



# **Solving the Syrian Rubik's Cube**

**An Instruction Guide for Leveraging Syria's  
Fragmentation to Achieve U.S. Policy Objectives**

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People Demand Change Inc.

### Cover Art

Melody Cook/CNAS and Getty Images

## About the Middle East Security Program

The Middle East Security Program conducts cutting-edge research on the most pressing issues in this turbulent region. The program focuses on the sources of instability in the region, maintaining key U.S. strategic partnerships, and generating solutions that help policymakers respond to both fast-moving events and long-term trends. The Middle East Security Program draws on a team with deep government and nongovernment experience in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, and international security. It analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions that defend and advance U.S. interests.

## Executive Summary

**E**ight years since the start of the Syrian crisis, the conflict in that country has transitioned from a war between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and its rebel opponents into an interstate competition among different foreign actors that have intervened in the war. The United States is a party to this competition because, through the campaign to counter the Islamic State group known as ISIS, Washington and its coalition partners have assembled a zone of control in northern and eastern Syria that encompasses nearly one-third of the country's territory. Through this coalition zone, the United States has strong influence over the distribution of several key natural resources—oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity production—that are essential to stabilizing Syria and that are coveted by the Assad regime and its allies. Syria's fragmentation therefore provides the United States and its partners with significant leverage to influence the end state that emerges as the outcome of the conflict.

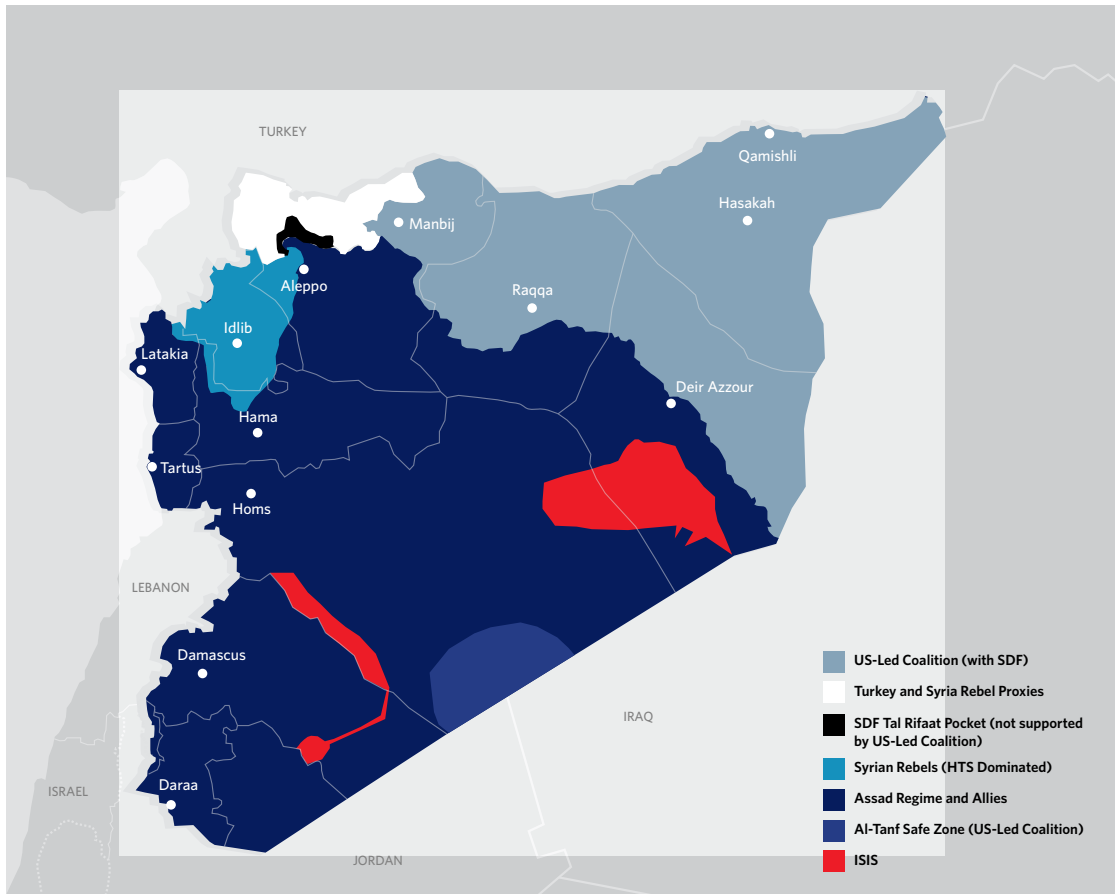
This potential leverage would be a powerful complement to the current American strategy to work toward the irreversible progress in the Geneva process through sanctions and maintaining an international consensus to deny Assad's regime reconstruction assistance. Currently, the United States has committed to retaining a residual military presence in northern and eastern Syria to combat the re-emergence of ISIS or a successor organization, but without the United States investing financially in the rehabilitation and stabilization of those areas. Simultaneously, Washington seeks to force changes in the Assad regime's behavior, policies, or composition by applying economic pressure via U.S. sanctions and closing off the regime's access to reconstruction funding.

