that the conflict in Syria remains dynamic and dangerous. ISIS no longer controls substantial swaths of territory but is reconstituting inside of Syria and Iraq. The Assad regime remains determined to retake all of Syrian territory, although in the areas it controls, authority is often tenuous and contested, in part due to the regime's cruelty toward residents in recaptured territory. Iran has been tactically deterred by targeted Israeli air strikes but remains strategically committed to entrenching itself in Syria, not only militarily but also economically, culturally, and politically. Russia has failed to transition its military success on behalf of the Assad regime into a political process that ends the conflict. Turkey regards the increased military capabilities of the Syrian Kurdish–dominated SDF to be an existential threat and may intervene militarily in northeastern Syria to push the SDF out. Meanwhile, both in areas retaken by the regime and in areas liberated from ISIS, humanitarian conditions remain dire and stabilization and reconstruction work has largely yet to begin. Lack of services and governance, large concentrations of displaced persons and detained fighters in camps across Syria, and premature refugee returns may instigate new rounds of conflict.

The Syria Study Group offers the following observations regarding the situation on the ground in Syria as of August 1, 2019.

ISIS and al-Qaeda

The liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States.

Although the United States announced the defeat of ISIS in March 2019, ISIS is reemerging as a powerful insurgency and continues to plan attacks within Syria as well as externally.¹¹ The group's leadership is largely intact, maintains "excellent command and control capability" in Syria, and is regrouping across the border in Iraq.¹² Thousands of fighters—estimates range from a few thousand to more than fifteen thousand—remain at large in the country.¹³ The group, which at one point was among the richest terrorist organizations in the world, also has substantial financial resources remaining with which to bankroll its operations both locally and internationally.

Within Syria, ISIS’s resilient network puts it in a position to take advantage of any pause or reduction in counterterrorism operations.

Within Syria, ISIS’s resilient network puts it in a position to take advantage of any pause or reduction in counterterrorism operations. In December 2018, the commander of U.S. Central Command, General

Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., stated, “I assess that, even after the liberation of ISIS-controlled territory, ISIS probably is still more capable than al-Qaeda in Iraq at its peak, suggesting it is well positioned to reemerge if pressure on the group is relieved.”¹⁴ Already, the group is waging an insurgent campaign of suicide and IED attacks, as well as targeted assassinations, in areas it once controlled.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS, outlined the group’s strategy in an April 2019 video.¹⁵ He framed a new campaign of attrition against ISIS’s enemies globally. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS is waging a multifront insurgency to degrade anti-ISIS forces and undermine alternative forms of governance. In this new phase, ISIS increasingly seeks both to prevent the formation of alternative forms of governance in northeastern Syria and to exploit Arab Sunni grievances, which are rooted in a growing sense of disempowerment under Kurdish rule. Disaffected Arab communities in ISIS-liberated areas offer a conducive operating environment and an attractive pool of new recruits.

Finally, ISIS ideology remains attractive to groups and individuals far beyond Syria, underscoring the assessment of some U.S. officials that ISIS presents a greater threat to the homeland now than it did when it held territory in Iraq and Syria.¹⁶ On April 21, ISIS took credit for coordinated suicide attacks in Sri Lanka. The group has announced the formation of new “provinces” in, among other places, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Turkey. Not all of these affiliates present the same level of threat, but taken together they illustrate the continuing appeal of ISIS’s brand.

The ISIS detainee population is a long-term challenge that is not being adequately addressed.

Some ten thousand ISIS fighters are currently being held by the SDF in a handful of temporary detention centers and “pop-up” prisons across northeastern Syria.¹⁷ The vast majority of these detainees—nearly eight thousand, according to U.S. officials—are Iraqis and Syrians.¹⁸

In addition to the fighters, thousands of ISIS family members, women and children, are held in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northeastern Syria. U.S. and SDF officials were surprised by the number of people they found in Baghouz, the final area of ISIS-controlled territory. These civilians quickly swelled camp populations, overwhelming capacity. The most overburdened of these camps is located outside the town of al-Hol, near the Iraqi border, and holds roughly seventy thousand individuals, two-thirds of whom are children.¹⁹ The al-Hol camp is at more than twice its capacity, and although the camp managers and NGO partners are providing basic humanitarian relief, there are insufficient

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for the children of ISIS fighters, many of whom spent formative years living under ISIS's rule, are nonexistent.

resources and capacity to address the health, education, and social services these women and children need.²⁰ Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for the children of ISIS fighters, many of whom spent formative years living under ISIS's rule, are

nonexistent. The SDF is responding to requests from tribes in eastern Syria for the release of specific detainees; as of April 2019, the SDF had discharged more than one thousand Syrians into tribal custody.²¹ The SDF has also transferred hundreds of Iraqis as well as some third-country nationals into Iraqi government custody.²² Iraq's courts, however, have significant shortcomings, including low evidentiary standards, allegations of torture to coerce confessions, and hastily conducted trials.²³

The more than two thousand ISIS foreign fighters currently under SDF custody pose a major challenge.²⁴ Several countries, including U.S. allies in Europe, either refuse to repatriate their citizens, in some cases stripping them of citizenship, or are willing to repatriate only select family members. Many of these countries lack the necessary evidence to charge ISIS fighters in domestic courts; others worry that the fighters could be convicted only on lesser charges and would serve short sentences before being released.²⁵

Offices across the U.S. government address distinct subsets of the ISIS detainee challenge in Syria, but no senior U.S. official holds the mandate to coordinate and implement all U.S. policy on this issue. Coalition military and international humanitarian implementers have equally important but potentially competing priorities, with no honest broker to coordinate them. The U.S. government continues to repatriate American citizens who fought for ISIS and, where possible, facilitates the return of foreign fighters to their country of citizenship. Countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Italy have undertaken laudable efforts to repatriate ISIS fighters from Syria.²⁶

The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS is working to address the challenges of ISIS detainees and their families, but it is constrained by differences among members regarding repatriation. It did not highlight this issue set in its June 25, 2019, Joint Statement by Political Directors.²⁷ The SDF has neither the capacity nor the willingness to hold these detainees indefinitely. Security conditions are tenuous inside both IDP camps and pop-up prisons. ISIS exploited multiple prison breaks in Iraq to fuel its rise to power in 2012 and 2013 and is likely contemplating a similar strategy in Syria. Should the Assad regime regain control of northeastern Syria and the detainee population, it could "weaponize" these individuals in the same way it utilized al-Qaeda fighters against the United States during the war in Iraq.

Crisis at al-Hol Camp

OVERCROWDING AT AL-HOL CAMP

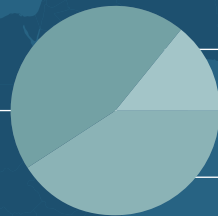


DEMOGRAPHICS OF AL-HOL CAMP

Of the 69,000 residents and IDPs at al-Hol:



41% are Syrian nationals



14% are foreign families

45% are Iraqi nationals

FOREIGN FAMILIES AT AL-HOL CAMP

At the camp's annex, foreign families include:



Sources: Data from UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic: North East Syria – Al Hol Camp," August 4, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Al-Hol-Snapshot-SitRip-040819.pdf>; and Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects Families," July 23, 2019, www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families. Artwork includes elements by Yevhenii Dubinko and PytyCzech/iStock.

Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups remain active in Syria and a threat to the United States.

Since the start of the Syrian war, al-Qaeda has commanded and supported a variety of groups that share its ideology and commitment to global jihad.²⁸ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri dispatched senior al-Qaeda operatives to Syria who failed to unify these disparate groups.²⁹ The strongest such groups are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Hurras ad-Din, and Hezb Islami al-Turkistani (TIP). Their forces are concentrated in Idlib, which senior U.S. officials have described as “the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11.”³⁰

HTS is the largest non-ISIS extremist group in Syria, with an estimated twenty thousand fighters, according to the United Nations.³¹ It has effective, although not complete, control over Idlib and formed a “Salvation Government,” which is slowly exerting control over all governance structures.³² Hurras ad-Din formed in February 2018 as a splinter from HTS³³ and has an estimated seven hundred fighters with the capacity and the desire to conduct external attacks.³⁴ Hurras ad-Din and HTS have had serious leadership disputes over strategy in Syria and occasionally compete locally, but they continue to cooperate despite this friction.³⁵ Compared with HTS, Hurras ad-Din has a larger proportion of foreign fighters and focuses more on external attacks than on operations inside Syria.³⁶

On June 30, 2019, U.S. Central Command carried out an airstrike against al-Qaeda operatives “responsible for plotting external attacks” in western Aleppo.³⁷ The U.S. attack was notable given Russian control of the airspace in northwestern Syria.

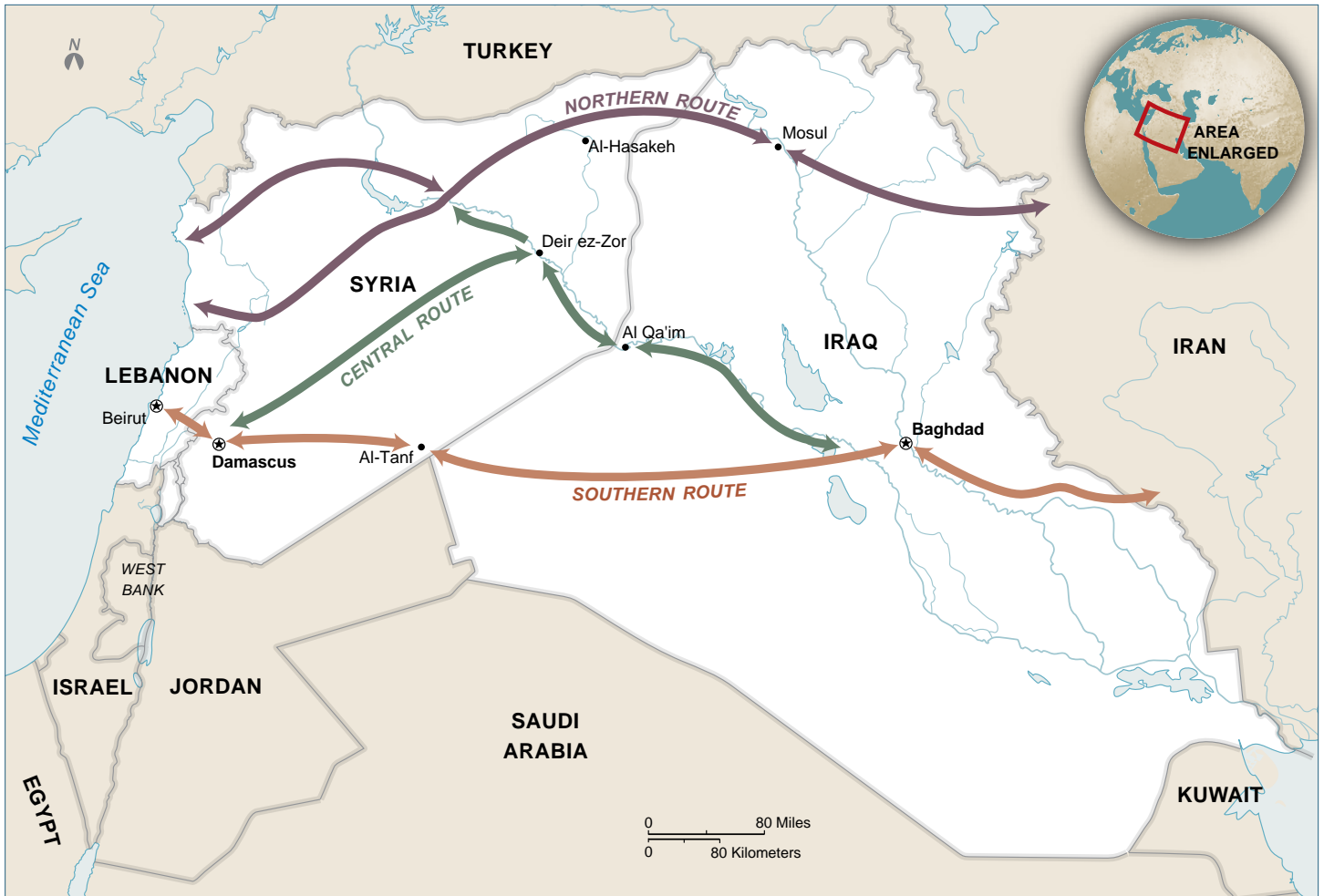
Iran

Despite Israeli air strikes and U.S. sanctions, Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria.

