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# Rethinking Stabilization in Eastern Syria: Toward a Human Security Framework

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Steven Heydemann





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Cover: Syrian schoolchildren walk as U.S. troops patrol near Turkish border in Hasakah, Syria November 4, 2018.  
REUTERS/Rodi Said

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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|                                                          |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Overview                                                 | 2  |
| Syria’s Endgame and US Stabilization Operations          | 3  |
| Map of control of Syrian territory as of November, 2018  | 4  |
| The Humanitarian/Economic Toll of the Syrian Conflict    | 6  |
| Syrian Conflict Stabilization/Early Recovery Funding     | 8  |
| Conclusion: The Future of Stabilization in Eastern Syria | 20 |
| About the Author                                         | 21 |

## OVERVIEW

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Syria's conflict now confronts the United States with a crucial moment. Only two areas of the country remain out of the control of the Bashar al-Assad regime, and the United States maintains a military presence in both. Further territorial gains by the regime and its key allies, Russia and Iran, pose the risk of direct confrontation with the United States. In response, after years in which the United States pursued a policy of disengagement on Syria, the Donald Trump administration is now changing course. It hopes to use the presence of US forces to regain leverage to shape the closing phases of the conflict and influence the path of any potential political settlement. It has identified three ambitious aims for its policy in Syria: to reduce Iran's presence and influence, to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and prevent its resurgence, and to achieve an "irreversible" political transition in Syria.

As this policy takes shape, however, the administration has weakened a core pillar of leverage: the US role in stabilization and reconstruction in eastern Syria. The Trump administration has adopted a minimalist approach to stabilization in eastern Syria, eliminating \$200 million in funding for stabilization programs. Such an approach is deeply counterproductive. It conflicts with current US stabilization doctrine, undermines topline US policy aims, and contributes to conditions on the ground that support the resurgence of violent extremism.

To improve its odds of success in Syria, the United States will need to adopt a broader approach to stabilization, and fund it accordingly. Such an approach requires that strengthening human security in US areas

of operation be defined as the principal objective of US stabilization operations. To make this shift, the United States will need to bring its stabilization operations in Syria into line with current US doctrine, which emphasizes the importance of supporting locally legitimate political institutions able to provide effective governance and ensure local security.<sup>1</sup>

Such a shift will not be simple, or straightforward. It will require significant changes in how the United States operates on the ground in eastern Syria, notably with regard to its partnership with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Rather than delegate authority over local governance of Arab-majority areas to the SDF—which has governed in a heavy-handed fashion, fueling local grievances—the United States needs to adopt a broader view of what it means to work “by, with, and through” local actors, and transfer governance from the SDF to locally legitimate authorities.<sup>2</sup>

The use of stabilization efforts to strengthen local governance offers the potential for important gains, both for residents of eastern Syria and for US policy. In the short term, it would strengthen the US position in eastern Syria, provide a more robust basis for pursuing topline US policy goals, and mitigate local grievances that contribute to future radicalization. In the longer term, it would provide local communities with more representative political institutions, reduce incentives for local elites to collaborate with the Assad regime as a counterweight to the SDF, and equip communities to more effectively navigate the eventual reimposition of regime control over Syria's eastern province by creating conditions favorable to enhanced local autonomy.

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1 US Department of State, “Briefing on Syria Meeting and U.S. Strategy,” September 27, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/09/286289.htm>.

2 “By, with, and through” military doctrine refers to operations conducted by partners, combined with US forces, in the context of unconventional warfare. For background on the doctrine in the context of Syria, see Linda Robinson, “SOF’s Evolving Role: Warfare ‘By, With, and Through’ Local Forces,” *Cipher Brief*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/sofs-evolving-role-warfare-by-with-and-through-local-forces>.

# SYRIA'S ENDGAME AND US STABILIZATION OPERATIONS

With the fall of southern Syria to the Assad regime in July 2018, Syria's eight-year conflict has entered a new phase. The regime's gains in the south represent more than just another notch in Assad's victory belt. They left only two remaining areas of the country outside the regime's control: a zone in northwest Syria—where Turkey has established a military presence with its “Euphrates Shield” and “Olive Branch” operations, and where the United States has small, but strategically important, positions in the town of Manbij—and a zone running across northeast and eastern Syria in the provinces of Hasaka, Raqqqa, and Deir Ezzour, from which the United States conducts most of its operations against ISIS.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, for the first time since the onset of armed conflict, any further regime advances risk direct confrontation with US and Turkish forces.<sup>4</sup>

The next phases of the conflict, and the terms of a possible political settlement including the future integrity of the Syrian state, are now directly connected to what the United States does on the ground, and whether it effectively uses its presence to advance its larger diplomatic and political aims. Recent developments have raised the stakes of the US presence in Syria, but have also increased the potential risks of uncertainty about the purposes of its role, its intentions, and its longer-term goals.

Such uncertainty has been a hallmark of US engagement in Syria since 2011. From the beginning of the conflict, US policy has been marred by ambiguity, and a sharp disconnect between its stated objectives and the resources allocated to achieve them. Under the Trump administration, this uncertainty has deepened. The aims of US engagement in Syria have expanded,

yet statements from officials have sown confusion about every aspect of US strategy. The administration's goals now include not only defeating ISIS and stabilizing areas it once held to prevent its return—the core objectives of the US presence in Syria since 2015—but also achieving an irreversible political transition and reducing Iran's presence and influence in the country.

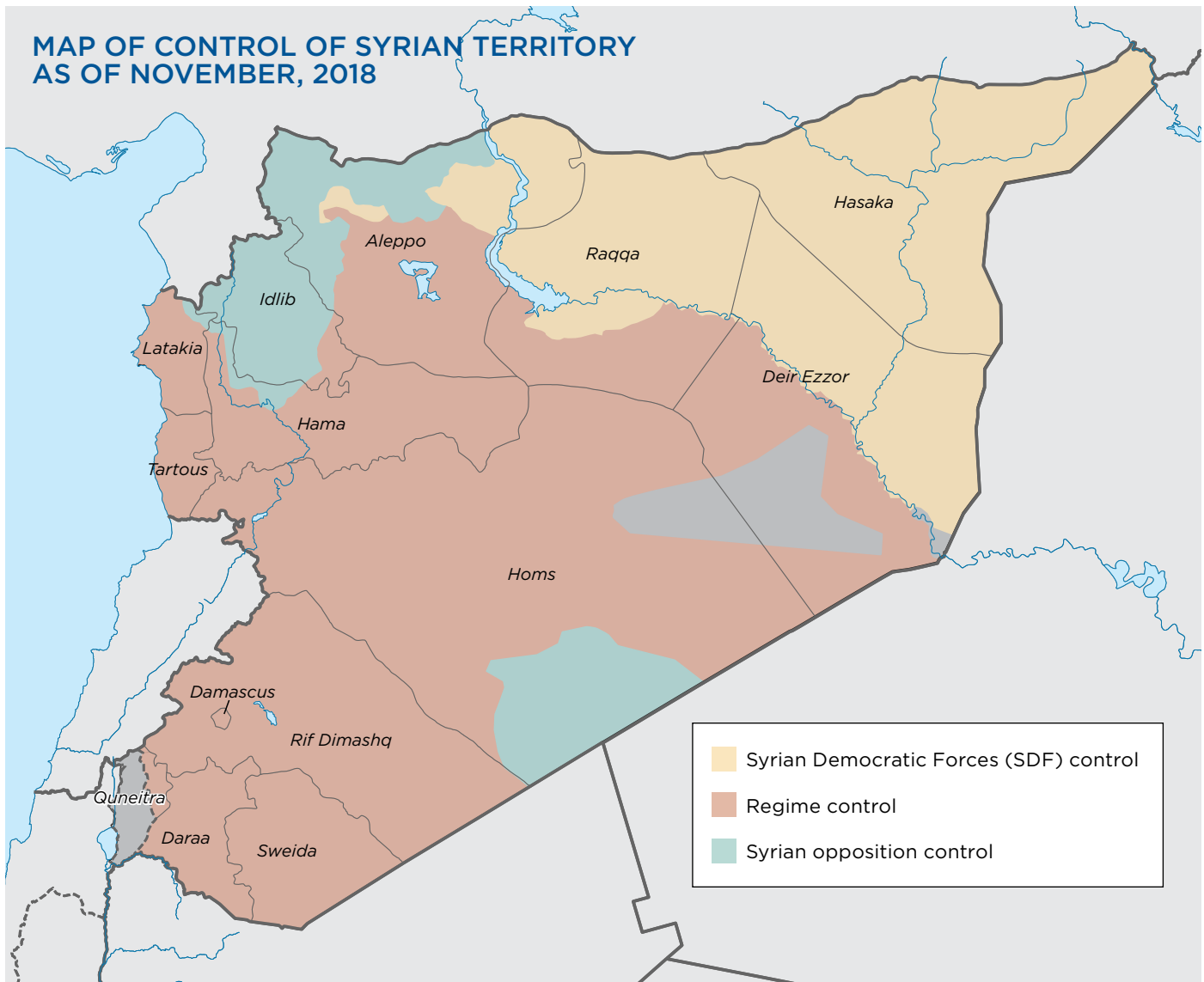
How the United States intends to achieve these goals, however, is as murky today as it was throughout the Barack Obama administration. Despite recent indications that the United States is no longer planning a rapid pullout from Syria, its commitment to maintaining a troop presence remains uncertain, thrown into doubt by the president's interest in a rapid end to the deployment.<sup>5</sup> The role of US forces in rolling back Iranian influence is also undefined, as is the strategy through which the United States will pursue a political transition, and how US forces on the ground will advance this aim. And, while the stabilization of areas once held by ISIS is a key priority, funding allocated to the State Department to support stabilization programs has been eliminated.<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and European governments are now filling the gap. This uncertainty and incoherence have already imposed significant costs on the United States, eroding partnerships with local actors and weakening US credibility with key Syrian, European, and regional partners. Observers might be forgiven for wondering what, precisely, the United States is up to in Syria, and how these pieces fit together to advance a coherent set of overarching objectives. With the Assad regime's recent advances, moreover, conditions on the ground now demand clarity about the Trump administration's aims and priorities in Syria.

<sup>3</sup> For a map of locations of US forces as of spring 2018, see Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Jeremy White, and David Bott, “The U.S. Has Troops in Syria. So Do the Russians and Iranians. Here's Where,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/11/world/middleeast/syria-military-us-russia-iran.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Harris with Jennifer Cafarella, “Update: Pro-Regime Forces Setting Conditions to Attack U.S. Forces in Eastern Syria,” Institute for the Study of War, August 31, 2018, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/08/update-pro-regime-forces-setting.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Elise Labott, “US Envoy to Syria Says US Will Stay Until There is an ‘Enduring Defeat’ of ISIS,” CNN, September 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/06/politics/us-envoy-syria-enduring-defeat/index.html>; Karen DeYoung and Shane Harris, “Trump Instructs Military to Begin Planning for Withdrawal from Syria,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-instructs-military-to-begin-planning-for-withdrawal-from-syria/2018/04/04/1039f420-3811-11e8-8fd2-49fe3c675a89\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1c4bcb993086](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-instructs-military-to-begin-planning-for-withdrawal-from-syria/2018/04/04/1039f420-3811-11e8-8fd2-49fe3c675a89_story.html?utm_term=.1c4bcb993086); Tim Haines, “Defense Secretary Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dunford Press Briefing,” *RealClearPolitics*, August 28, 2018, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/08/28/defense\\_secretary\\_mattis\\_and\\_chairman\\_of\\_the\\_joint\\_chiefs\\_of\\_staff\\_dunford\\_press\\_briefing.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/08/28/defense_secretary_mattis_and_chairman_of_the_joint_chiefs_of_staff_dunford_press_briefing.html).

<sup>6</sup> Emily Burchfield, “Has the US Given Up on Stabilization Efforts in Syria?” *Syria Source* (blog), Atlantic Council, September 10, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/has-the-us-given-up-stabilization-efforts-in-syria>.



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## US Policy and the Role of Stabilization in Eastern Syria

Questions about where stabilization in eastern Syria fits in the larger scheme of US policy loom especially large. With the collapse of ISIS, stabilization efforts have emerged as a main pillar of US operations in eastern Syria.<sup>7</sup> Yet, even as it becomes a centerpiece of an ambitious US policy, stabilization has been framed in the narrowest possible terms, and organized along lines that signal the limits of US engagement.

Stabilization is presented as an explicit alternative to larger-scale, and more costly, reconstruction efforts, or to activities that might be seen as implying an indefinite US presence in the country. These include support for the development of local governance institutions in Arab-majority areas of eastern Syria—as opposed to institutions dominated by the Kurdish-led SDF—or the parallel development of locally controlled security and justice sectors in such areas. Emphasizing the limits of US engagement, Brett McGurk, US special envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, has stressed

<sup>7</sup> US Embassy in Syria, “Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts To Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS,” August 17, 2018, <https://sy.usembassy.gov/briefing-on-the-status-of-syria-stabilization-assistance-and-ongoing-efforts-to-achieve-an-enduring-defeat-of-isis/>.



that “[s]tabilization is not nation-building. We’re not attempting to dictate political outcomes nor is it long-term reconstruction where projects are chosen by outsiders often with no connection to the local community costing and often wasting billions of dollars. Instead, stabilization is a low-cost, sustainable, citizen-driven effort to identify the key projects that are essential to returning people to their homes such as water pumps, electricity nodes, grain silos, and local security structures, local police.”<sup>8</sup>

“A renewal of funding for stabilization is essential for the United States to achieve its aims in eastern Syria; however, the principal shortcomings of the policy are not budgetary.”

McGurk’s caution about the use and abuse of reconstruction is not inappropriate. The US track record in post-conflict reconstruction is sufficient to give any informed observer pause; the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq are reason enough to be leery. Nonetheless, the current, rigidly defined, and tightly constrained US approach to stabilization is deeply problematic. In so sharply limiting the scope of its activities, the Trump administration is reproducing the defining flaw of US Syria policy since 2011: aspirational aims with inadequate resources. Whether the main purpose of stabilization is to improve the conditions that promote radicalization and stem the resurgence of ISIS, or to advance the goals of a political transition and a reduction in Iran’s influence, a more flexible, locally driven, and better-funded approach will be needed.

A renewal of funding for stabilization is essential for the United States to achieve its aims in eastern Syria; however, the principal shortcomings of the policy are not budgetary. With its current approach, the United States is missing an opportunity to use both stabilization and reconstruction more effectively, in two critical ways. First, the current approach fails by not using stabilization programs as a means to strengthen

human security in US areas of operation, neglecting the opportunity to assist in developing governance frameworks that protect civilians rather than threaten them. In delegating local governance in eastern Syria to a Kurdish-led force, the Syrian Democratic Forces—and in its reluctance to use stabilization to support the development of locally legitimate governance bodies in Arab-majority areas—the United States is increasing the likelihood of a political future in which citizens remain vulnerable to the authority of unjust, abusive state institutions.

Second, current stabilization strategy fails to advance the larger diplomatic and strategic purposes of US policy, particularly its commitment to an “irreversible political transition” in Syria. Even in the context of a limited time horizon for US forces, much can be done to expand possibilities for meaningful decentralization in Syria—a plausible element of what a Syrian political transition might entail—by enabling local communities in areas of US operations to navigate the eventual departure of US forces, and the likely restoration of the Assad regime as the sovereign authority in eastern and northeastern provinces. Overcoming these issues, however, requires: greater clarity about the US commitment to maintaining its presence in eastern Syria; a stabilization strategy that more directly addresses the concerns of Arab-majority communities; a more flexible use of the “by, with, and through,” strategy the United States has adopted in these areas; and a willingness to invest the resources such a strategy will require.

The initial step toward such a strategy demands nothing more than applying the US government’s definition of stabilization. The Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR)—a major assessment and updating of stabilization doctrine, released in June 2018—defined stabilization as “an inherently political endeavor that requires aligning U.S. Government efforts—diplomatic engagement, foreign assistance, and defense—toward supporting locally legitimate authorities and systems to peaceably manage conflict and prevent violence.”<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on the political character of stabilization does not mean “dictating political outcomes.” Rather, it acknowledges that stabilization cannot be detached from issues of governance, the effectiveness of political institutions, and the quality of relations between citizens and legitimate local authorities. It recognizes that effective stabilization requires functioning justice

8 US Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Mattis, General Dunford and Special Envoy McGurk on the Campaign to Defeat ISIS in the Pentagon Press Briefing Room,” May 19, 2017, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1188225/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretarymattis-general-dunford-and-sp/>.

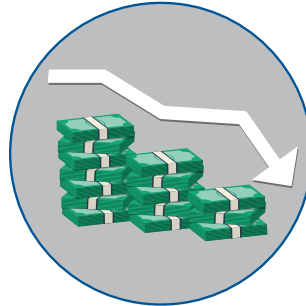
9 US Department of State, US Department of Defense, US Agency for International Development, press release, “Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas,” June 19, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/283334.htm>.