Syria is Iran’s only state ally and key to Tehran’s purported “forward defense” strategy.³⁸ Iran is pursuing a two-track policy of military entrenchment and economic and political expansion that is designed to ensure a permanent presence and influence in Syria. For Iran, Syria is a theater for the projection of power and influence in the Middle East, a land bridge to the Levant and Mediterranean, and a third front—in addition to Lebanon and Gaza—against Israel.

Iran intervened early in the Syrian conflict. In 2012, it reinforced Assad’s troops with members of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; Shia recruits from Afghanistan and Pakistan; Iraqi Shia militia members; and fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah.³⁹ Along with Russia, which intervened in September 2015, providing the regime with critical air power, Iran was instrumental first in reversing the momentum of anti-Assad armed opposition groups and then in helping the regime begin to recapture lost territory.

Iran’s military entrenchment in Syria takes at least three forms: the introduction of advanced weapon systems; the establishment of military command centers, often within existing regime



MAP 3: IRAN'S POTENTIAL LAND BRIDGE.

Source: Based on a map in Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019, <http://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

bases; and the insertion of troops. Iran supplies the regime with a wide range of munitions, including short-range ballistic missiles, drones, and antitank missiles.⁴⁰ In addition to its own weapons systems in Syria, which remain under Iranian command, Iran also continues to attempt to transfer sophisticated weaponry, including precision guided missiles, to Hezbollah.⁴¹ Iranian forces are present, according to one estimate, at nearly forty locations in the country.⁴² The Iranian troop presence peaked in 2015 and has since tapered off. Recent estimates suggest that the number of Iranian military personnel in Syria ranges from the "high hundreds to the low thousands."⁴³ The total number of Hezbollah and Shia militia fighters in Syria ranges from ten thousand to twenty thousand.⁴⁴

Israeli airstrikes have constrained, but not deterred, Iranian actions in Syria. To date, Israel has largely targeted weapons systems and military infrastructure, not leadership or other personnel. Israeli officials believe, however, that absent their air campaign, Iran would have assembled a much larger force in Syria.⁴⁵ Israel's objectives are to push Iranian forces away

Iran and Russia maintain an alliance of convenience in Syria, and their commitment to preserving their client Assad is stronger than any disagreement.

missiles.⁴⁷ Israeli security officials worry that Hezbollah will continue to entrench itself on the Israel-Syria border in the manner it has on the Israel-Lebanon border, heightening the threat of infiltration along that frontier and requiring Israel to increase the defense resources it devotes to monitoring and patrolling it.⁴⁸

Iran is complementing its military strategy with an economic, political, and social campaign focused on securing long-term influence in Syria comparable to what it has in Iraq. Iranian efforts vary across the country. In southern and, increasingly, in eastern Syria, Iran courts local tribes by providing stipends or jobs. Iranian-funded Shia religious centers provide social, religious, and economic programs in impoverished areas. The Iranian Cultural Center in the regime sector of Deir ez-Zor offers scholarships for Syrians to study in Iran and is enrolling students in Farsi courses. Iran has also opened up at least three schools in the Deir ez-Zor countryside near the Iraqi border that are staffed by Iranian teachers. The schools have enrolled over 250 children, each of whom receives a small stipend to attend.⁴⁹

In Damascus and surrounding suburbs, both Hezbollah and Iran are purchasing residential and commercial properties in an attempt to establish a base similar to Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut.⁵⁰ Several universities, under regime directives, now offer courses in Farsi.⁵¹

There are limits, however, to the extent to which Iran can penetrate Syrian society. Syria has only a small Shia population, and many Syrians reportedly have an antipathy toward Iran.⁵² Even members of Assad's own Alawite sect—an offshoot of Shia Islam—resent the regime's readiness to prioritize Iranian interests over Syrian concerns, such as seeking the release of Shia militiamen first in prisoner exchanges.⁵³ Yet Iran will continue its efforts to insert its proxies to fill gaps in services and security in regime-controlled areas.

Iran and Russia maintain an alliance of convenience in Syria, and their commitment to preserving their client Assad is stronger than any disagreement. Tensions may emerge periodically between the two, but there is so far no sign that either will allow tactical or operational differences to undermine their shared short-term goal of regime survival. Iran's partnership with Russia has furthermore allowed it to escape any UN Security Council censure for its actions in Syria.

from Israel's border and prevent Iran from positioning in Syria weapons systems that threaten Israel.⁴⁶ From within Syria, Iran or its proxies have targeted Israel on a number of occasions, both with drones and with

The Syrian Civil War

Assad has not won the conflict in Syria and the war is not frozen; rather, it is entering a new phase.

By some estimates the regime controls 60 percent of the country, mostly in western and southwestern Syria.⁵⁴ The regime is seeking to cement its control through various means. Law No. 10, for example, facilitates regime seizures of property from absent owners. The law requires property owners, many of whom are Sunnis who fled the country, to provide the regime with proof of ownership or risk forfeiting their property. Much of the regime's control, however, particularly in the southwest, is tenuous. Regime forces do not have a monopoly on the use of force and depend on Russian airpower and Iranian and Iran-backed ground

BOX 1

Law No. 10: A Legal Veneer on an Assad Land Grab

- Implemented on April 2, 2018, by the Assad regime.¹
- Permits the government to designate for “redevelopment” land anywhere in the country.²
- Property owners must present (initially, within thirty days) proof of ownership in a Syrian regime court; otherwise, ownership defaults to the regime.^{1,3}
- Allows the regime to repossess vast amounts of property and land that have been vacated during the course of the war. The lists of property repossessions are posted in a local newspaper and online, but the owners are not actively sought out and informed.^{1,3}
- Few refugees or IDPs have property titles or other proof of ownership in their possession; even fewer are willing to interact with the regime due to fear of reprisals.³
- The regime has used this law to punish its opponents and to reward its supporters, including Iran and Hezbollah, both of which are buying tracts of seized real estate.⁵
- Law No. 10 is contributing to significant demographic changes in Syria and is deepening and expanding Shia influence by granting leases of repossessed property to Shia militia fighters and outside investors.⁵
- Amended on November 11, 2018, under Russian pressure to extend to one year the period to present documentation to claim ownership; now formally known as Law No. 42.^{4,6}

Sources:

1. Syrian Arab Republic, Prime Ministry, Law No. 10, April 2, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2qIRGci>.
2. Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, “TIMEP Brief: Law No. 10 of 2018: Housing, Land, and Property,” December 10, 2018, <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-law-no-10-of-2018-housing-land-and-property/>.
3. Human Rights Watch, “Q&A: Syria’s New Property Law,” May 29, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law>.
4. Sarah Kayyali, “The Syrian Conflict’s Next Frontline,” Human Rights Watch, November 23, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/23/syrian-conflicts-next-front>.
5. Ibrahim Abu Ahmed, “Assad’s Law 10: Reshaping Syria’s Demographics,” *Fikra Forum*, a blog by Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 17, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>.
6. Sana, “President Assad Decrees a New Law that Amends Some of the Sections of Law No. 10,” November 11, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=842393>.

forces to maintain control. Regime violence, terrorist attacks, and ethno-sectarian tensions will continue to fuel instability. Meanwhile, local economies are struggling to recover in regime-controlled areas, where 83 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.⁵⁵ For the foreseeable future, the structure of the Syrian state will remain weak and vulnerable, exporting people and terrorism.

Western Syria

Throughout 2019, Syrians in Damascus struggled with shortages of cooking gas and heating fuel, long lines at gas stations, and repeated electrical outages.⁵⁶ In coastal areas, the regime relies on paramilitary forces for security. These groups, which are often little more than criminal gangs, are increasingly operating outside regime control.⁵⁷ Kidnappings for ransom and car thefts have both become more common over the past year.⁵⁸ Tensions and distrust between the Alawite and Sunni communities have reportedly hardened since the war.⁵⁹

Between February and May 2018, the regime, with substantial Russian and Iranian assistance, managed to retake both eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, and northern Homs governorate on the road to Idlib.⁶⁰ The regime has subsequently punished both areas for their rebellion, displacing vast swaths of the population. In particular, eastern Ghouta, a traditionally rich

BOX 2

Syria's Economy at a Glance

- 21 million: Syria's pre-war population¹
- 18 million: Syria's 2019 population²
- 83% live below the poverty line³
- 11.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid³
- 50% unemployment nationwide
- 78% youth unemployment⁵
- 538,000 jobs lost per year from 2011 to 2015
- 58% inflation⁵
- \$388 billion in conflict-related destruction⁵
- \$226 billion gross domestic product losses from 2011 to 2016⁶
- 1/10: Syrian pound is at one-tenth of its pre-war value⁵
- \$20 billion drop in foreign exchange reserves (down to \$1 billion)⁵
- 93% drop in oil production since 2011⁵
- 92% drop in exports between 2011 and 2015⁵

Sources:

1. World Bank, "Syrian Arab Republic, Population Total," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SY>.
2. World Food Programme, "Syria Country Brief," June 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-country-brief-june-2019>.
3. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Syr_HNO_Full.pdf.
4. Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>.
5. World Bank, "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria—Key Facts," July 2017, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/brief/the-toll-of-war-economic-and-social-impact-analysis-esia-of-the-conflict-in-syria-key-facts>.
6. World Bank, "The World Bank in the Syrian Arab Republic: Overview," accessed August 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview>.
7. UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Experts Discuss Post-Conflict Reconstruction Policies after Political Agreement in Syria," media brief, August 7, 2018, <https://www.unescwa.org/news/syrian-experts-discuss-post-conflict-reconstruction-policies-after-political-agreement-syria>.

agricultural area, has struggled to recover from years of warfare and the accompanying regime-imposed blockade.

Southwestern Syria

Unrest is spreading in southwestern Syria, where the regime is facing mounting instability. Significant antiregime sentiment roils the province. Recent months have witnessed assassinations, checkpoint attacks, and sporadic clashes between opposition elements and regime soldiers.⁶¹ The regime routinely violates the “reconciliation” agreements negotiated with rebel fighters when it regained control of the area in July 2018, arresting former rebels, who are often tortured if not killed. Others are being conscripted to fight in regime operations elsewhere. In addition, Iran and its proxies are seeking to increase their influence in the area.⁶²

Idlib

Idlib is one of the last pockets still held by anti-Assad groups. It poses a major counter-terrorism threat and humanitarian challenge. Terrorist groups have consolidated military and political control over the population of Idlib.

Idlib’s population has more than doubled since the start of the war, jumping from less than 1.5 million in 2010 to over 3 million today. Much of the increase is attributed to an influx of fighters and IDPs from elsewhere in Syria. The vulnerable civilians rely on humanitarian aid delivered across the border from Turkey. Pro-regime attacks against Idlib displaced more than 400,000 Syrians northward toward the Turkish border from April to late July 2019, two-thirds of whom are living without shelter.⁶³ An intensification of the regime offensive will impose further heavy casualties on the civilian population, large numbers of whom would likely flee to the borders of Turkey or Turkish-controlled areas of Syria, which are currently closed.

Russia and the Assad regime launched an offensive into Idlib in early 2019 after failing to compel a surrender of anti-Assad groups. Russia is providing air support and enablers to Assad regime ground forces. Together, Russian and Assad airstrikes and artillery barrages are hitting hospitals, schools, markets, and other illegal targets in order to terrorize the population and depopulate areas. During the months of May and June 2019, for example, twenty-two hospitals and four ambulances were bombed in Idlib.⁶⁴

The pro-regime offensive has only made limited gains due to pushback from Turkish-backed opposition groups and al-Qaeda–linked forces.⁶⁵ Al-Qaeda–linked forces are digging tunnel networks to fortify the province against Assad and Russian operations.⁶⁶ The slow progress of the pro-regime operations indicates that the Assad regime and Russian forces lack the combat power to take Idlib without considerable help from Iran, which thus far has not provided it. The regime and Russia may attempt to make up for their failing ground forces with asymmetric tactics such as chemical weapons attacks and other mass casualty operations aimed at terrorizing and scattering civilians.