# The Humanitarian/Economic Toll of the Syrian Conflict

The conflict has killed more than 470,000 Syrians, the last comprehensive number accepted internationally. Of note that this number was issued in 2016, and since then most international monitoring groups have essentially stopped counting.<sup>1</sup>



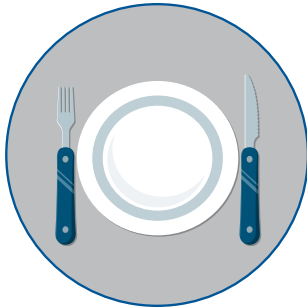
Over 11 million Syrians have been displaced internally or made refugees, half the pre-war population.<sup>2, 3</sup>



From 2011 to 2016, cumulative GDP loss is estimated at \$226 billion.<sup>4</sup>



UN ESCWA concluded that the volume of destruction of Syria's physical capital and its sectoral distribution exceeds \$388 billion.<sup>5</sup>



5.5 million Syrians remain food insecure and require some form of food assistance.<sup>6</sup>



Unemployment rate is estimated at about 50%, and is the main concern internally displaced Syrians list as a constraint to returns.<sup>7</sup>



6.1 million children and adolescents are in need of education assistance, including 1.75 million children who dropped out of school.<sup>8</sup>

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-death-toll.html>

2 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66538>

3 <http://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/02/Syria-Fact-Sheet-2017-2018.pdf>

4 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview>

5 <https://www.unescwa.org/news/syrian-experts-discuss-post-conflict-reconstruction-policies-after-political-agreement-syria>

6 <https://www.wfp.org/content/syrian-arab-republic-faowfp-crop-and-food-security-assessment-mission-october-2018>

7 <https://www.wfp.org/content/syrian-arab-republic-faowfp-crop-and-food-security-assessment-mission-october-2018>

8 <http://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/06/UNHCR-Syrias-End-of-Year-Report-2017.pdf>

institutions and security frameworks that local communities view as legitimate; without which, “managing conflict” cannot happen. It also makes clear that stabilization cannot be detached from subsequent phases of post-conflict recovery, including reconstruction, and that how stabilization is managed in the near term has long-term consequences for the stability and security of local communities.

“A second critical step is similarly straightforward, yet no less challenging: avoid repeating past mistakes in the design and implementation of stabilization programs.”

A second critical step is similarly straightforward, yet no less challenging: avoid repeating past mistakes in the design and implementation of stabilization programs.<sup>10</sup> By linking stabilization to an integrated Syria strategy, the United States can reduce the likelihood of reproducing the disconnect between its top-down diplomatic and strategic efforts and its field-based operations, which became a hallmark of US programs in Idlib and other opposition-held areas in the northwest.<sup>11</sup> With little clarity about the aims of US policy in Syria and a lack of coherence in its engagement with the opposition, field operations evolved in response to urgent needs among civilian populations, but with little relation to an overarching policy.

These two steps would require significant changes in how the United States undertakes stabilization operations in Syria. Yet, they offer an opportunity for stabilization to advance broader policy objectives. These

include preventing the resurgence of post-Caliphate ISIS, an outcome that remains in doubt. They also include building local capacity for, and putting the foundations in place for, a decentralized political framework that could become a critical piece of the larger political transition the United States still hopes to see in Syria, and ease the eventual reintegration of eastern provinces into the Syrian state.<sup>12</sup> As currently configured, US stabilization efforts in the Jazirah are poorly designed to play this role. Rather than integrate stabilization into topline diplomacy, the United States limits the scope of its engagement, rejects potential initiatives that might be viewed as support for reconstruction—or, even worse, nation building—and outsources even the modest costs of small-scale stabilization programs to other members of the anti-ISIS coalition, further curtailing its influence on the ground. The US approach has seemingly been constructed with one eye on the political winds blowing from the Trump White House and the other on the likelihood that the time horizon of the US presence in Syria will be limited, and will almost inevitably be followed by the forced reintegration of Syria’s eastern provinces into a unitary Syrian state under the Assad regime’s control.

Such an approach is short-sighted and counterproductive. It virtually guarantees the failure of both the short-term objectives that define the current approach to stabilization, and the longer-term aims of US policy. As designed, US efforts will do little to address, and may well contribute to, conditions that will facilitate the return of ISIS in a new form. They will exacerbate dysfunctional patterns of local governance that have taken hold in areas under US control, where the SDF governs as the implementing arm of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). They will also encourage attempts by the Assad regime to disrupt stability in areas of US operations, and erode prospects that local actors in the eastern provinces will be able to shape the terms of their eventual reintegration into a regime-dominated Syrian state.

10 Critical assessments of US stabilization efforts in Syria highlight significant deficiencies, and are consistent in identifying the integration of stabilization into coherent, integrated diplomatic and strategic frameworks as essential to the success of both. See Frances Z. Brown, “Seeing Like a State-builder: Replication of Donor Reconstruction Dilemmas in Syria,” *The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, 2018), <https://pomeps.org/2018/09/07/pomeps-studies-30-the-politics-of-post-conflict-reconstruction/>; Matt Freear, *Syria Stabilization and Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: American Security Project, 2016), <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/white-paper-syrian-stabilization-and-reconstruction/>; Mona Yacoubian, *Lessons Learned for Stabilization in Syria* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2014), <https://www.stimson.org/content/lessons-learned-stabilization-syria-2/>; and Anthony H. Cordesman, “Stability Operations in Syria: The Need for a Revolution in Civil-Military Affairs,” *Military Review*, May-June, 2017, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2017/Stability-Operations-in-Syria/>.

11 Frances Z. Brown, *Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/26/dilemmas-of-stabilization-assistance-case-of-syria-pub-77574/>; Melissa Dalton and Frances Z. Brown, “Don’t Give Up Yet: There’s Still a Chance to Salvage Eastern Syria,” *CSIS Briefs* (blog), Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 9, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/dont-give-yet-theres-still-chance-salvage-eastern-syria>.

12 Hassan Hassan, “ISIS is Ready for a Resurgence,” *Atlantic*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/baghdadi-recording-iraq-syria-terrorism/568471/>.

# Syrian Conflict Stabilization/ Early Recovery Funding



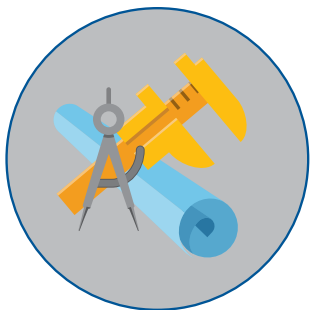
Since 2011, the United States and other Western donors have provided over \$1 billion in politically oriented assistance to local councils in opposition-held areas.<sup>1</sup>



The US has provided \$900 million in non-lethal and stabilization assistance to Syria.<sup>2</sup>



The European Union and member states have provided 3.4 billion euros in non-humanitarian aid.<sup>3</sup>



After redirecting \$230 million in stabilization funds for Syria to other policy priorities, the US elicited around \$300 million in contributions from other countries.



Countries in the region have stepped up burden-sharing, with Saudi Arabia contributing \$100 million and the UAE contributing \$50 million to US-led stabilization efforts.<sup>4</sup>



However, Western countries are withholding funds for reconstruction until a political transition occurs.<sup>5</sup>

1 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/26/dilemmas-of-stabilization-assistance-case-of-syria-pub-77574>  
2 <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/isp-i-18-29.pdf>  
3 [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/22664/eu-and-crisis-syria\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/22664/eu-and-crisis-syria_en)  
4 <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285198.htm>  
5 <https://apnews.com/6fa0762530274c48937817d77a10c7e8>

## Legacies of the Past and the Shadow of the Future

Two critical factors set the stage for these outcomes; neither can be addressed by the current US approach to stabilization. The first concerns legacies of the past: the

impact of the Syrian conflict on longstanding patterns of governance and intercommunal relations in Syria's east. In these thinly populated and overwhelmingly agricultural areas, local security, state-society relations, and intercommunal relations—including often-fraught ties between Kurdish and Arab communities—were

heavily mediated by tribal authorities.<sup>13</sup> Since 2011, however, prewar governance frameworks have been upended. Tribal identities vary enormously in the extent to which they influence behavior and political loyalties.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, as protests escalated across Syria in 2011, the affinities and standing of tribal elders have been sharply eroded as the communities splintered among pro-regime loyalists—often drawn from tribal elites who benefitted from their ties to the regime—and supporters of the opposition who were concentrated among younger, better-educated segments of local populations.