The Peace Process

Progress toward a political settlement to the Syrian conflict has stalled, and Assad shows no willingness to compromise with his opponents.

No political process to date has delivered meaningful progress toward a resolution of the conflict. The UN-led Geneva process, as laid out in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 (see the accompanying text box and appendix 4), has stalled. UN mediation currently centers on forming a constitutional committee with equal representation from the regime, opposition, and civil society. For its part, the regime does not believe compromise is necessary and will not allow genuine reform through the constitutional committee or any other means. In its view, the battlefield trajectory signals an Assad victory.⁶⁷ Syrian political opposition groups remain divided and mostly outside of Syria, with little leverage to demand concessions from the regime at the negotiating table.

The Astana process, led by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, started in January 2017 as a dialogue outside of UN auspices and led to the creation of three “de-escalation areas.”⁶⁸ In practice, however, Astana allowed Russia and the regime to exploit pauses in fighting to brutally retake control in eastern Ghouta (April 2018) and northern Homs (May 2018). Russia and the regime also violated the third de-escalation zone, in southwestern Syria; that zone had been negotiated separately with the United States and Jordan.⁶⁹

The U.S.-led “small group”—including Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom—is attempting to revitalize the Geneva process, but it does not include Russia, Turkey, or Iran, all of whom are key players on the ground. The United States has engaged in a separate diplomatic track with Russia, proposing a “road map” in hopes of testing Russian willingness to make compromises and exercise influence over the Assad regime in order to make progress toward a political settlement acceptable to Washington.⁷⁰

Some observers hope that the 2021 elections will be conducted under UN auspices and fulfill the elections phase of the Geneva process, offering an opportunity for political transition if the Syrian diaspora is able to participate. Given current conditions inside Syria, and with Russia protecting Assad at the UN Security Council, there is no possibility that the 2021 elections will be free, fair, and credible. Instead, Assad will try to use the 2021 elections to bolster his claim to legitimacy. Russia will similarly seize on the election results to argue that countries should reestablish diplomatic relations with Damascus and reinvest in the country.

BOX 3

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254: A Stalled Process

- Passed unanimously in December 2015.
- Resolution 2254 outlines four steps for a “Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition.”

STEP 1: POLITICAL PROCESS

- Proposed Action: Talks to begin in mid-January 2016 between the government and the opposition as an initial step toward a political transition.
- What Happened: Direct talks between the regime and the opposition did not happen. The United Nations has convened eight rounds of intra-Syrian talks since 2016—often in the format of “proximity talks,” in which a government and an opposition delegation sat in separate rooms—with no significant results.¹

STEP 2: NATIONWIDE CEASE-FIRE

- Proposed Action: A nationwide cease-fire to begin as soon as the parties take the initial steps toward a political transition.
- What Happened: A nationwide cease-fire went into effect in late February 2016, but it collapsed within two months. Another cease-fire was announced in September 2016, but it, too, collapsed.

STEP 3: DRAFT A NEW CONSTITUTION

- Proposed Action: A new constitution to be drafted starting in June 2016.
- What Happened: A constitutional committee has been proposed with equal representation from the regime, the opposition, and civil society. However, the committee has not been finalized due to disputes over the names proposed for membership. Work is ongoing by the UN Special Envoy for Syria to reach an agreement on committee membership.

STEP 4: ELECTIONS

- Proposed Action: Free and fair elections to be held by June 2017, which would be supervised by the United Nations to ensure the “highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.”
- What Happened: The elections did not take place.

Source:

1. UN News, “Syria,” accessed July 28, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/focus/syria>.

Russia

U.S. policy underestimated Russia's ability to use Syria as an arena for regional influence.

Russia's military intervention in September 2015 (falsely premised on combatting ISIS) accomplished its immediate goal of preserving the Assad regime. It also gave Moscow the opportunity to demonstrate its utility as a partner, and a theater to showcase its weapons and exercise its military capabilities. Regional governments have noted Russia's reinvigorated role first in Syria, and then in the region as a whole, and have increased their own contacts with Moscow.⁷¹

Since its intervention in Syria, Russia's regional profile has improved markedly; it has not paid a price among U.S. partners for its alliance with Iran in support of Assad. Moscow has signed weapons deals with, among others, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey.⁷² During a visit by King Salman of Saudi Arabia to Russia in 2017, the first by a Saudi monarch to Moscow, the two countries agreed to cut oil production, thereby increasing Russian influence in world energy markets.⁷³ In Iraq, Russia has opened an intelligence-sharing center to facilitate cooperation with the Iraqi military.⁷⁴

In Syria, the presence of Russian forces required the U.S. military to make operational adjustments, interfered with U.S. communications, and provided Russia with an opportunity to test its electronic warfare capabilities against U.S. targets.⁷⁵ Through its military deployments, including at an airbase at Hmeimim and at an expanded naval base at Tartus on Syria's western coast for which Russia has secured extended basing rights,⁷⁶ Moscow can project power into the eastern Mediterranean. Russia has also deployed in Syria multiple S-400 batteries, a long-range surface-to-air missile defense system. Although the S-400 has never been fired in combat, its presence in Syria threatens U.S. air dominance and has imposed constraints on U.S. forces.⁷⁷

The cost to Russia of rescuing the Assad regime and altering the course of the conflict has been relatively small. The Russian military has shown itself to be both opportunistic and adaptive. It has utilized a light-footprint approach of deploying airpower and relatively few ground troops—between four and six thousand at any one time,⁷⁸ supplemented by private military contractors.⁷⁹ Russia's military death toll, while not officially announced, has been low, and most estimates suggest that Moscow spends only around \$4 million a day in Syria.⁸⁰

However, Russian support has yet to translate battlefield success into a political victory in Syria by securing broad diplomatic acceptance of Assad and overseeing his readmittance to the international community. On its own, Russia lacks the economic strength to rebuild Syria and has failed to compel Assad to change regime behavior, such as taking the measures necessary to promote the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of refugees. Barring significant movement in these two areas—reconstruction aid and refugee return—Russia will be deprived of the international recognition it seeks to consolidate its gains in Syria.

Turkey

U.S.-Turkey relations are strained in Syria by starkly diverging views of the SDF; a Turkish incursion would represent a major setback to U.S. aims in Syria and a new crisis for the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

The United States' partnership with the SDF is, in large part, an outgrowth of Turkey's limited ability to support initial U.S.-led efforts against ISIS. The U.S. military regards the SDF as a capable partner force, one that has been operationally successful and responsive to American operational requests.

As valuable as the SDF has been operationally, the U.S.-SDF partnership faces several challenges. Turkey, a close partner and NATO ally of the United States, considers the SDF a grave security threat. In Turkey's view, the YPG—the Syrian Kurdish component of the SDF—is indistinguishable from the Turkey-based PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. In July 2015, a two-and-a-half-year cease-fire between Turkey and the PKK broke down, reigniting a conflict that has been ongoing since 1984.⁸¹ Between July 2015 and July 2017, nearly three thousand people were killed in Turkey in PKK-related violence, including in bombings in Ankara and Istanbul.⁸² Turkey fears that U.S. training and equipping of the SDF in Syria is escalating the threat posed by the PKK to Turkey's internal security.

Previous Turkish incursions into Syria provide substantial evidence that additional Turkish military operations are likely to be destabilizing and undermine U.S. objectives in Syria. The August 2016 Euphrates Shield operation resulted in Turkish control of Syrian territory from the city of Azaz in the west to Jarabulus in the east. In March 2018, Turkey occupied a second stretch of territory, in and around the city of Afrin. Although the two areas are contiguous, Turkey has taken a markedly different approach to each. The Euphrates Shield area is a predominantly Arab region where Turkey has provided support in governance and service provision.⁸³ In Afrin, a traditionally Kurdish area, Turkey has been accused by NGOs of complicity in human rights abuses—including arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, and the confiscation of property—by Turkish-backed militias.⁸⁴

Ankara has repeatedly underscored its unwillingness to tolerate SDF dominance in northern Syria. Turkey is threatening another incursion, which the United States worries could cause a number of problems: the collapse of the SDF or an SDF deal with the Assad regime made under duress, a move by the Assad regime and its partners across the Euphrates, and a distraction for the SDF from its focus on fighting ISIS. The United States is seeking to forestall additional Turkish military action in Syria by negotiating a “safe zone” along the Turkey-Syria border. An agreement on a safe zone would presumably include joint U.S.-Turkey patrols and the withdrawal of SDF forces from an agreed-upon area.

The Syrian Kurds

While the SDF was a highly effective partner in the fight against ISIS, it must transition to ensure stability in northeastern Syria.

The United States implemented a model of fighting ISIS “by, with, and through” the SDF.⁸⁵ Over the course of four and a half years, from August 2014 to March 2019, the United States and the SDF partnered to clear more than twenty thousand square miles of ISIS-held territory in Syria.⁸⁶ U.S. government officials estimate that the SDF numbers roughly sixty thousand, split more or less evenly between Kurdish and Arab forces.⁸⁷ When the Arabs and Kurds within the SDF were fighting a common enemy in ISIS, they largely downplayed their ethnic differences and divisions. In the aftermath of ISIS’s loss of Syrian territory, these fault lines are resurfacing in Arab-dominated areas.

Although U.S. officials describe the relationship as “tactical, temporary, and transactional,” there is no publicly articulated policy for transitioning the nature of the U.S.-SDF relationship following the liberation of Syrian territory from ISIS.⁸⁸ The United States never explicitly pledged support for Kurdish autonomy or self-rule in Syria. However, the YPG has leveraged the strategic and tactical support it received from the United States to establish civilian governance led by its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), across areas liberated from ISIS. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the civilian counterpart to the SDF, has sporadically explored a settlement with the Assad regime, but the announced U.S. withdrawal in December 2018, while temporarily accelerating these efforts, simultaneously undercut the SDF’s negotiating position.⁸⁹ Following U.S. reassurances of maintaining a military presence in Syria, the negotiations stalled. Absent U.S. support and troops on the ground, the SDF would likely fracture along ethnic and sectarian lines while Assad, Russia, and Iran would initiate military operations to recapture SDF-held areas. SDF leader General Mazloum has stated that the SDF is still willing to negotiate a deal with the regime on the condition that it recognizes the SDF’s “self-administration” authority and preserves the autonomy of the SDF.⁹⁰ But Assad is unlikely to agree to even limited autonomy for the SDF in the current environment.

Inside the post-ISIS territory of Syria, tensions are already surfacing that challenge the viability of the SDF’s staying power. The SDC highlights its commitment to inclusive, representative, and decentralized rule. However, it has not meaningfully devolved authority to local populations in Arab-concentrated areas, particularly in Deir ez-Zor. Arab leaders in eastern Syria complain that the Kurdish leadership of the SDF is unwilling to equitably share resources.⁹¹ Arab communities complain of heavy-handed treatment by Kurdish SDF units, including forced recruitment. In April 2019, Arab protesters in Deir ez-Zor chanted “No to Kurdish occupation!” and complained that the SDF was benefitting from local oil deposits, which it subsequently sells to the Assad regime.⁹²

BOX 4

Key Kurdish Groups

PKK: KURDISTAN WORKERS' PARTY

- Founded in 1978. The United States designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in October 1997. It upheld the designation following a review in March 2019.¹

PYD: DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY

- The Syrian branch of the PKK, founded in 2003.²

YPG: PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS

- Emerged in 2012 as the military arm of the PYD.³ The United States began cooperating with the YPG in late 2014.