Both the regime and the opposition have sought to mobilize tribes to strengthen their positions in the Jazirah region in Syria's northeast. The Assad regime appointed loyalist tribal leaders to key positions, established pro-regime tribal militias, and exploited longstanding patronage networks to enlist the support of tribes. In parallel, the opposition cultivated anti-regime elites, supported the emergence of anti-regime tribal militias, and worked to unify supportive tribes through events such as the Conference of Arab Tribes in Istanbul and Cairo.<sup>15</sup> In December 2017, pro-opposition tribal leaders met in Istanbul for the first general conference of the Supreme Council of Syrian Tribes, followed by conferences of opposition representatives in Aleppo and Idlib.<sup>16</sup> Urban areas where protests were most intense, such as the Baba Amr district of Homs, were home to large tribal networks as a result of decades of rural-urban migration. As these residents

organized, joined protests, and experienced regime violence, loyalist-opposition splits within tribal networks extended eastward—and became more pronounced.

The appearance of ISIS dramatically, and violently, exacerbated these divisions. ISIS demanded the allegiance of Syrian tribes, and recruited actively among young men in Raqqqa and Deir Ezzour provinces. Resistance was met by extraordinary brutality, including the mass murder of some seven hundred members of the al-Sheitat tribe in Deir Ezzour in August 2014 (replicating a tactic used to quash tribal resistance in Iraq).<sup>17</sup> Yet, ISIS found adherents within eastern tribes, including among men who had been exposed to Salafist variants of Islam through labor migration to Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup> Those members of tribes who joined the Islamic State and survived the military operations of the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS have largely been repudiated by tribal leaders. Yet, the strains and suspicion resulting from the ISIS period linger, corroding kinship bonds and contributing to the ability of ISIS to regroup in the former territory of the Caliphate.<sup>19</sup>

The onset of armed conflict, and the later rise of ISIS in the Jazirah region, also fueled longstanding tensions between Arabs and Kurds, but in forms that reflected the impact of Syria's uprising in generating new alliances and enmities. Kurdish political actors, notably, the PYD and the far weaker Kurdish National Council (KNC), occupied an ambivalent position in the Syrian uprising. Neither the opposition, dominated by Arab

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- 13 Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control," *Middle East Journal* vol. 64 no. 1, Winter 2010, pp. 29-49, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20622981?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20622981?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents). See also Akil Hussein, "Division Defines Syria's Tribes and Clans," Chatham House, January 2018, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/division-defines-syrias-tribes-and-clans>; Andrew Tabler (ed.), "Eyeing Raqqqa: A Tale of Four Tribes" *Policy Note* 38 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/eyeing-raqqqa-a-tale-of-four-tribes>; and Andrew Table (ed.), "A Tale of Six Tribes: Securing the Middle Euphrates River Valley" *Policy Note* 52 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-tale-of-six-tribes-securing-the-middle-euphrates-river-valley>.
- 14 On the use and abuse of tribes and tribalism as frameworks for understanding social and political dynamics in eastern Syria, and on relations between local actors in Raqqqa province and the Assad regime, see Annika Rabo, "Regional Politics and *Shawai'a* Identities in the Raqqqa Province," unpublished manuscript presented at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting, 2017.
- 15 The Assad regime has also constituted tribal conferences, militias, and other groupings. On pro-regime tribal militias, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir: Tribal Auxiliary Forces of the Military Intelligence," *Pundicity* (blog), April 2, 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/19789/quwat-muqatili-al-ashair-tribal-auxiliary-forces>; Haian Dukhan "Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Revolution," *OpenDemocracy*, December 19, 2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/haian-dukhan/tribes-and-tribalism-in-syrian-revolution>; and Haian Dukhan, "The Syrian Civil War: What Role do Tribal Loyalties Play?" *Middle East Centre Blog*, London School of Economics, June 13, 2018, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/13/the-syrian-civil-war-what-role-do-tribal-loyalties-play/>.
- 16 Akil Hussain, "Analysis: Division Defines Syria's Tribes and Clans," *News Deeply*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/01/16/analysis-division-defines-syrias-tribes-and-clans>.
- 17 Oliver Holmes and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Islamic State Executed 700 People from Syrian Tribe: Monitoring Group," Reuters, August 16, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-execution/islamic-state-executed-700-people-from-syrian-tribe-monitoring-group-idUSKBN0GG0H120140817>.
- 18 Larger tribes present in eastern Syria extend across state boundaries into Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and large numbers of Syrian "tribals" hold Saudi passports, though figures on this phenomenon are not known.
- 19 Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, *Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal Regions* (Riad El Solh, Lebanon: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2017), <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/02/28/eastern-expectations-changing-dynamics-in-syria-s-tribal-regions-pub-68008>. See also Nicholas Heras, Bassam Barabandi, and Nidal Betare, *Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNASReport-DAMaps-DoSProof.pdf?mtime=20170929135935>.

nationalists, nor the Assad regime fully trusted either group. Turkey, a key backer of the opposition, viewed the PYD as a threat to its national security. Though the KNC was more willing to publicly align itself with the opposition and declared its support for Syrian unity, both mainstream Syrian opposition groups and the Assad regime continued to view the Kurds as suspect and unreliable, harboring irredentist ambitions, and pragmatic to a fault in their defense of Kurdish interests. The mid-2012 establishment of a nominally autonomous Kurdish zone in northeastern Syria, Rojava (later renamed the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria), reinforced these perceptions.

These tensions were evident throughout the uprising, and have weighed heavily in shaping Kurdish-Arab relations in US areas of operation in eastern Syria. During the initial phases of armed conflict, for example, pro-regime Arab tribal militias attacked Kurdish towns along the Turkish border, and joined in clashes targeting PYD positions in Kurdish-majority neighborhoods of Aleppo.<sup>20</sup> In this period, opposition armed groups regularly cooperated with Kurdish militias to confront the regime. However, as opposition militias radicalized and jihadi groups came to dominate the armed opposition, relations with Kurdish militias became strained, at times deteriorating into violence.<sup>21</sup> As ISIS seized territory in Syria and worked to extend areas under its control from mid-2014 onward, Kurdish villages along Syria's northeastern border with Turkey became principal targets. ISIS captured some three hundred and fifty Kurdish-majority villages by fall 2014, before it was defeated in the battle of Kobani/Ayn al-Arab in early 2015 by Kurdish fighters supported by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the US Air Force. The battle of Kobani marked one of the last major confrontations in which Kurdish and Arab armed groups collaborated.

The arrival of US forces in 2015 affected every vector of Kurdish politics, with significant implications for US stabilization programs. The decision to rely on PYD-affiliated Kurdish fighters to develop a US-backed, local anti-ISIS militia, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),

“While US forces have tried to alleviate local conflicts caused by SDF practices, its narrowly defined approach to stabilization leaves the United States poorly equipped to offer more than ad hoc interventions on a case-by-case basis.”

and to delegate authority over local governance to the SDF in areas retaken from ISIS, reconfigured the balance of power between Kurds and Arabs.<sup>22</sup> Kurdish forces are now the de facto ruling authority in Arab-majority areas in which Kurds have not historically been present, including Raqqa city and eastern Deir Ezzour.<sup>23</sup>

Aggravating an already-fragile situation, SDF commanders have often been heavy-handed in their approach to local governance. Against the opposition of local communities, they have imposed measures to empower the PYD. In Raqqa and its surroundings, the SDF has restricted freedom of expression, used force to break up protests against SDF authorities, and transferred the legal jurisdiction of Arab villages to Kurdish areas. It has also been accused of forced conscription of Arab youth into the SDF, as well as arbitrary detentions and the abusive treatment of detainees in areas under its control.<sup>24</sup> International human-rights organizations and community activists in Arab-majority areas have charged the SDF and PYD with ethnic cleansing in a campaign to transform the demographic balance of mixed Kurdish-Arab areas—charges the PYD has denied.<sup>25</sup> While US forces have tried to alleviate local conflicts caused by SDF practices, its narrowly defined approach to stabilization leaves the United States poorly equipped to offer more than ad hoc interventions on a case-by-case basis.

20 Nicholas A. Heras and Carole A. O'Leary, “The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria,” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* vol. 11, no. 13, June 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-tribal-factor-in-syrias-rebellion-a-survey-of-armed-tribal-groups-in-syria/>.

21 Pascal Andersen, “Friends or Foes? A Closer Look on Relations Between YPG and the Regime,” *Belling Cat*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/12/friend-or-foes-ypg-regime/>.

22 Bedir Mulla Rashid, *Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria* (Istanbul: Omran for Strategic Studies, 2018), <http://omranstudies.org/publications/reports/military-and-security-structures-of-the-autonomous-administration-in-syria.html>.

23 Daniel Wilkofsky and Khalid Fatah, “Northern Syria's Anti-Islamic State Coalition Has an Arab Problem,” *War On The Rocks*, September 17, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/northern-syrias-anti-islamic-state-coalition-has-an-arab-problem/>.