SDF: SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

- Created in 2015 as the United States' local partner in the war to defeat ISIS.⁴ The SDF's leadership is largely drawn from the YPG, but it is a "multi-ethnic force comprising Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnic groups."⁵ Primary command and control is held by Kurdish elements.

SDC: SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL

- Created in 2015 as the "political wing of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)."⁶ The SDC is Kurdish-dominated and provides governance to much of northeast Syria, including predominantly Arab areas.

KNC: KURDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL

- Founded in 2011 as an umbrella group for various Syrian Kurdish parties, members of different civil society organizations, and independent personalities. As of mid-2019, the KNC consisted of fourteen parties.⁷

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Civilian Protection

The Assad regime's systematic targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure constitutes war crimes and demands accountability.

The Assad regime has deliberately and repeatedly targeted civilians in Syria with both conventional and chemical weapons. At the same time, it has systematically used rape, torture, disappearances, and unlawful detentions as weapons of war. An independent UN commission of inquiry reported in 2016 that the regime's actions amounted to "crimes against humanity" and "extermination."⁹³

The regime, with Russian complicity and assistance, has not only bombed hospitals and humanitarian convoys but also arrested and tortured medical staff.⁹⁴ The use of barrel bombs (unguided bombs filled with shrapnel designed to cause extensive casualties) remains a hallmark of the regime's brutal war on civilians. Former prisoners have detailed the horrors of life inside Assad's prisons.⁹⁵ Detainees are not allowed to sleep or speak without permission, cells are overcrowded, dead bodies are left to rot, and torture is routine. Although multiple countries, including the United States, have stressed the importance of civilian protection in their public statements and through diplomatic efforts with Russia and the United Nations, none has been willing to take sustained military action in response to regime or Russian targeting of civilians.

Twice, in 2017 and 2018, the United States responded militarily to the regime's use of Sarin, a deadly nerve agent. There have been no alleged or confirmed Sarin attacks by the regime since the U.S. strikes, although there are allegations (but no confirmation) that the regime has since used other chemical weapons.⁹⁶ The regime has continued to use conventional weapons to target and kill civilians, including in the current attacks against Idlib.

In the short term, it is highly unlikely that the regime will be held to account for its crimes. Assad will not appear in front of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Syria never joined the ICC, so the court's chief prosecutor cannot initiate an investigation. Referrals from the UN Security Council, which could initiate one, have been vetoed by Russia.⁹⁷ Other options to pursue justice, particularly through the use of "universal jurisdiction" and high-level prosecutions in Europe, have yielded limited results. A joint German and French investigation resulted in the arrest of three former regime officials, two in Germany and one in France, in February 2019.⁹⁸ French authorities have also issued international arrest warrants for Assad's former Air Force intelligence director, Jamil Hassan,⁹⁹ and for the regime's national security chief, Ali Mamlouk, for collusion in war crimes.¹⁰⁰

Despite the unlikely prospect of securing accountability in the near term, documentation efforts are ongoing in hopes of supporting eventual prosecutions and the United States continues to provide funding in support of them. Dozens of outside reports, internal regime documents, and the testimonies of regime defectors corroborate the grim picture of the regime's

The regime has consistently used humanitarian access and aid as a means of punishing opponents and rewarding loyalists.

crimes painted by former prisoners. For example, in 2014 a former regime military police officer (with the pseudonym “Caesar”) fled Syria with thousands of photographs of the bodies of people who had been tortured

before being killed. The Federal Bureau of Investigation subsequently verified the authenticity of the photographs.¹⁰¹ The International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) was formed by the UN General Assembly, bypassing the Security Council, in 2016. The IIIM is tasked with assisting investigations and prosecutions for war crimes committed in Syria. The IIIM, however, has no enforcement powers or arrest authorities.

The Humanitarian Challenge

Dire humanitarian conditions and widespread destruction, along with the challenges posed by IDPs and refugees in and beyond the region, will likely reverberate for decades. Most refugees are unlikely to voluntarily return to Syria in the near term.

The conflict in Syria has led to the largest displacement crisis since the end of World War II. Six million Syrians are internally displaced. More than 5.6 million Syrians are registered as refugees outside the country, including more than 1 million in Europe.¹⁰² Tens of thousands are illegally detained by the regime. Syrians form the largest asylum-seeking population in the world.

Inside the country, more than 11 million people are in need of humanitarian aid.¹⁰³ In 2018, the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria—a UN-led effort involving multiple UN agencies, NGOs, and other actors to address Syrian-conflict related humanitarian needs both inside and outside Syria—received only two-thirds of its requested funding.¹⁰⁴ As of May 2019, the 2019 HRP had received only 16 percent of its requested \$3.3 billion.¹⁰⁵

Earlier this year, concerns emerged that the United Nations intended to phase out the Amman-based UN regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria and consolidate its humanitarian operations in Damascus. In the view of some humanitarian organizations, the United Nations appears to be choosing to work primarily through Damascus as a concession both to the regime and to Russia, which has been lobbying strongly for a Damascus-only approach to humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁶

The regime has consistently used humanitarian access and aid as a means of punishing opponents and rewarding loyalists. The regime has placed “regular restrictions on the access of humanitarian organizations to communities in need” and has made sure that “the humanitarian response is siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the abusive state apparatus.”¹⁰⁷

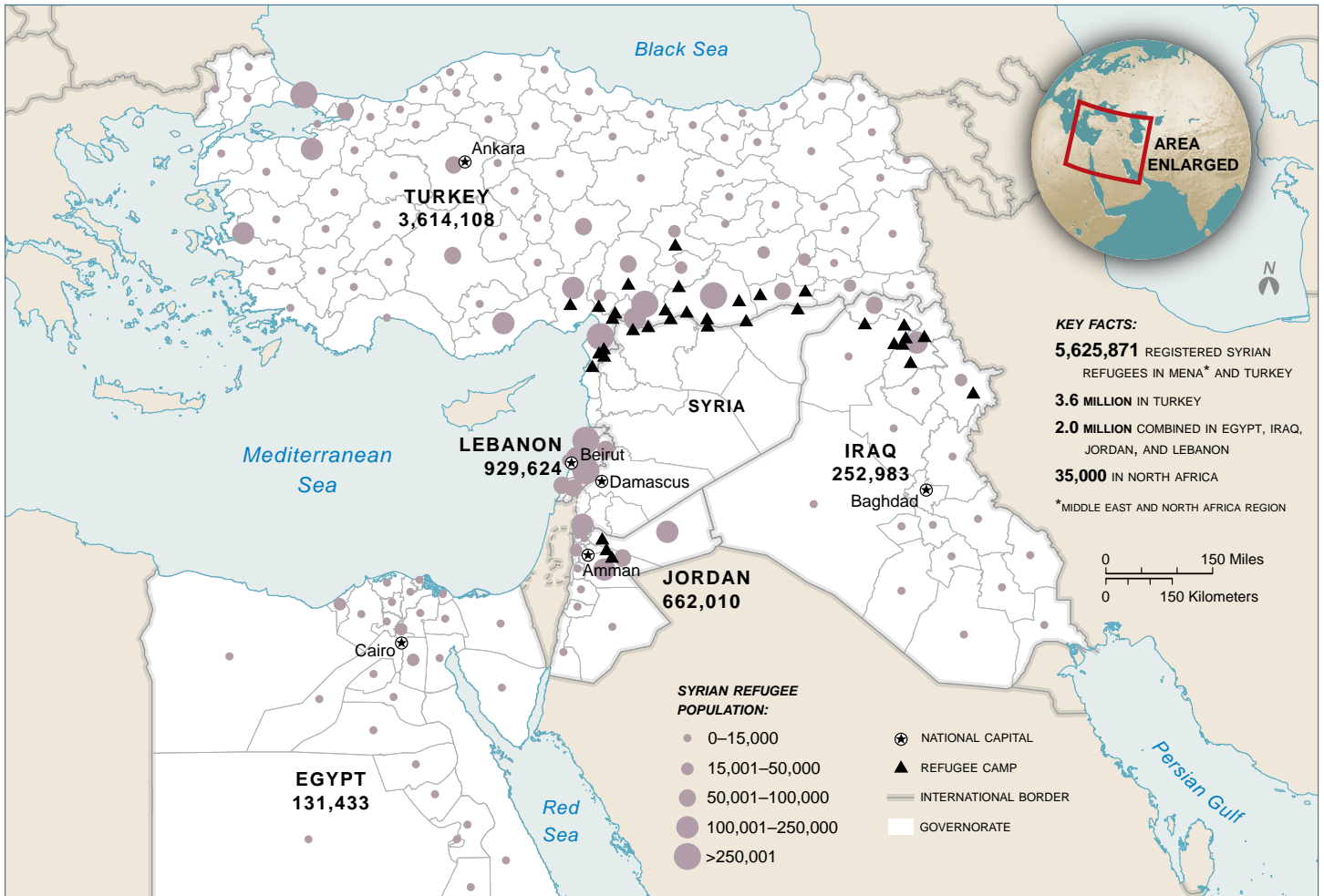
UNSCR 2449 (see appendix 5), which authorizes cross-border aid delivery into Idlib and other parts of Syria, is due for renewal in December 2019. In 2018, for the first time in four years, Russia abstained from the vote on renewal, saying the resolution was “divorced from reality,” which has raised concerns among humanitarians and others that the resolution will not be renewed.¹⁰⁸ If the cross-border delivery of aid is not renewed for 2020, the humanitarian responders working in Idlib would find themselves in a much more precarious position—and the overall humanitarian aid flows to the area most in need in Syria are likely to shrink.

Fewer than 200,000 Syrian refugees have returned to Syria.¹⁰⁹ The regime continues to conscript, arrest, torture, and kill some of those who do return. Some returnees find that their property and homes have been destroyed or seized; others have reported being forced to inform on family members.¹¹⁰ There does not appear to be consistent international attention to missing persons and detainees or land reform under UN—or any other—auspices. Processes to address these issues will be critical for refugee decision making about returning to Syria. Given the poor security and humanitarian conditions in regime-held areas of Syria, most refugees and IDPs are not willing to return to their homes.

The situation in camps such as Rukban, which is located on the Syria-Jordan border and is effectively cut off from both countries, is dire. Although the Rukban population has dropped to around twenty-five thousand from a high of between seventy thousand and eighty thousand in 2016, serious problems persist.¹¹¹ Within the camp, services, including basic health care, are virtually nonexistent. Access to clean, potable water is limited. Food prices have risen. Women and girls live in fear of sexual assault.¹¹² The population at Rukban can be accessed from Damascus if the regime and Russia permit transit, as demonstrated by two previous successful UN aid deliveries to Rukban spearheaded by the United States, most recently in February 2019. The regime has refused the past two UN requests to deliver aid and, as of late July 2019, had yet to authorize the current UN request.

Hosting millions of refugees has placed substantial political and economic pressure on Syria’s neighbors: Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees (3.6 million); Lebanon hosts the most refugees per capita in the world.¹¹³ No country in the region has a long-term plan to deal with Syria’s refugees. The influx has engendered a significant backlash against the refugees, particularly in Lebanon.¹¹⁴ Throughout Lebanon, hate speech is on the rise, refugee tents have been burned down, and there have been multiple cases of forced returns.¹¹⁵ Syrian refugees in Turkey have also faced harassment; the Turkish government is reported to have initiated forced returns to Syria since July 2019.¹¹⁶

Jordan’s ability to shelter Syrian refugees depends on the provision of significant additional outside support; such support, however, has been limited. The Jordan Response Plan, for instance, was funded at 62 percent of its budget in 2016, at 65 percent in 2017, and at just 34 percent in 2018.¹¹⁷



MAP 4: SYRIAN REFUGEES IN NEIGHBORING STATES, JULY 2019.

Source: Based on “Syria Situation Map in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region and Turkey (as of 04 July 2019),” originally published in Amman, Jordan, by the UNHCR MENA Director’s Office. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

U.S. Points of Leverage

Despite these challenges, the United States maintains leverage to shape an outcome in Syria that protects core U.S. national security interests.