24 Bethan McKernan, “US-backed Kurdish Forces Face Accusations of Abuse Amid ISIS Liberation Campaign,” *Independent*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-kurds-isis-fight-for-raqqa-sunni-arabs-accusations-abuse-detentions-arrests-internment-a7763956.html>.

25 Roy Gutman, “Have the Syrian Kurds Committed War Crimes?” *Nation*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/have-the-syrian-kurds-committed-war-crimes/>.

The success of the US-led anti-ISIS campaign has thus transformed the political landscape of eastern Syria, amplifying frictions between US-backed militias and local communities, and generating conflicts that both Arabs and Kurds typically frame in terms of longstanding ethnic hostility. Yet, the United States, resistant to undertaking activities that might be seen as support for reconstruction or engaging in nation building, has largely avoided responding to the political consequences of its anti-ISIS campaign. Nor has it used its presence in the Jazirah to support the emergence of political institutions that local, Arab-majority communities view as legitimate and effective. Instead, the United States implements stabilization programs that focus on urgent, short-term, basic needs, while encouraging the development of political frameworks that do little to address local concerns about the intentions of the SDF and the PYD. The mantra of “by, with, and through” has become a catch-all justification of a division of labor in which the United States cedes local governance to the SDF, which it then works through to manage its field-based programming. As a result, while the United States claims that its approach is intended to avoid dictating political outcomes, it is, in fact, complicit in the destabilization of local politics throughout its areas of operation.

The experience of governance in Raqqqa, the largest city in eastern Syria and site of one of the fiercest and most destructive battles in the anti-ISIS campaign, is a case in point. Even before the defeat of ISIS in October 2017, the SDF began to put in place a post-ISIS governance structure for the city, based on “Self-Administration” models used by the PYD to govern areas under its control. The SDF, working as an extension of the PYD, established a political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), to organize a Raqqqa civil council that included representation from the city’s Arab-majority population, jointly headed by an Arab and a Kurdish representative.<sup>26</sup> The local council was nominally designed as an expression of the SDC’s commitment to democratic decentralization, yet operates to consolidate the authority of the SDF’s armed wing and, eventually, bring Raqqqa city under the direct authority of the YPG as part of its federal system. According

to a leading analyst, “[t]he SDF sponsored model for Raqqqa aims to ensure their control over the territories they capture from ISIS as a first step to integrating it in the Self-Administration project.”<sup>27</sup> According to the International Crisis Group:

“Efforts by the YPG (and its Self-Administration) to achieve Arab buy-in to its project have been partial and haphazard and do not amount to a meaningful share in governance. Official rhetoric signals inclusiveness and pluralism, but YPG flags and posters of [imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah] Öcalan adorn streets and town squares (including in majority-Arab areas) in a manner typical of autocratic, single-party rule elsewhere in the region. Arab figures willing to participate in the Self-Administration are handed impressive titles but no real authority... ultimate power of decision rests with the Qandil-trained PKK cadres. Beyond that, these institutions are limited to the distribution of meagre services that are unlikely to purchase the loyalty of otherwise skeptical citizens.”<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly, Raqqqa’s Arab majority has chafed under the authority of the SDF-SDC and been vocal in its opposition. In May 2018, local Arab activists organized protests that were violently suppressed by the SDF. In June, the SDF imposed a brief curfew and declared a temporary state of emergency in Raqqqa, alleging that ISIS militants were seeking to reenter the city—a threat many residents viewed as a cover-up for a political crackdown to suppress dissent.<sup>29</sup> Arab residents have also expressed anger at the United States for the slow pace of reconstruction, and the perceived lack of US action regarding governance failures and the conduct of the SDF.<sup>30</sup>

Raqqqa’s experience is far from unique. Similar governance arrangements, and similar narratives of local pushback and resistance, are also evident in SDF-controlled areas of Deir Ezzour, the largest city in eastern Syria, and in other Arab-majority towns and

26 The website of the civil council is hosted by the Syrian Democratic Forces: <https://sdf-press.com/en/tag/al-raqqa-civil-council/>.

27 Haid, “The Ramifications of the SDF Governance Plan for Raqqqa Post-ISIS,” *Syria Source* (blog), Atlantic Council, May 11, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-ramifications-of-the-sdf-governance-plan-for-raqqa-post-isis>; see also Haid Haid, “Is the Raqqqa Civilian Council Fit for Purpose?” Chatham House, October 2017, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/is-the-raqqa-civilian-council-fit-for-purpose>.

28 *Fighting ISIS: The Road to and Beyond Raqqqa*, Middle East briefing no. 53 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/b053-fighting-isis-road-and-beyond-raqqa>.

29 “U.S.-Backed Forces Announce Three-Day Curfew in Raqqqa City,” Reuters, June 24, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa/us-backed-forces-announce-three-day-curfew-in-raqqa-city-idUSKBN1JK092>.

30 Aris Rouissinos, “Raqqqa Residents Blame the U.S. for Neglecting the City’s Recovery,” *Vice*, July 19, 2018, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/8xbqx3/raqqa-residents-blame-the-us-for-neglecting-the-citys-recovery](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/8xbqx3/raqqa-residents-blame-the-us-for-neglecting-the-citys-recovery).



The third session meeting of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) is held in Tabqa, Syria July 16, 2018. *Credit:* REUTERS/Rodi Said

villages that US-backed militias have freed from ISIS control.<sup>31</sup> US commanders in the field are not unaware of these effects, and have taken measures to mitigate them, including efforts to develop local councils that more accurately reflect the demographic composition of Arab-majority areas. Such efforts, however, have not been adequate to address local concerns, or to check the SDF's determination to deepen its control within its areas of operation. Most recently, on September 6, 2018, the SDF-backed Syrian Democratic Council announced the formation of a region-wide governance body, the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," to coordinate among local councils in the SDF's areas of operation.<sup>32</sup> These councils have not been tightly linked to coherent stabilization programs that have a goal of "supporting locally legitimate authorities and systems to peaceably manage conflict and prevent violence," as recommended by the SAR.<sup>33</sup> Instead, the current US approach to stabilization, in which the doctrine of "by, with, and through" privileges the SDF, contributes to conditions that make conflict and violence more likely, undermines efforts to prevent

the resurgence of ISIS, fuels grievances among local communities, and undercuts the impact and potential effectiveness of topline US diplomacy.

If longstanding ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds weigh heavily on the stability and security of opposition-held eastern Syria, stabilization efforts must contend with a second, equally daunting, factor: the shadow of the future. Simply put, the greater the uncertainty among local actors about the US commitment to its presence in eastern Syria, the weaker the incentives to take US interests into account, to engage with the United States, or to invest in US-backed initiatives. Despite statements from newly appointed Syria envoy James Jeffrey affirming the United States' intent to keep troops in Syria as long as necessary, there remains widespread doubt about the credibility of the United States among both US-backed Kurdish forces and local Arab residents. Confidence in the stability of US policy under President Trump is low; his decision to eliminate State Department funding for stabilization operations in both eastern and northwestern

31 Rodi Said, "U.S. Allied Syrian Groups Form Civilian Council to Run Deir al-Zor," Reuters, September 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deir-zor/u-s-allied-syrian-groups-form-civilian-council-to-run-deir-al-zor-idUSKCNIBZ0F6>.

32 Ragip Soyly, "YPG Suspends Oil Deals with Assad Regime as US Sanctions Iran-tied Middlemen," *Daily Sabah*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2018/09/07/ypg-suspends-oil-deals-with-assad-regime-as-us-sanctions-iran-tied-middlemen>.

33 US Department of State, et al., "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas."



Syria amplified these doubts. Nor has the replacement of US funding by contributions from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and EU members of the anti-ISIS coalition done much to alter local perceptions.

“As US-backed stabilization operations are seen as focused solely on short-term counterterrorism, having empowered Kurdish militias, and indifferent to the development of legitimate political institutions, the incentives to look beyond the United States and the SDF for security will increase.”

Such perceptions create powerful incentives for local actors to limit their cooperation, treat the US not as a “partner” but as a transactional actor to be exploited, and invest instead in positioning themselves to survive the inevitable return of the Assad regime. And, to the extent that US-backed stabilization operations are seen as focused solely on short-term counterterrorism; having empowered Kurdish militias; and indifferent to the development of legitimate political institutions, the incentives to look beyond the United States and the SDF for security will increase. The strategic calculus of US-backed Kurdish forces, and other Kurdish actors, reflects their distinctive concerns and priorities, but is also driven by a lack of clarity about the duration of the US presence, the limited scope of US stabilization operations, and clear signals that the United States expects the Assad regime to regain control over eastern and northeastern Syria.

The stakes for both Arab residents and the SDF are high, and the incentives to adjust in anticipation of the

regime’s likely return are compelling. Other areas that have been outside the regime’s control for extended periods have fared poorly following its return. Regime authorities have consistently violated pledges made in the course of negotiations with local councils in opposition-held areas, looking to preserve some measure of local governance and protect those who were not active participants in opposition armed groups. The regime has given an ominously Orwellian twist to the terms of surrender it imposes on the communities it has defeated, designating them as “reconciliation agreements.” Yet, it has failed to abide by even the harsh terms such agreements contain.<sup>34</sup> According to one assessment:

“The reconciliations were regarded from the very beginning as part of a war strategy rather than a genuine desire to move toward power-sharing: promises pertaining to administrative decentralization and the special privileges promised to notables of reconciled areas were reversed over time and loyalists were systematically reintroduced into these areas.”<sup>35</sup>

Residents of eastern Syria are well aware of these experiences, and the likely fate of those who “surrender” to the Assad regime.<sup>36</sup> They understand the benefit of moving early to strike a deal with the regime, rather than endure extended sieges and their consequences. In eastern Syria, moreover, the fragmentation of tribes, splits between opposition supporters and loyalists, the erosion of the authority of tribal elders, lingering grievances among those who suffered under ISIS, and resentment over the marginalization of Arab notables by the SDF have compounded the uncertainties surrounding the aftermath of a US withdrawal.

Depending on how reintegration unfolds, any number of these vectors could drive significant violence, including the possible splintering of the SDF along ethnic lines. If the PYD and SDF negotiate some form of decentralization, will it include Arab-majority areas along the Euphrates? If so, how would Arab communities respond? If negotiations fail, however, and the regime moves to retake the northeast by force, the Jazirah will become a battlefield, and will likely experience the levels of violence

34 Seth J. Frantzman, “Syrian Regime Cracks Down on Former Rebel Areas Near Golan,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Syrian-regime-cracks-down-on-former-rebel-areas-near-Golan-565788>.

35 Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, “Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements,” *Syria Studies* vol. 9, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-14, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/index>; see also Fadi Adleh and Agnès Favier, “‘Local Reconciliation Agreements’ in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding,” *Middle East Directions Research Project Report* (June 2017), <http://cadmus.eui.eu//handle/1814/46864>.

36 According to opposition media sources, more than one hundred and forty “reconciled” former opposition fighters died “in mysterious circumstances” after being summoned by the regime for possible deployment to Idlib. See “140 Individuals from the ‘Reconciled’ Opposition Die Under Mysterious Circumstances...And the Syrian Regime is Accused of Liquidating Them,” Nida` Suriyya, September 15, 2018, <http://nedaa-sy.com/news/8419>.



Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) celebrate the first anniversary of Raqqa province liberation from ISIS, in Raqqa, Syria October 27, 2018. *Credit: REUTERS/About Hamam*

the regime and its allies have meted out to other opposition-held areas. Conflict in the northeast is likely to be especially intense, given the skill and experience of YPG-SDF fighters. Under these conditions, it is also likely that conflicts will occur between pro-regime and pro-opposition tribal factions. For the time being, the US presence serves as a deterrent to military action by the regime. Yet, this deterrent effect can also be expected to degrade over time, without a clear and unequivocal commitment from the United States to keep its forces in Syria.

Not surprisingly, both Arabs and Kurds have taken steps to protect their interests, given the lack of US commitment, credibility, and engagement. Both treat their ties to US forces and their role in support of US policy as short-term, with declining payoffs, and therefore expendable. With both groups, there is growing evidence of a willingness to defect from the United States and

shift allegiances to the Assad regime. In turn, and no less predictably, the Assad regime has also read the tea leaves and redoubled its efforts to widen breaches between the United States, the SDF-PYD, and tribal elites in eastern Syria. As the regime continues to gain ground and retake areas held by the opposition, these efforts have been increasingly successful. In early June 2018, as the regime, Russia, and Iran prepared an offensive against opposition-held areas of southern Syria, some seventy "Syrian tribal members and leaders in Deir Hafer city, in northern Aleppo province, announced they were forming a force called the Popular Tribal Resistance Units...to 'resist the US, French and Turkish presence in eastern Syria and reject any presence or intervention of military forces of any state on Syrian soil without the government's approval and coordination.'"<sup>37</sup> One month later, with Deraa in government hands, tribal leaders from Aleppo province confirmed their support

37 Mohammad Bassiki, "Syria's Assad Seeks Support of Tribes Against US, Others," *Al-Monitor*, July 11, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/syria-arab-tribes-us-foreign-presence-kurds.html#ixzz5QzhJMudI>. On regime efforts to split tribal and Kurdish forces from the United States, see also Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, "Pay as You Stay: Here's What the Trump Administration Is Really Plotting in Syria," *Daily Beast*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/is-trump-serious-about-syria-do-we-stay-do-we-go-and-who-pays>.

“for the army in its war on terrorism,” and their resistance to US and other foreign forces in eastern Syria.<sup>38</sup>

Regime advances and concerns about the reliability of the United States have also led Kurdish groups to explore prospects for some form of accommodation with the Assad regime, both to secure the gains they have achieved since 2011 and to enlist the regime’s protection against threats from Turkey.<sup>39</sup> For its part, the regime has been responsive to such talks. Kurdish regime loyalists have encouraged their counterparts in the northeast to accept the inevitability of a US withdrawal, and to recognize that a return to the regime’s fold is their only option.<sup>40</sup> In late July 2018, Russia facilitated a meeting in Damascus between a YPG delegation and a senior regime security official, Ali Mamlouk, to discuss the terms of a possible negotiation.<sup>41</sup> A second meeting followed shortly thereafter. As of late 2018, these exchanges on the future status of the YPG-led “Democratic Autonomous Administration” have yielded little, and the likelihood of an imminent agreement is remote. Yet, both sides appear committed to continuing negotiations. Moreover, there are indications that US officials have tacitly encouraged the SDF to come to terms with the Assad regime, reinforcing Kurdish perceptions that, whatever might be said in Washington, the United States remains committed to a withdrawal from Syria in the near term.<sup>42</sup>

These machinations by local actors have not yet compromised anti-ISIS operations. In mid-September 2018, the SDF, with support from US forces, began attacks to clear the few remaining pockets controlled by ISIS in eastern Syria. The SDF remains dependent on the United States, yet its potential to affect counterterrorism operations and undermine topline US diplomacy was on vivid display earlier in the year. In July, following

“The SDF remains dependent on the United States, yet its potential to affect counterterrorism operations and undermine topline US diplomacy was on vivid display earlier in the year.”

its defeat of insurgent armed groups in southern Syria, the Assad regime began positioning forces for an offensive against opposition-held Idlib province. Even as warnings from the Trump administration and other Western governments against such an incursion escalated, Kurdish officials and SDF leaders announced their willingness to fight alongside the regime, in the hope of evicting Turkish forces and their Syrian proxies in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from the Kurdish city of Afrin.<sup>43</sup> Salih Muslim, former co-chair of the PYD, told reporters in late July: “Fighting in Idlib or Afrin is our duty and responsibility, and when we fight in Idlib, it will be our decision as we are not tools in the hands of others.”<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, PYD leaders backed away from this position.<sup>45</sup> Yet, in effect, the leading US-backed militia in the anti-ISIS coalition had announced its intent to work against US efforts to prevent a regime offensive in northwest Syria, undermining US diplomacy. Awkward at best, the PYD’s position could lead to the diversion of Kurdish fighters from eastern Syria, hampering operations against ISIS—a possible repeat of events of January 2018, when a Turkish operation to push Kurdish forces out of Afrin drew SDF fighters away from the anti-ISIS coalition in the east. This ongoing dance between

38 “Tribes and Clans of Aleppo and its Countryside Confirm Their Support for the Army in Its War on Terrorism,” Syrian Arab News Agency, July 7, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=778868>.

39 Apart from discussions over the future status of Kurdish-controlled areas, the Assad regime and the YPG have maintained connections and economic ties throughout Syria’s conflict. See Sam Hamad, “YPG and Assad: Pragmatic Allies but Unwilling Bedfellows?” *New Arab*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/8/26/ypg-and-assad-pragmatic-allies-but-unwilling-bedfellows>.

40 Helbast Shekhani, “Syrian MP Says US to Leave Syria Soon, Kurds Should Return to Government,” *Kurdistan 24*, July 31, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/3f14cd6f-9309-48c6-b566-a5d22143e977>. See also Hannah Lynch, “Dealing in Damascus: Rojava Kurds Consider Pact with Assad,” *Rudaw*, July 28, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/28072018>.

41 Haid Haid, “Will the Syrian Government Strike a Deal with the Kurds?” *Middle East Eye*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/will-syrian-regime-strike-deal-kurds-1019797361>.