In northeastern Syria, the United States, through its control of the air space and partnership with the SDF, insulates a significant part of Syria and its population from regime, Russian, and Iranian operations. The area is of particular importance, given its strategic location, agricultural output, and rich natural resources, such as water and oil reserves. Two-thirds (66 percent) of Syria’s hydrocarbons are not under the regime’s control, and most of that two-thirds lies in northeastern Syria.¹¹⁸ This area accounts for roughly one-third of the country east of the Euphrates River and is the United States’ greatest single point of leverage in Syria.



A poster of President Bashar al-Assad with “Yes” in Arabic hangs in the Hamadiyah market in the Old City of Damascus. (Photo by Hassan Ammar/AP/ Shutterstock.)

The United States also has imposed extensive sanctions on the Assad regime and its supporters. The stated purpose of U.S. sanctions on Assad and his network of support is “to deprive the regime of the resources it needs to continue violence against civilians and to pressure the Syrian regime to allow for a democratic transition as the Syrian people demand.”¹¹⁹ These goals have yet to be achieved, but the U.S.-led sanctions architecture has been a success in terms of preventing the regime from benefitting economically and making it more difficult for members of Assad’s family and the regime’s elite to travel abroad. U.S. sanctions on Syria predate the current conflict but have expanded significantly since 2011. Sanctions on Syria are effectively a “full embargo,” with the exception of humanitarian aid.¹²⁰ Through executive orders and Congressional statutes, the United States has established a multilayered sanctions architecture that targets individuals, companies, and institutions associated with the regime; outside financial networks that aid the regime; and third-country nationals, companies, and institutions that provide material support to the regime. The United States has also imposed sanctions on multiple Russian banks, the Russian state-owned arms exporter Rosoboronexport, and a number of individuals for providing material support and services to the Assad regime.¹²¹

Absent concerted U.S. pressure, other states are likely to move to reestablish normal ties with Damascus.

Along with European and international financial institutions, the United States leads efforts to deny assistance for reconstruction in Syria until the regime fundamentally changes its behavior. The United States has

also signaled its intent to use the full weight of its diplomatic influence to discourage other countries from providing reconstruction aid to the regime.¹²² The economic damage from the war in Syria is estimated at nearly \$400 billion, with \$120 billion in material destruction and \$268 billion in lost production.¹²³

The United States is central to maintaining the current diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime. Although the United States and its allies have struggled to come together around a strategy for Syria, the major states of North America, Europe, and Asia are relatively unified in their opposition to the actions of the Assad regime and its backers and largely supportive of U.S. efforts. Assad, in contrast, is backed enthusiastically only by a handful of states, such as Russia and Iran. Nevertheless, in part due to the pervasive narrative that Assad has “won,” some states are making ongoing efforts to reestablish influence with Assad in an attempt to modify his behavior or, in the case of the United States’ Arab partners, to counteract Iranian influence. For instance, in December 2018, the United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy in Damascus and Bahrain resumed operations at its embassy in Damascus.¹²⁴ Absent concerted U.S. pressure, other states are likely to move to reestablish normal ties with Damascus. There is no evidence, however, that Assad is willing to modify his behavior in exchange for normalization or that he is prepared to break with Iran, with which he and his family have been closely entwined for decades and which has proven a stalwart ally to the regime, though not to the Syrian people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Syria Study Group believes that sound U.S. policy toward Syria demands sustained political commitment by the senior leaders of the U.S. government, as well as a strategy that aligns means and ends. The first problem is by far the easier to address. The President and U.S. national security officials must deliver a consistent message in support of America's Syria policy and use all opportunities to advance that policy. Congress must also prioritize the Syrian challenge by ensuring vigorous oversight of U.S. policy in Syria, conducting hearings on the topic, and using travel and legislative opportunities to signal that America's elected representatives believe that the unresolved Syrian conflict affects U.S. national security interests. Few things have undermined American influence in Syria more than the impression of uncertainty. The United States has stepped back wherever it has had leverage—military forces, foreign assistance, diplomatic engagement—thus ceding that leverage to adversaries and giving our allies and partners little option but to adjust accordingly.

The latter problem—that of mismatched ends and means—is more difficult to address. The United States is unlikely to dramatically elevate the priority it places on Syria. The Syria Study Group acknowledges that there is little domestic appetite for a heavy increase in U.S. resources—whether military investments or economic assistance. Without a substantial increase in resources, it will be even more important to deploy limited U.S. levers to achieve strategic ends, whether ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS, protecting civilians, or rallying stakeholders for a negotiated end to the war.

America should not stand idly by or back away. Russia now seeks to translate its battlefield successes on behalf of the Assad regime into a political victory and reassert itself as a great power on the international stage. Iran is working to entrench its influence in the Assad regime's security architecture; integrate its political, economic, and cultural influence across Syrian society; and cement a permanent base from which to project power into the Mediterranean and threaten Israel. ISIS, al-Qaeda and its offshoots, and other violent extremist organizations retain military capabilities and the intent to plot external attacks. This is not a frozen conflict but rather a dynamic and evolving one, which continues to endanger the Syrian people, destabilize Syria's neighbors, and threaten U.S. interests in the region and beyond.

Absent changes in the behavior of the Assad regime—something Russia has conspicuously failed to accomplish—and associated improvements in conditions within the country, Syria will remain the leading source of instability in the Middle East: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and successor entities will find fertile ground for their activities; Iranian influence will deepen; the humanitarian crisis will expand; and new waves of refugees will seek safety abroad.

Although the U.S. military mission in Syria is often lumped together with the Iraq and Afghanistan missions in the “forever war” category, the Syria case offers a different—and far less costly—model.

Removing U.S. military forces from Syria would exacerbate and accelerate these trends. Throughout the Syria Study Group’s briefings and interviews, no one argued that withdrawing U.S. troops would make ISIS less likely to regroup or Iran

less likely to entrench itself. Although the U.S. military mission in Syria is often lumped together with the Iraq and Afghanistan missions in the “forever war” category, the Syria case offers a different—and far less costly—model. A small U.S. military footprint, supported by U.S. air power and other high-end capabilities, reinforced by a global coalition of like-minded allies and partners, rallied a partner force many times its size to liberate territory from a terrorist group. What U.S. forces and their partners have gained in Syria should not be discarded with a premature withdrawal.

U.S. security would be best served by an end state in which a Syrian government is viewed as legitimate by its own population and has the will and capability to end Syrian dependence on foreign forces and prevent terrorist groups from thriving on Syrian territory. Such an end state, in this Group’s estimation, requires conditions in which Syrian citizens live free from fear of the Assad regime and of Russian, Iranian, and ISIS brutality and within an updated political and social compact based on empowered local governance and equitable resource allocation. We are skeptical, however, that this end state will be achieved in the near future.

Therefore, the Syria Study Group recommends a strategy that makes a negotiated political settlement in Syria more likely yet also allows the United States to defend its interests even if a political solution is not found. To that end, the Group recommends that the United States, working in close concert with allies and partners, continue its military mission in order to maintain pressure on ISIS and other terrorist groups while strengthening pressure on the Assad regime and its backers until conditions are conducive for a political settlement that ends the Syrian conflict.

This strategy will require supporting local governance in areas where the United States and its allies and partners have territorial control and reliable relationships that can, at a minimum, improve short- to medium-term conditions and stability for Syrian civilians. If a political settlement is reached by all parties to the conflict, these areas of local governance can be reconnected to Syria’s center. Assad is unlikely to readily concede changes to his governance model, so this strategy buys time while pressure builds on his regime, with the aim of compelling governance changes over the long term. It will require sustained U.S. leadership and commitment, but given the stakes for U.S. interests, it is the Group’s assessment that this is a worthwhile investment.



Women line up for aid supplies at the al-Hol camp in al-Hasakeh Province, Syria. The camp's population is more than twice its capacity, with 69,000 residents from former ISIS-held areas in Syria. (Photo by Maya Alleruzzo/AP/ Shutterstock.)

This strategy is grounded in the conclusion outlined in the previous section of this report: that the United States has interests at stake in Syria and retains meaningful tools of leverage to defend those interests, particularly if that leverage is exercised in cooperation with allies and partners. This approach also aims to subvert a geopolitical win for Russia.

Consolidate gains in northeastern Syria following the territorial defeat of ISIS and offer an alternative vision for governance, resource allocation, and security in Syria.

The United States should halt its military withdrawal from northeastern Syria and update the U.S. force mix to address the current range of threats to security and stability. ISIS has not been decisively defeated in Syria; it has transitioned to an insurgency. The U.S. counter-ISIS strategy in Syria, however, has not transitioned to address the changed nature of the ISIS threat. In order to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, the United States must put in place a targeted civil-military campaign that integrates political, informational, military, and economic lines of operation.

This campaign should focus on:

- Prioritizing stabilization activities and working with the SDF to ensure inclusive governance, including equitable access to resources for Arab communities and opportunities to credibly participate in local governance.
- Conducting counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations to disrupt ISIS and al-Qaeda cells, including by training, advising, and assisting local partners.
- Buttressing information operations and subverting disinformation to bolster credible, local Syrian governance and to highlight the predatory and corrupt nature of Assad, Russia, Iran, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and violent extremist organizations.
- Enabling local partners to secure and process ISIS detainees, and provide services to noncombatant women and children, in accordance with international legal and humanitarian standards.
- Serving as the enabling backbone for allied and partner contributions for stabilization (e.g., command and control; close air support and airspace coverage; logistics, lift, and intelligence; surveillance; and reconnaissance).

U.S. planning should also include contingencies that account for escalation scenarios such as:

- An ISIS resurgence and/or significant deterioration in the security situation in northeastern Syria.
- Pressure on U.S. forces at al-Tanf.
- U.S. forces engaging Iranian-backed proxies or Russian-backed mercenary forces.
- A Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria.
- A breach of the Euphrates de-confliction line by the regime, by Iranian-backed proxies, or by Russian-backed mercenary forces.

The Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) Forward team should be returned to Syria and U.S. stabilization assistance should be restored. Spending U.S. funds for limited stabilization activities will send a necessary signal of U.S. commitment and allow for U.S. officials to do effective planning and programming based on availability of funds. As part of the restoration of stabilization assistance:

- State Department leadership and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security should demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to assume some risk in order for U.S. civilians to effectively work in northeastern Syria.
- U.S. political advisors should accompany U.S. forces during all civil engagement.
- Partners should be asked to increase contributions not just to the military force, but also to these civilian stabilization efforts.
- Unspent funds designated for Syria in the Relief and Recovery Fund should be obligated to demonstrate U.S. commitment in an effort to promote greater burden sharing for stabilization in northeastern Syria.
- U.S. civilian and military actors should engage key tribal leaders in the lower Middle Euphrates Valley by involving them more directly in local security and stabilization efforts.

The United States should utilize the considerable leverage it holds with the SDF to encourage more inclusive governance in northeastern Syria—particularly given the success it has had to date in shaping the SDF’s military approach. This will require more assertive engagement with the SDF on these issues by both U.S. civilian and U.S. military leadership. In particular, U.S. officials should ask the SDF to:

- Sever its links with the PKK leadership and remove any PKK figures from positions of responsibility in Syria.
- Allow civil society actors and journalists to work freely.
- Ensure that local governance structures represent their populations’ demographics and political diversity.
- Cease any efforts to promote PKK ideology among the population of northeastern Syria.
- Share resources more equitably with local Arab populations.
- Enable freedom of movement for the civilian population, particularly to and from IDP camps where restrictions have reportedly been imposed. This is an opportunity for the SDF to demonstrate how it will be a responsible security provider, enabling international humanitarian and stabilization access to the northeastern Syrian population.