42 Ibrahim Hamidi, “Kurds Prioritize Public Services in Pilot Talks with Damascus Regime,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 28, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1345901/kurds-prioritize-public-services-pilot-talks-damascus-regime>. See also Aaron Stein, “The SDF’s Post-American Future: Why the Syrian Kurds Must Make a Deal with Assad,” *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-08-31/sdfs-post-american-future>.

43 Martin Chulov and Mohammed Rasool, “Aggrieved Kurdish Fighters Quietly Join Syrian Regime Side in Battle for Idlib,” *Guardian*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/07/kurds-renew-their-claim-for-idlib-as-final-battle-draws-near>.

44 Helbast Shekhani, “Kurdish Leader Reveals Details of First Meeting with Syrian Government,” *Kurdistan 24*, July 30, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/54d92d6a-2f82-457f-a8da-5b5b579ef70c>.

45 “The Kurdish Protection Will Not Participate in the Battle for Idlib...The Eye Is On Afrin,” *Al-Arabiyya*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/Arab-and-world/syria/2018/09/16/الاربيية-تعلن-عن-عدم-مشاركة-الحرس-الديمقراطي-الكردي-في-قتال-الاربيية>



Members of the US Army 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) conduct 50. Caliber weapons training during counter-ISIS operations in Syria, Nov. 22, 2017. *Credit:* US Army/Staff Sgt. Jacob Connor

the PYD and the regime does not mean that accommodation is inevitable: significant differences between the two remain.<sup>46</sup> Yet, as it develops, and as uncertainty about US intentions drags on, the pressure on the PYD to align with the regime will only grow.

### **Stabilization, Governance, and Human Security**

To point out shortcomings in the current US approach to stabilization does not imply a 180-degree shift in an opposite direction. The limitations and constraints that have shaped the current approach cannot simply be dismissed—nor should they be. It is appropriate to view the US troop presence in Syria as a relatively short-term commitment. US forces should be withdrawn within a reasonable, but not precipitous, timeframe. It is correct to acknowledge that the United States cannot resolve deep social, ethnic, and tribal tensions in the Jazirah. Nor should its use its presence in Syria

to pursue a policy of partition; the future reintegration of the northeast and east provinces into a unitary Syrian state should continue to guide US assumptions about the longer-term political future of the country. Moreover, as earlier stabilization and reconstruction experiences have taught, it is important to keep expectations in check. Too often, grandiose goals are attached to stabilization programs that are poorly funded, thinly staffed, and structurally incapable of achieving their purported aims.

These constraints are not trivial. At present, however, they have led to a stabilization strategy that is not only counterproductive to the larger goals of US policy, but also contributes to conditions on the ground that increase the prospects of future conflicts, and future waves of radicalization. More effectively aligning stabilization operations in Syria with US policy, and helping shape local conditions that hold greater

<sup>46</sup> Occasionally, these differences lead to violence between the regime and Kurdish forces, which both usually work to avoid. For example, on September 8, 2018, clashes in the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli between regime forces and the Kurdish internal security force, the Asayish, killed eleven and wounded many more. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “YPG to Investigate Clash with Regime that Killed 11,” *Kurdistan 24*, September 15, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/6f12b30d-052b-4299-b4af-ba39e29188a6>.

promise of long-term stability, will require rethinking the underlying assumptions on which current practices are based. These include not only the timetable for a US withdrawal, but how stabilization is conceptualized and implemented.

As noted above, the first step toward this end is straightforward: US forces should simply apply current US stabilization doctrine to Syria, and prioritize the development of locally legitimate political authorities capable of providing effective governance and maintaining security. This shift will have more impact, however, if stabilization efforts are designed with a focus on strengthening human security in US areas of operations. Linking stabilization to human security is not new. The US government has integrated the two in other conflict zones, including Afghanistan and Bosnia. Yet, such a focus would require substantive shifts in the design and funding of field-based programs. Most important, this shift would recognize that, under the Assad regime, state institutions will continue to pose the most significant threat to the security of civilian populations, especially in areas that have been outside its control for a significant time.

Confirming the findings of the 2009 Arab Human Development Report on human security, Syria is a case *par excellence*, in which “factors such as weak institutional curbs on state power; a fragile and fragmented civil society; dysfunctional elected assemblies, both national and local; and disproportionately powerful security apparatuses often combine to turn the state into a menace to human security, rather than its chief supporter.”<sup>47</sup> Seven years of violent conflict have only exacerbated these conditions.<sup>48</sup> The regime’s conduct in areas it has retaken since 2015 offers ample empirical evidence that, for the vast majority of Syrians, the state does not, and cannot, function as the “chief supporter of human security.”<sup>49</sup>

Current US stabilization policy does little to address the threat of future repression by the Assad regime. This need not be the case. Indeed, the most effective way to align Syria stabilization with current doctrine, and link it more tightly to a broader strategy, is to make use of the US presence to offset or mitigate the Assad regime’s capacity to threaten human security in eastern Syria. In practical terms, this requires an approach that prioritizes efforts to equip local communities, both Arab and Kurdish, to shape the terms on which the Assad regime reimposes its authority. This, in turn, requires a

“Current US stabilization policy does little to address the threat of future repression by the Assad regime.”

greater degree of flexibility in how the United States operationalizes its “by, with, and through” approach to stabilization to be more inclusive of a wide range of local actors, shrink the role of the SDF in local governance in Arab-majority areas, support the development of representative, legitimate, and effective local-governance institutions, and encourage the development of local balance-of-power arrangements that will generate incentives for the Assad regime to accept some measure of local autonomy. In effect, this means extending to Arab communities in eastern Syria the opportunity to negotiate reintegration that is now available only to the PYD. Such an approach does not put the United States in the position of dictating political outcomes. Rather, it creates at least the possibility for local actors to have a hand in shaping their own political outcomes.

To the extent that this does not occur—that possibilities for a negotiated accommodation with the regime are monopolized and controlled by the PYD-SDF, and exclude meaningful Arab participation—the more likely it becomes that the reimposition of regime authority will be accompanied by violence, instability, the resurgence of radicalism, and the continued erosion of the US ability to affect the closing trajectory of the Syrian conflict. If this is done without addressing demands for effective local governance among Arab residents of the Jazirah—and without compromising similar Kurdish demands—it becomes more likely that the return of the Syrian state will bring with it the renewal of the coercive, abusive practices that define the Assad regime’s treatment of its own citizens. The likelihood of these outcomes increases so long as the United States is unwilling to directly fund, and adequately support, stabilization programs with an expanded mandate that includes a systematic focus on local governance.

Therefore, the United States needs to make clear, first and foremost, that while it remains committed to the SDF as a partner in the anti-ISIS campaign, it intends to support the development of autonomous local

47 UNDP, Regional Bureau for Arab States, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in Arab Countries* (New York: UNDP, 2009), p. 53, [http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/arab\\_human\\_developmentreport2009.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/arab_human_developmentreport2009.html).

48 Steven Heydemann, “Tracking the ‘Arab Spring’: Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 24, no. 4, October 2013, pp. 59-73, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/tracking-arab-spring-syria-and-future-authoritarianism>.

49 Steven Heydemann, *Beyond Fragility: Fierce States and the Challenge of Reconstruction in Syria* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-fragility-syria-and-the-challenges-of-reconstruction-in-fierce-states/>.

governance in Arab-majority areas that have never been under Kurdish authority. To achieve this, the SDF will need to devolve local authority to known and trusted community representatives, who will assume responsibility for governance, including stabilization and reconstruction programs, policing, and the oversight of justice institutions. Nothing about this will be easy. It will require building a stabilization effort that supports the development of reconfigured local administrations, local police, and local justice institutions. It will require strengthening coordination and cooperation between local administrations and their civil-society counterparts. It will inevitably affect, and could disrupt, delicate local balances of power. Its implementation must be mindful of the many rivalries and factional differences that might upend an expanded stabilization program.

“Adopting an approach based on the “rules for reconstruction” that should guide US policy in regime-held areas of Syria—go local, go small, and go around the Assad regime—offers some assurance that stabilization funds would not be allocated to wasteful, large-scale activities.”