Focus greater attention within the United States and partner governments in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS on addressing the challenges posed by detained ISIS fighters and their families. To this end, the United States should:

- Develop an internationally coordinated strategy for addressing the ISIS detainee problem set and designate one senior U.S. official charged with implementing a coherent strategy to address all ISIS detainee populations, including foreign fighters, Syrian ISIS fighters, Iraqi ISIS fighters, women, and children.
- Work with European governments on the repatriation or third-country prosecution of their citizens who are being held as ISIS detainees and find permanent solutions for the detainees’ families.
- Press the SDF administering the al-Hol camp to reduce the gap in services; increase transparency with regard to which NGOs are granted access to the camp; and provide more information about what services are currently provided in the camps, about family members in SDF detention, and about potential returns of family members to their country of citizenship.
- Increase Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) funding and update authorized activities for Syria. Additional funds should be used to improve infrastructure in SDF-managed camps for ISIS detainees and noncombatant IDPs. CTEF funding should prioritize the need for U.S.-supported SDF to ensure that conditions at camps meet international standards, including for humanitarian access.
- Improve strategic communications on U.S. willingness to repatriate U.S. citizens, and publicize successful U.S. prosecutions of repatriated ISIS fighters.

ISIS in Syria will not be defeated if the group reconstitutes in Iraq. Therefore, the United States should prioritize the Iraqi partnership in order to maintain a U.S. military presence to assist the Iraqi Security Forces in preventing ISIS's resurgence, and partner with nonmilitary Iraqi institutions to assist in Iraq's post-ISIS recovery. In particular, the United States should:

- Press Iraqi officials to prioritize stabilization activities in ISIS-liberated communities.
- Continue military support to the legitimate Iraqi Security Forces to reinforce their counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency operations.
- Utilize U.S. assistance supporting the Iraqi government's repatriation efforts of detained ISIS fighters and their families.

Until conditions inside Syria improve, deny the Assad regime and its backers all avenues for normalization by enforcing the regime's diplomatic isolation and maintaining a rigorous sanctions architecture. The United States should:

- Make clear that any steps toward normalization require, at a minimum, changes in regime behavior.
- Prioritize and invest in Syria sanctions, as a policy matter and a resource matter across the U.S. government.
- Demand the release of detained U.S. citizens prior to easing sanctions or diplomatic isolation.
- Continue to deny reconstruction funding to areas controlled by the regime absent meaningful reform.
- Refuse to accept the legitimacy of the 2021 presidential elections if they occur absent meaningful reform by the Assad regime and are not conducted according to international standards.
- Continue to support the development of civil society inside Syria and among the refugee communities while acknowledging that civil society actors face significant risks to their personal safety from the regime and its allies.
- Discourage foreign governments, particularly in the Middle East, from reengaging with Assad and make clear that returning embassies to Damascus or accepting reconstruction contracts will expose them to U.S. sanctions.
- Sign into law the Caesar Civilian Support Act—mandating additional sanctions for persons supporting the Assad regime—in order to signal U.S. resolve against normalization of the Assad regime.
- Explore new areas for increasing economic pressure on the Assad regime. Such areas include further curtailing Iranian oil shipments to Syria, including via regional partners and third parties; pressuring the United Nations to improve its transparency and accountability of all funds, in order to ensure that its operations in Damascus do not funnel revenue to Assad cronies; and urging European and Arab governments to tighten sanctions.



Comrades of SDF soldiers attend the funeral in Kobane in July 2017 of five comrades killed during fighting with ISIS. (Photo by Morukc Umnaber/Picture Alliance via Getty Images.)

Even if a mutually acceptable political compromise between the Assad regime and the opposition can be found, Syria's long-term stability requires accountability for war crimes. As long as conflict is ongoing, accountability for war crimes committed by the regime and ISIS is unlikely. In the interim, the United States should:

- Robustly fund documentation efforts and support organizations focused on building evidence for third-country prosecutions.
- Congress should signal its commitment to eventual war crimes prosecutions and to accountability for victims by confirming the nominee for Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice at the State Department. This office should focus on consolidating international efforts to protect and support whistle-blowers willing to testify or to provide evidence of war crimes committed in Syria; improving information sharing with governments with prosecutorial power; and ensuring that crimes in Syria are documented for future prosecution efforts and to preserve the historical record.

Test and verify Russian willingness to support political settlements acceptable to the United States, but continue activities that increase the costs to Russia for its actions in Syria. Russian officials are working aggressively to position Moscow as the regional power within the Middle East. The best way to counter this is for the United States to:

- Maintain consistency in advancing U.S. objectives, and rally allies and partners by taking their concerns into account and ensuring that, going forward, they are never surprised or undermined by U.S. policy actions or announcements.
- Underscore that Russia is a cobelligerent alongside the Assad regime by exposing Russian hybrid operations, information operations, and actors within Syria.
- Require concrete actions of Russia pursuant to any discussions of a political settlement; absent such action, avoid concessions to Moscow or legitimization of its positions.
- Confront Russian pretensions—and hold Russia to account for its diplomatic representations—through messaging that underscores Moscow’s failure to deliver on any of its commitments in Syria or in the region.
- Develop an information operations strategy that leverages tools from the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, the Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community to subvert Russian disinformation efforts and to reinforce messaging on areas of Russian vulnerability, including:
 - Russia’s indiscriminate targeting of Syrian civilians and civilian targets.
 - Russia’s support for predatory and corrupt behavior in Syria and globally.
 - Iran’s infiltration of Syrian state and cultural structures that may undermine Russian influence over Syria.
- Commission a study on Russian war crimes in Syria. Such a study will demonstrate patterns of complicity and intentionality in crimes committed both by the Assad regime and by Russia itself. Release the study publicly, targeting public opinion within Russia and the Arab world.

The United States should remain focused on expelling Iranian forces from Syria but recognize that this is best accomplished in phases. The key near-term goal should be to prevent further entrenchment of Iran and its many partners and proxies while raising the cost to Iran for its support of the Assad regime. More specifically, the United States should:

- Continue to support Israeli strikes on Iranian assets inside Syria. These strikes have arguably prevented Iran from accomplishing more expansive goals in Syria but are unlikely to deter Iran in its strategic campaign to increase its presence there.
- Enforce and, where possible, expand sanctions targeting Iranian support for the Assad regime and proxies engaged in the Syrian conflict, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Shia militias. Further actions by European countries—such as the seizure in early July by the British Royal Navy of a Syria-bound tanker carrying Iranian oil—should be encouraged, as should the enforcement by the European Union of its own sanctions.
- Maintain its presence at al-Tanf to prevent consolidation of Iran’s land bridge across Syria. Avoid conceding that territory absent significant concessions by Russia and Iran.

- Develop a multilateral strategy to disrupt Iran’s soft power activities in Syria. That strategy should involve:
 - Supporting international and NGO efforts to map Iranian political, economic, cultural, and religious activities in Syria.
 - Channeling assistance to those unarmed actors inside and outside Syria postured to counter Iran’s efforts.
 - Using overt and covert information sources to spread messaging reflecting the negative impact and consequences of Iran’s activities in Syria.
- Make clear that any U.S.-supported political settlement to the Syria conflict requires the evacuation of Iranian and Iranian proxy forces from Syria.

Seek areas for cooperation with Turkey and address legitimate Turkish security concerns while pressing Turkey to avoid any incursion into northeastern Syria and to improve conditions in the Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas. The United States should:

- Continue negotiations with Turkey on a security mechanism along Turkey’s border with northeastern Syria. If a zone is established, it should preserve safe and secure conditions for the local population, allow for legitimate local governance, and deprive extremist groups of a safe haven. The United States should be willing to commit additional troops to patrol any security zone and should also seek to recruit Coalition partners to participate.
- Encourage and offer to facilitate renewed Turkey-PKK peace talks, which present the best path to resolution of Turkish concerns with the SDF.
- Seek to isolate the Syria issue from broader tensions in the U.S.-Turkey relationship, in part by fostering more regular dialogue between the Turkish military and U.S. military combatant commands (in particular, the U.S. European Command and U.S. Central Command). This mechanism could explore the Turkish proposal for providing security and continuing anti-ISIS military operations in northeastern Syria.
- In concert with efforts to address Turkish security concerns, press Turkey to commit to expelling extremist groups from the areas of Syria it controls, end any repression of the local population, and commit to representative local governance in those areas. Turkey should offer full transparency to U.S. and UN officials and others assessing conditions in these areas. Concurrently, the United States should press the SDF to end attacks by its affiliates in these areas.

Seek to address the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and counter the presence of terrorist groups there. The United States should:

- Seek to deter the Assad regime by warning that the use of chemical weapons or other forms of civilian targeting could bring a military response. Retaliatory strikes for regime mass civilian casualty operations in Idlib and elsewhere should be approached as a last resort, best conducted with allies. Still, the credible threat of military force and its exercise buttresses diplomatic efforts to deter and counter Assad regime state terror; neglecting such deterrence feeds the regime’s sense of impunity, with devastating effects in Syria and beyond.

- Prioritize diplomacy to end the assault on Idlib by the regime and Russia while working to restore U.S. air access to conduct surveillance and targeted counterterrorism operations. Idlib is an area where Russian willingness and ability to deliver on concrete steps can be tested.
- Urge Turkey to open its borders, as well as the Euphrates Shield area, to persons displaced from Idlib.
- Urge the Turkish government to allow NGOs to use cross-border assistance modalities in order to respond to the humanitarian needs of those in Idlib.
- Continue to support moderate civil society groups providing information and humanitarian assistance.

Energize efforts to address the humanitarian crisis inside Syria, while taking steps to shore up countries hosting Syrian refugees. In particular, the United States should:

- Insist publicly that conditions inside Syria are not conducive for refugee returns that are safe, voluntary, and dignified. Most Syrian refugees are unlikely to return given fears for their safety.
- Coordinate with European partners to privately discourage officials from governments neighboring Syria from employing rhetoric that associates Syrian refugees with economic and security threats.
- Increase diplomatic efforts at the UN Security Council and through a public campaign to renew UNSCR Resolution 2449 to ensure cross-border humanitarian access. Failing to renew this resolution would effectively grant the Assad regime a veto over the provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria.
- Press the United Nations and humanitarian NGOs to ensure greater accountability and transparency of all Damascus-based aid operations, thereby making sure that no aid is benefitting the regime. The United States should oppose relocation of the UN whole-of-Syria operations currently based in both Amman and Damascus to Damascus alone.
- Pair efforts to encourage inclusive policies toward refugees with increased levels of assistance and coordination to fully fund assistance pledges to Lebanon and Jordan. Specifically, the United States should:
 - Establish pooled funding mechanisms, and multiyear financing, for development assistance in consultation and coordination with refugee-hosting countries.
 - Improve education opportunities, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, for Syrian refugees in the region.
 - Encourage and support host countries to offer legal pathways to employment for refugees.
 - Support efforts by the World Bank and other international financial institutions to offer levers beyond aid to support refugee-hosting governments.
- Shoulder part of the refugee burden by accepting and resettling an increased number of Syrian refugees in the United States in 2020. This would send an important signal to both European allies and regional host countries.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Syria Study Group Enabling Legislation

PUBLIC LAW 115-254, DIVISION G,

SEC. 1501. SYRIA STUDY GROUP.

(a) ESTABLISHMENT.—There is established a working group to be known as the “Syria Study Group” (in this section referred to as the “Group”).

(b) PURPOSE.—The purpose of the Group is to examine and make recommendations on the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria.

(c) COMPOSITION.—

(1) MEMBERSHIP.—The Group shall be composed of 12 members, none of whom may be members of Congress, who shall be appointed as follows:

(A) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate.

(B) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate.

(C) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate.

(D) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate.

(E) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives.

(F) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives.

(G) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives.

(H) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on

Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives.

(I) One member appointed by the majority leader of the Senate.

(J) One member appointed by the minority leader of the Senate.

(K) One member appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

(L) One member appointed by the minority leader of the House of Representatives.

(2) CO-CHAIRS.—

(A) Of the members of the Group, one co-chair shall be jointly designated by—

(i) the chairs of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(ii) the chairs of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(iii) the majority leader of the Senate; and

(iv) the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

(B) Of the members of the Group, one co-chair shall be jointly designated by—

(i) the ranking minority members of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(ii) the ranking minority members of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(iii) the minority leader of the Senate; and

(iv) the minority leader of the House of Representatives.

(3) PERIOD OF APPOINTMENT.—A member shall be appointed for the life of the Group.

(4) VACANCIES.—Any vacancy in the Group shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment.

(d) DUTIES.—

(1) REVIEW.—The Group shall conduct a review on the current United States military and diplomatic strategy with respect to the conflict in Syria that includes a review of current United States objectives in Syria and the desired end state in Syria.

(2) ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS.—The Group shall—

(A) conduct a comprehensive assessment of the current situation in Syria, the impact of such situation on neighboring countries, the resulting regional and geopolitical threats to the United States, and current military, diplomatic, and political efforts to achieve a stable Syria; and

(B) develop recommendations on the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria.

(e) COOPERATION OF UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—The Group shall receive the full and timely cooperation of the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the Director of National Intelligence in providing the Group with analyses, briefings, and other information necessary for the discharge of the duties of the Group under subsection (d).

(2) LIAISON.—The Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the Director of National Intelligence shall each designate at least one officer or employee of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, respectively, to serve as a liaison to the Group.

(3) FACILITATION.—The United States Institute of Peace shall take appropriate actions to facilitate the Group in the discharge of the duties of the Group under this section.

(f) REPORTS.—

(1) FINAL REPORT.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the date of enactment of this section, the Group shall submit to the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, the majority and minority leaders of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the minority leader of the House of Representatives a report that sets forth the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the Group under this section.

(B) ELEMENTS.—The report required by subparagraph (A) shall include each of the following:

(i) An assessment of the current security, political, humanitarian, and economic situations in Syria.

(ii) An assessment of the current participation and objectives of the various external actors in Syria.

- (iii) An assessment of the consequences of continued conflict in Syria.
- (iv) Recommendations for a resolution to the conflict in Syria, including—
 - (I) options for a gradual political transition to a post-Assad Syria; and
 - (II) actions necessary for reconciliation.
- (v) A roadmap for a United States and coalition strategy to reestablish security and governance in Syria, including recommendations for the synchronization of stabilization, development, counterterrorism, and reconstruction efforts.
- (vi) Any other matter with respect to the conflict in Syria that the Group considers to be appropriate.

(2) INTERIM REPORT.—Not later than 90 days after the date of enactment of this section, the Group shall submit to the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, the majority and minority leaders of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the minority leader of the House of Representatives a report that describes the status of the review and assessment under subsection (d) and any interim recommendations developed by the Group as of the date of the briefing.

(3) FORM OF REPORT.—The report submitted to Congress under paragraph (1) shall be submitted in unclassified form, but may include a classified annex.

(g) TERMINATION.—The Group shall terminate on the date that is 180 days after the date on which the Group submits the report required by subsection (f)(1).

APPENDIX 2

Members of the Syria Study Group

CO-CHAIRS

Mr. Michael Singh

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The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Ms. Dana Stroul

Senior Fellow, Beth and David Geduld
Program on Arab Politics,
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The Honorable Mark Kirk

Former U.S. Senator, Illinois

Ms. Melissa Dalton

Senior Fellow and Deputy Director,
International Security Program,
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Ambassador Anne Patterson

Former Assistant Secretary of Near East Affairs,
U.S. Department of State

Ambassador Frederic Hof

Diplomat in Residence,
Bard College

Dr. Dafna Rand

Vice President for Policy and Research,
Mercy Corps

Dr. Kimberly Kagan

Founder and President,
Institute for the Study of War

Mr. Vance Serchuk

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Center for a New American Security

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Director of Strategic Studies,
Johns Hopkins School of Advanced
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The Brookings Institution

Mr. Christopher Tuttle

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APPENDIX 3

Consultations

The Syria Study Group consulted with individual representatives of the following U.S. government agencies and related agencies and programs; foreign governments; U.S. Congressional offices; international and regional organizations; academic institutions; nongovernmental organizations; and Syrian American and Syrian nongovernmental organizations.

U.S. GOVERNMENT AGENCIES & RELATED AGENCIES AND PROGRAMS

Congressional Research Service

National Counterterrorism Center

National Defense University

National Intelligence Council

National Security Council

United States Agency for International Development

- Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance

- Bureau for the Middle East

- Office of Food for Peace

- Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance-Middle East Crisis Humanitarian Response

- Office of Transition Initiatives

United States Army

United States Central Command

United States Consulate, Istanbul

United States Department of Defense

- D-ISIS Task Force

- Office of Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs

United States Department of State

- Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism

- Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

- Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration

- The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

- Office of the Secretary's Special Representative for Iran

- Office of the Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement

- Southern Syria Assistance Platform (SSAP)

- Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START)

United States Embassy, Jordan

United States Embassy, Lebanon

United States Embassy, Turkey

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

United States Institute of Peace

United States Special Operations Command
United States Treasury
Office of Foreign Assets Control

FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS

France, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Germany, Federal Foreign Office
Israel, Department of Intelligence
Israel, Israel Defense Forces
Israel, Ministry of Defense
Israel, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Jordan, General Intelligence Directorate
Jordan, Jordanian Armed Forces (Jordanian Army)
Jordan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates
Jordan, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation
Jordan, Ministry of State for Economic Affairs
Jordan, Jordanian Royal Court
Lebanon, General Directorate of General Security
Lebanon, Lebanese Armed Forces/Lebanese Army
Lebanon, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants
Lebanon, Office of the President
Lebanon, Office of the Prime Minister
Lebanon, Office of the Speaker of the Parliament
Lebanon, Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations
Turkey, Ministry of Defense
Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Turkey, Ministry of Interior, Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD)
Turkey, National Intelligence Organization
United Kingdom, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

U.S. CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES

House Armed Services Committee
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Office of the House Minority Leader
Office of the Senate Majority Leader
Office of the Senate Minority Leader
Office of the Speaker of the House
Office of Senator Jeanne Shaheen
Senate Armed Services Committee
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

United Nations Disengagement Observer Force

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

 Middle East and North Africa Bureau

 Jordan Regional Office

 Lebanon Regional Office

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria

World Bank Group

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

American University of Beirut

George Mason University

Princeton University

Stanford University

Smith College

University of Lyon

University of Oklahoma

Yale University

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Amnesty International USA

Atlantic Council

CARE USA

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Carnegie Middle East Center

Center for Global Policy

Center for New American Security

Center for Strategic and International Studies

The Century Foundation

Crisis Action

Geneva Center for Security Policy

The Global Strategy Network

Foreign Policy Research Institute

Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

Human Rights Watch

iMMAP

Institut Montaigne

Institute for the Study of War

InterAction

International Committee of the Red Cross
International Rescue Committee
IREX
Mercy Corps
Middle East Institute
Norwegian Refugee Council USA
Oxfam America
Pax for Peace
RAND Corporation
Refugees International
The Shaikh Group
Solidarités International
Synaps
Washington Institute for Near East Policy
World Vision USA

SYRIAN AMERICAN AND SYRIAN NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Americans for a Free Syria
American Relief Coalition for Syria
Citizens for a Secure and Safe America
Etana
Kayla's List PAC
Omran Center for Strategic Studies
Orient Policy Center
People Demand Change
Radio Al Kul
Radio Watan and Radio Bissan
The Syria Campaign
Syria Emergency Task Force
Syria Justice and Accountability Center
Syrian American Council
Syrian American Medical Society
Syrian Center for Policy Research
Syrian Network for Human Rights
Syrian Network for Printed Media
The Day After
Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)
Syrian Negotiations Commission
Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC)
White Helmets

APPENDIX 4

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 7588th meeting, on 18 December 2015

The Security Council,

Recalling its resolutions 2042 (2012), 2043 (2012), 2118 (2013), 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2170 (2014), 2175 (2014), 2178 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2199 (2015), 2235 (2015), and 2249 (2015) and Presidential Statements of 3 August 2011 (S/PRST/2011/16), 21 March 2012 (S/PRST/2012/6), 5 April 2012 (S/PRST/2012/10), 2 October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15), 24 April 2015 (S/PRST/2015/10) and 17 August 2015 (S/PRST/2015/15), Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, Expressing its gravest concern at the continued suffering of the Syrian people, the dire and deteriorating humanitarian situation, the ongoing conflict and its persistent and brutal violence, the negative impact of terrorism and violent extremist ideology in support of terrorism, the destabilizing effect of the crisis on the region and beyond, including the resulting increase in terrorists drawn to the fighting in Syria, the physical destruction in the country, and increasing sectarianism, and underscoring that the situation will continue to deteriorate in the absence of a political solution, Recalling its demand that all parties take all appropriate steps to protect civilians, including members of ethnic, religious and confessional communities, and stresses that, in this regard, the primary responsibility to protect its population lies with the Syrian authorities,

Reiterating that the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, with a view to full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 as endorsed by resolution 2118 (2013), including through the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers, which shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent while ensuring continuity of governmental institutions, Encouraging, in this regard, the diplomatic efforts of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to help bring an end to the conflict in Syria,

Commending the commitment of the ISSG, as set forth in the Joint Statement on the outcome of the multilateral talks on Syria in Vienna of 30 October 2015 and the Statement of the ISSG of 14 November 2015 (hereinafter the “Vienna Statements”), to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué in its entirety, and emphasizing the urgency for all parties in Syria to work diligently and constructively towards this goal,

Urging all parties to the UN-facilitated political process to adhere to the principles identified by the ISSG, including commitments to Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character, to ensuring continuity of governmental institutions, to protecting the

rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, and to ensuring humanitarian access throughout the country,

Encouraging the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria,

Bearing in mind the goal to bring together the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians, who will decide their negotiation representatives and define their negotiation positions so as to enable the political process to begin, taking note of the meetings in Moscow and Cairo and other initiatives to this end, and noting in particular the usefulness of the meeting in Riyadh on 9-11 December 2015, whose outcomes contribute to the preparation of negotiations under UN auspices on a political settlement of the conflict, in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué and the “Vienna Statements”, and looking forward to the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Syria finalizing efforts to this end,

1. Reconfirms its endorsement of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, endorses the “Vienna Statements” in pursuit of the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria, and stresses that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria;
2. Requests the Secretary-General, through his good offices and the efforts of his Special Envoy for Syria, to convene representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition to engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process on an urgent basis, with a target of early January 2016 for the initiation of talks, pursuant to the Geneva Communiqué, consistent with the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement, with a view to a lasting political settlement of the crisis;
3. Acknowledges the role of the ISSG as the central platform to facilitate the United Nations’ efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria;
4. Expresses its support, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement;
5. Acknowledges the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process, pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and that both initiatives should move ahead expeditiously, and in this regard expresses its support for a nationwide ceasefire in Syria, which the ISSG has committed to support and assist in implementing, to come into effect as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards a political transition under UN auspices, on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement, and to do so on an urgent basis;

6. Requests the Secretary-General to lead the effort, through the office of his Special Envoy and in consultation with relevant parties, to determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire as well as continue planning for the support of ceasefire implementation, and urges Member States, in particular members of the ISSG, to support and accelerate all efforts to achieve a ceasefire, including through pressing all relevant parties to agree and adhere to such a ceasefire;

7. Emphasizes the need for a ceasefire monitoring, verification and reporting mechanism, requests the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council on options for such a mechanism that it can support, as soon as possible and no later than one month after the adoption of this resolution, and encourages Member States, including members of the Security Council, to provide assistance, including through expertise and in-kind contributions, to support such a mechanism;

8. Reiterates its call in resolution 2249 (2015) for Member States to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh), Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda or ISIL, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council, and as may further be agreed by the ISSG and determined by the Security Council, pursuant to the Statement of the ISSG of 14 November 2015, and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Syria, and notes that the aforementioned ceasefire will not apply to offensive or defensive actions against these individuals, groups, undertakings and entities, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement;

9. Welcomes the effort that was conducted by the government of Jordan to help develop a common understanding within the ISSG of individuals and groups for possible determination as terrorists and will consider expeditiously the recommendation of the ISSG for the purpose of determining terrorist groups;