However, the most immediate challenge to devolution within US areas of operation is a decision by the SDF in mid-September 2018, seemingly with US support, to impose a layer of regional governance, the General Council of Self-Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria, to coordinate the local councils it created in the areas from Manbij in the northwest into Deir Ezzour in the east. For the first time, the provinces of Raqqa and Deir Ezzour have been included in the PYD-led Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.<sup>50</sup> The scope of SDF-PYD ambition is clear: to create a single, unified, Kurdish-ruled zone that is nominally independent of Damascus, mirroring the status of the Kurdish Regional

Government in Iraq. Farid Ati, Kurdish co-chair of the council, told journalists that the General Council will provide “the pillars of the government ruling in north-eastern Syria, with its headquarters in Ain Issa. Thus, the new entity extracts power from two sources: a political one (the SDC) and a military one (SDF). They are allies, and the US and the international coalition back them in northeastern Syria.”<sup>51</sup>

This initiative, imposed unilaterally by the SDF, reinforces Arab concerns about security, the political future of Arab-majority areas, and the reliability and credibility of the United States. It will amplify the kinds of grievances that have previously fueled Arab-Kurdish tensions and contributed to radicalization within Arab communities in eastern Syria. It stands as an example of how the US mantra of operating “by, with, and through” local partners can undermine the effectiveness of topline US diplomacy. Therefore, rather than giving such moves their blessing, US commanders in eastern Syria need to expand the scope of their strategy, begin unraveling the political structures created by the SDF, replace them with truly legitimate local councils, and deploy stabilization resources to equip local communities to have the best possible prospects for navigating their own political futures over the next three-to-five years. As the end phase of the anti-ISIS operation unfolds, this is an opportune moment to rethink the political role of the SDF in Arab-majority areas.

Downgrading the political role of the SDF in eastern Syria carries risks. Yet, the potential benefits of an expanded stabilization effort—focused on strengthening human security through improved local governance—are significant. Such an approach to stabilization would provide for the emergence of locally legitimate governance in Arab areas of eastern Syria. It would create conditions in which civil-society institutions can develop to strengthen the accountability, responsiveness, and effectiveness of local authorities. It would also offer opportunities to improve the effectiveness of stabilization programs by linking them more closely to authorities best situated to identify and act on local priorities. Adopting an approach based on the “rules for reconstruction” that should guide US policy in regime-held areas of Syria—go local, go small, and go around the Assad regime—offers some assurance that stabilization funds would not be allocated to wasteful, large-scale activities.<sup>52</sup>

50 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “New Administration Formed for Northeastern Syria,” *Kurdistan 24*, September 6, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c9e03dab-6265-4a9a-91ee-aa8d2a93c657>.

51 Sardar Milla Drwish, “Kurds Step Up Efforts to Form Self-Government in Northeast Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, September 18, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/syria-kurds-general-council-government.html#ixzz5RYzrY94e>.

52 Steven Heydemann, “Rules for Reconstruction in Syria,” *Markaz* (blog), Brookings, August 24, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/24/rules-for-reconstruction-in-syria/>.

By pursuing such an approach, the United States would also be advancing its topline diplomatic aims. Properly funded, stabilization efforts could provide local authorities in the Jazirah with resources to improve basic infrastructure, address urgent humanitarian needs, and alleviate conditions that are associated with radicalization. Doing so would both enhance the legitimacy of local authorities and give communities a stake in preventing the resurgence of ISIS, or its replacement by other violent extremist organizations. Empowering local governance would also offer residents in Arab-majority areas an alternative to the Assad regime as a means to defend local interests from Kurdish authorities that are widely viewed as illegitimate. Further, a focus on human security through effective local governance would also advance US efforts to achieve an irreversible political transition, by lending weight to bottom-up processes of political decentralization in eastern Syria similar to, if more modest than, those currently in place in Kurdish-majority areas of the northeast. Without dictating political outcomes, the United States would be contributing to conditions that could give local authorities a measure of leverage in shaping the political future of eastern Syria.

Why would any of these efforts hold once the regime sets its sights on retaking the east? They might not. The possibility of failure is real, as it is with regard to

the PYD's efforts to consolidate its authority in the northeast. Yet, the regime's conduct over the past seven years provides ample evidence of its willingness to bargain with local authorities to avoid the need to retake contested areas by force. To be sure, the regime routinely violates the agreements that result from such negotiations. However, if US stabilization work has been successful, the regime will have a chance to lower the political and financial costs of reintegrating the east, and local residents will have greater resources they can bring to bear to manage reintegration more effectively than was the case in communities that experienced brutal (and illegal under international law) starvation sieges. What the regime wants from eastern Syria, first and foremost, is control over its oil resources and agricultural output. If it can attain these, and reestablish its formal sovereignty, it may well conclude that local governance structures can be melded into its system of rule, rather than dismantled. There is a long history of accommodation and bargaining between the regime, the Baath Party, and local elites in eastern Syria; this has extended greater autonomy to local elites in the east than exists in more intensely centralized western provinces. This history suggests not to underestimate the sustainability of local-governance initiatives backed by US stabilization programs.

## CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF STABILIZATION IN EASTERN SYRIA

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**A**s the focus of the Syrian conflict narrows to the two remaining contested areas of the country, the presence of US forces on the ground is drawing the United States closer to its center. If the United States has an interest in shaping the closing trajectory of the conflict, it has a narrow window in which to do so. In eastern Syria, the United States has an opportunity to use stabilization to advance both short- and long-term interests. It can adopt a stabilization strategy that will improve the well-being of communities in eastern Syria, develop effective, legitimate local authorities, and assist local communities in preparing for an uncertain political future. By shifting its efforts to focus on the role of local governance in strengthening human security, the United States will bring its field-based operations into line with the recently established stabilization doctrine of the US government. It will also be in a position to improve the contribution of field-based programs to topline US diplomacy in Syria, and increase the likelihood that the presence of US forces in Syria will both temper the possible resurgence of violent extremist groups and leave communities better positioned to manage their political futures once the United States withdraws.

Exploiting these opportunities will not be easy. It will require the United States to engage more directly in local governance than it has to date, and oversee the devolution of authority from the SDF and its local councils to bodies that are more fully representative of Arab-majority communities. After more than two years in which the United States has worked largely “by, with, and through” the SDF, it will need to broaden and expand the scope of its stabilization operations, and renew connections and relationships with a broader range of local actors. Delegating local governance to the SDF has eased the burden the United States might otherwise face in navigating the complex, and often opaque, politics of tribes, villages, and urban centers in eastern Syria. Yet, the hands-off, light-footprint approach comes at a price. As the United States works to achieve the three central aims that now seem to define its broader Syria policy—defeat ISIS, reduce Iran’s presence and influence, and achieve an irreversible political transition—the costs of a narrowly defined stabilization strategy will only increase. Adjusting US policy to accommodate and fund a stabilization strategy based on support for locally legitimate governance could provide the United States with a more effective means for using its work on the ground to advance its core diplomatic aims.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Dr. Steven Heydemann** holds the Janet Wright Ketcham 1953 Chair in Middle East Studies, with a joint appointment in the Department of Government, at Smith College. He is also a nonresident senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy of the Brookings Institution. From 2007-15 he held a number of leadership positions at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., including vice president of applied research on conflict and senior adviser for the Middle East. Prior to joining USIP, he was director of the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University and associate professor in the government department. From 1997 to 2001, he was an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Columbia University. Earlier, from 1990-97, he directed the Program on International Peace and Security and the Program on the Near and Middle East at the Social Science Research Council in New York.

From 2011-15, Heydemann directed USIP's Syria program, including The Day After project (TDA), in which the institute facilitated a transition planning process for Syria with the Syrian opposition. The resulting document, "The Day After: Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria," was widely used by activists, NGOs and governments during the early phases of the Syrian conflict, and it was endorsed by numerous Syrian opposition groups as well as the European Parliament. Following the completion of the planning phase of the TDA project, Heydemann provided technical expertise in support of the creation of a Syrian-led NGO called The Day After Association, based in Istanbul, which works to support the principles and aims of The Day After project in Syria. He remains an adviser to the board of the NGO.

In addition, Heydemann consults widely with the U.S. government, NGOs and European governments on issues relating to Syria policy and the status of the Syrian conflict. He writes regularly on Syria for major media outlets and has appeared as a Syria expert on leading television networks, including the BBC, al-Arabiyya, al-Jazeera, the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy Journal* and PBS.

Heydemann is a political scientist who specializes in the comparative politics and the political economy of the Middle East, with a particular focus on Syria. His interests include authoritarian governance, economic development, social policy, political and economic reform and civil society. Among his many publications are "Explaining the Arab Uprisings: Transformations in Comparative Perspective," *Mediterranean Politics* (January 2016); "Authoritarian Learning and Counterrevolution," in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch (Columbia University Press, 2014, with Reinoud Leenders); *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (Stanford University Press, 2013, co-edited with Reinoud Leenders); "Tracking the Arab Spring: Syria and Arab Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* (October 2013); "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," in *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Non-Democratic Regimes*, ed. Oliver Schlumberger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); "Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World," (Saban Center, Brookings Institution, November 2007); *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, edited volume (Palgrave Press, 2004); *War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East*, edited volume (University of California Press, 2000), and *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

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