10. Emphasizes the need for all parties in Syria to take confidence building measures to contribute to the viability of a political process and a lasting ceasefire, and calls on all states to use their influence with the government of Syria and the Syrian opposition to advance the peace process, confidence building measures and steps towards a ceasefire;

11. Requests the Secretary-General to report to the Council, as soon as possible and no later than one month after the adoption of this resolution, on options for further confidence building measures;

12. Calls on the parties to immediately allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria by most direct routes, allow immediate, humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need, in particular in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas release any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, calls on ISSG states to use their influence immediately to these ends, and demands the full implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and any other applicable resolutions;

13. Demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment, welcomes the commitment by the ISSG to press the parties in this regard, and further demands that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable;

14. Underscores the critical need to build conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas and the rehabilitation of affected areas, in accordance with international law, including applicable provisions of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and taking into account the interests of those countries hosting refugees, urges Member States to provide assistance in this regard, looks forward to the London Conference on Syria in February 2016, hosted by the United Kingdom, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations, as an important contribution to this endeavor, and further expresses its support to the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Syria;

15. Requests that the Secretary-General report back to the Security Council on the implementation of this resolution, including on progress of the UN-facilitated political process, within 60 days;

16. Decides to remain actively seized of the matter.

APPENDIX 5

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2449 (2018)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 8423rd meeting, on 13 December 2018

The Security Council,

Recalling its resolutions 2042 (2012), 2043 (2012), 2118 (2013), 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2175 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2209 (2015), 2235 (2015), 2254 (2015), 2258 (2015), 2268 (2016), 2286 (2016), 2332 (2016), 2336 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) and its Presidential Statements of 3 August 2011 (S/PRST/2011/16), 21 March 2012 (S/PRST/2012/6), 5 April 2012 (S/PRST/2012/10), 2 October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15), 24 April 2015 (S/PRST/2015/10) and 17 August 2015 (S/PRST/2015/15),

Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations,

Expressing outrage at the unacceptable level of violence and the killing of hundreds of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of child casualties, as a result of the Syrian conflict,

Reiterating its grave distress at the continued devastating humanitarian situation in Syria and at the fact that urgent humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance, is required by more than 13 million people in Syria, of whom 6.2 million are internally displaced, including Palestine refugees, and more than 1 million people are still living in hard-to-reach areas,

Gravely concerned at the insufficient implementation of its resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) and recalling in this regard the legal obligations of all parties under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as well as all the relevant decisions of the Security Council, including by ceasing all attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including those involving attacks on schools and medical facilities, the indiscriminate use of weapons, including artillery, barrel bombs and air strikes, indiscriminate shelling by mortars, car bombs, suicide attacks and tunnel bombs, as well as the widespread use of torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary executions, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as all grave violations and abuses committed against children,

Noting the progress made in taking back areas of Syria from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Daesh) and Al-Nusrah Front (ANF) but expressing its grave concern that areas remain under their control and about the negative impact of their presence, violent extremist ideology and actions on stability in Syria and the region, including the devastating humanitarian impact on the civilian populations which has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, reaffirming its resolve to address all aspects of the threat posed by ISIL (also known as Daesh), ANF and all other

individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, as determined by the United Nations Security Council and as may further be agreed by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and endorsed by the UN Security Council and calling for the full implementation of Security Council resolutions 2170 (2014), 2178 (2014), 2199 (2015), 2249 (2015), 2253 (2015), 2347 (2017), 2354 (2017), 2368 (2017) and 2370 (2017),

Expressing grave concern also at the movement of foreign terrorist fighters and other terrorists and terrorist groups into and out of Syria and reiterating its call on all States to take steps, consistent with international law, to prevent and suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with ISIL or Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, as determined by the United Nations Security Council, and as may further be agreed by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and endorsed by the UN Security Council,

Reaffirming that Member States must ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law,

Reaffirming the primary responsibility of the Syrian authorities to protect the population in Syria and reiterating that parties to armed conflict must take all feasible steps to protect civilians and recalling in this regard its demand that all parties to armed conflict comply fully with the obligations applicable to them under international law related to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, including journalists, media professionals and associated personnel,

Reiterating its strong condemnation of all forms of violence and intimidation to which those participating in humanitarian operations are continue to be exposed, as well as attacks on humanitarian convoys and acts of destruction and looting of their assets and its urging of all parties involved in an armed conflict to promote the safety, security and freedom of movement of humanitarian personnel, including medical personnel and humanitarian personnel exclusively engaged in medical duties and United Nations and its associated personnel and their assets, expressing its ongoing admiration at the dedication and commitment of the Syrian Red Crescent volunteers and other humanitarian workers operating in deeply challenging conditions and urging all parties to take all appropriate steps to ensure the safety and security of United Nations and associated personnel, those of its specialised agencies and all other personnel engaged in humanitarian relief activities,

Noting that the United Nations and their implementing partners reached on average 5.4 million people with humanitarian aid each month in 2018 and that life-saving assistance delivered across borders represented a vital part of this, including the delivery of food assistance for on average 1 million people every month in 2018; and since the start of operations in 2014, non-food items for 6 million people; health assistance through 25 million treatments and water and sanitation supplies for over 5 million people,

Reiterating its grave concern at all instances of hindrances to the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance, noting that ISIL (also known as Daesh), ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, are hindering the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance and are responsible for preventing aid delivery through deliberate interference and obstruction,

Reiterating further its grave concern at the continuing impediments to the delivery of sustained, needs-based humanitarian assistance across the country through the most direct routes, including to hard-to-reach areas and across conflict lines,

Expressing grave concern that access to medical care continues to be severely restricted and reiterating the need to respect the principle of medical neutrality, facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment, transport and supplies, including surgical items,

Reaffirming the need to support the United Nations and their implementing partners in their efforts to expand the delivery of humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need in Syria and further reaffirming its decision in resolution 2165 (2014) that all Syrian parties to the conflict shall enable the immediate and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance directly to people throughout Syria, by the United Nations and their implementing partners, on the basis of United Nations assessments of need and devoid of any political prejudices and aims, including by immediately removing all impediments to the provision of humanitarian assistance,

Taking note of the report of the Secretary-General of 19 June 2018 (S/2018/617) on the Review of the United Nations Cross-Border Operations and further taking note of ongoing efforts to implement the recommendations contained therein, and stressing the need to ensure that the delivery of humanitarian aid and services, including at the stage of distribution, is impartial, non-discriminatory and needs-based and that those most in need are beneficiaries of such aid and services, without misappropriation,

Expressing its appreciation for the work of the United Nations monitoring mechanism in monitoring shipments and confirming their humanitarian nature, in accordance with resolutions 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017) and commending the mechanism's efforts in facilitating cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid by the United Nations and their implementing partners, emphasising the importance to further robust monitoring of the humanitarian nature of UN relief consignments and their delivery inside Syria and encouraging the United Nations and their implementing partners to continue to take steps to scale up humanitarian deliveries throughout the country, notably into hard-to-reach areas,

Reiterating the need for all parties to respect and uphold the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law and the United Nations guiding principles of humanitarian emergency assistance, emphasising the importance of upholding the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, in the provision of humanitarian assistance and recalling also the importance of humanitarian deliveries reaching their intended beneficiaries,

Noting the role that ceasefire agreements which are consistent with humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law can play in facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance in order to help save civilian lives, reiterating its call upon all parties to respect and fulfil their commitments to existing ceasefire agreements, as well as the full implementation of resolution 2268 (2016) and 2401 (2018), as a step towards a comprehensive nation-wide ceasefire and emphasising that humanitarian access must be part of these efforts in accordance with international humanitarian law,

Expressing grave concern at the more than 5.6 million refugees, including more than 4.2 million women and children, who have fled Syria as a result of ongoing violence,

Reiterating its deep appreciation for the significant and admirable efforts that have been made by the countries of the region, notably Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, to accommodate Syrian refugees and mindful of the immense costs and social challenges incurred by these countries as a consequence of the crisis,

Recalling the need to create conditions throughout the country and facilitate the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas in Syria, in accordance with international law, including applicable provisions of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, taking into account the interests of those countries hosting refugees,

Calling upon the international community to increase their assistance to Syria by providing additional humanitarian aid, noting with concern that the international response to the Syrian and regional crisis continues to fall short of meeting the needs as assessed by host governments and the United Nations, therefore urging once again all Member States, based on burden-sharing principles, to support the United Nations and the countries of the region, including by adopting medium and long-term responses to alleviate the impact on communities, providing increased, flexible and predictable funding as well as increasing resettlement efforts and noting the second conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region held in Brussels in April 2018, co-chaired by the European Union and the United Nations,

Calling for humanitarian mine action to be accelerated as a matter of urgency throughout Syria,

Strongly condemning the arbitrary detention and torture of individuals in Syria, notably in prisons and detention facilities, as well as the kidnappings, abductions, hostage-taking and forced disappearances and demanding the immediate end of these practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons starting with women and children, as well as sick, wounded, persons with disabilities and elderly persons and United Nations and humanitarian personnel and journalists,

Noting with grave concern that impunity in Syria contributes to widespread violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law, stressing the need to end impunity for these violations and abuses and re-emphasising in this regard that those who have committed or are otherwise responsible for such violations and abuses in Syria must be brought to justice,

Emphasising that the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate further in the absence of a political solution to the Syrian conflict in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and calling upon all parties to make progress in this regard and to undertake confidence-building measures and recognising the efforts by the Office of the UN Special Envoy and the international community, including within the Astana framework, to advance the early release of any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, and handover of the bodies as well as the identification of missing persons,

Determining that the devastating humanitarian situation in Syria continues to constitute a threat to peace and security in the region,

Underscoring that Member States are obligated under Article 25 of the Charter of the United Nations to accept and carry out the Council's decisions,

1. Calls upon all parties to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2019;
2. Reiterates its demand that all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable and further demands the full and immediate implementation of all provisions of all relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) and recalls that some of the violations and abuses committed in Syria may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity;
3. Decides to renew the decisions in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Security Council resolution 2165 (2014) for a further period of twelve months, that is, until 10 January 2020;
4. Further demands that all parties allow safe, unimpeded and sustained access for United Nations' and their implementing partners' humanitarian convoys, including medical and surgical supplies, to all requested areas and populations according to United Nations' assessment of need in all parts of Syria;
5. Reiterates that the situation will continue to deteriorate further in the absence of a political solution to the Syrian conflict and recalls its demand for the full and immediate implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) to facilitate a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition, in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué as set forth in the ISSG Statements, in order to end the conflict in Syria and stresses again that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria;
6. Requests the Secretary-General to brief the Council monthly and to provide a report on a regular basis, at least every 60 days, on the implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and this resolution and on compliance by all relevant parties in Syria and further requests the Secretary-General to continue to include in his reports overall trends in UN cross-line and cross-border humanitarian access and detailed information on the humanitarian assistance delivered through UN humanitarian

cross-border operations as authorised by resolution 2165 (2014), including on the number of beneficiaries, locations of aid deliveries at district-level and the volume and nature of items delivered;

7. Reaffirms that it will take further measures under the Charter of the United Nations in the event of non-compliance with this resolution or resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018);

8. Decides to remain actively seized of the matter.

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SYRIA STUDY GROUP

In October 2018, the Syria Study Group was established by law to examine and make recommendations to Congress on the United States' military and diplomatic strategy in Syria. Specifically, Members of Congress sought a bipartisan review and assessment of U.S. objectives and a strategy going forward. Congress designated the United States Institute of Peace to facilitate the Group based on the Institute's demonstrated expertise in convening Congressionally directed study groups. Over the course of several months, the Syria Study Group met with current and former U.S. government officials, foreign governments, Congressional offices, international and regional organizations, academic institutions and think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and Syrian American and Syrian nongovernmental organizations. Members of the Group met in Washington, DC, traveled to the Middle East, and engaged the U.S. military in Tampa during their review of U.S. objectives and the desired end state in Syria.



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