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This study examines how the United States can leverage Syria's fragmentation to achieve U.S. policy goals through several policy options. The options are based on two key metrics: first, the level of U.S. investment in Syria, and second, whether the United States should seek to change Assad's behavior, remove Assad, or resign itself to the reality that he will stay and to re-engaging with him. Based on these two criteria, the study offers six policy options:

1. *Pressure Assad With Limited Investment in the Coalition Zone:* This is current U.S. policy, whereby the United States retains a residual military presence in northern and eastern Syria in order to combat the re-emergence of ISIS or a successor organization, without investing financially in the rehabilitation and stabilization of those areas, while simultaneously using sanctions and the withholding of reconstruction funding to seek to force changes in the Assad regime's behavior.
2. *Pressure Assad and Expand U.S. Investment in the Coalition Zone:* With significantly increased U.S. economic support for rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria and the stabilization mission in addition to sanctions, this option would also continue to avoid seeking to change the Assad regime by force but change its behavior (and potentially create a post-Assad state) by the leverage of U.S. geopolitical and economic power.
3. *Withdraw from the Coalition Zone and Slowly Re-engage with the Assad Regime:* The United States would stop impeding reconstruction funding from entering Syria, to start the process of rebuilding the country, even if Washington and its partners do not actively encourage engagement with Assad's regime.
4. *Accept Assad but Use the Coalition Zone to Shape an Outcome That Restrains Him:* The United States would continue the coalition's counter-ISIS mission, and hold onto the resources in the coalition zone, while using Russia and the Assad regime's desire to regain access to these resources in order to re-engage directly in a high-level negotiation with Russia over the future of Syria.
5. *Withdraw but Continue a Maximum Pressure Campaign:* The Trump administration would publicly announce that it is returning to a policy of seeking to build a post-Assad order as a major part of the end state after the Syrian conflict. The United States would seek to apply pressure on the Assad

**Fragmented Syria<sup>1</sup>**



*This map depicts the zones of control in Syria as of April 1, 2019.*

regime, and through it on Russia, through peaceful means, namely by maintaining sanctions and an international consensus against normalizing Assad’s regime, to achieve regime change.

- 6. *Facilitate Active Regime Change:* Building on the current U.S. strategy, the United States would provide increasing economic support for rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria and the stabilization mission coupled with a decision to intervene either militarily or through covert action to overthrow Assad.

Ultimately, the study recommends that the United States continue the Trump administration’s current approach to change Assad’s behavior but also significantly increase the U.S. investment in its zones of control in Syria. The report also warns that while this may be the best approach now, it is still quite likely to fail, at which point the United States will have a looming decision to make: whether to begin re-engaging with Assad’s regime or move more aggressively to remove him.

**Research Methodology**

This study uses a mixed research method that is informed by interviews conducted by the authors and guided discussions that the authors participated in with U.S. and international stakeholders working on and invested in the outcome of the Syrian crisis; from surveys and analysis conducted by Syrian-run partner organizations that work inside of Syria, most prominently People Demand Change, Inc.; and through secondary sources such as studies, analysis, and news articles in English, Arabic, and French. As much as possible, the authors of this study sought to gather research material that was derived from interviews or participation in discussions concerning the Syrian crisis. As these interviews and discussions frequently concerned sensitive matters, the authors generally agreed not to use the names and, in most circumstances, also the positions of interviewees or stakeholders speaking about sensitive matters in group discussions.



## Current U.S. Policy on Syria

The Trump administration has recently offered greater clarity on what it intends to do in Syria and how it expects U.S. policy to unfold there. For the foreseeable future, the United States will maintain a residual military force in Syria to support coalition allies and local Syrian partners, especially the multiethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition, to stabilize post-ISIS areas and prevent the return of the Islamic State group or a successor organization.<sup>2</sup> According to the administration, this course of action will be pursued for an indefinite period. The administration has further explained that maintaining a smaller residual force in northern and eastern Syria conforms to the spirit of President Donald Trump's December 2018 decision to totally withdraw U.S. forces from Syria.<sup>3</sup>

This policy toward the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria has not yet significantly altered the U.S. approach to funding for the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas in the zone, the majority of which the United States continues to expect to come from coalition allies and regional partners.<sup>4</sup> The United States also expects that international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) will develop and fund projects focused on the rehabilitation of the coalition zone, including caring for the tens of thousands of internally displaced

persons (IDPs) currently living there as a consequence of the counter-ISIS campaign, which is an important component of the stabilization mission in northern and eastern Syria. The United States will focus on building up the capacity of local Syrian partner forces to secure post-ISIS areas and, with limited funding, will support some projects in these areas of northern and eastern Syria that promote governance, administration, and humanitarian support.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to its policy toward northern and eastern Syria, where the United States has territorial leverage to try to influence the future end state in Syria, the Trump administration has a policy toward the regime of President Bashar al-Assad that seeks to change its behavior and advance irreversible progress in United Nations-led peace efforts—the so-called Geneva process—and the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (UNSCR 2254), which serves as a road map for that process.<sup>6</sup> The administration continues to tie the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. forces from Syria to the irreversible progress on the Geneva process.<sup>7</sup>

The Trump administration has maintained a consistent position that Iran's military investment in Syria since 2011 should be minimized, and Iranian and Iranian-backed forces that are deployed to Syria need to be withdrawn. Administration officials have communi-

cated this message clearly and at all levels, including by Trump himself at the September 2018 United Nations General Assembly meeting.<sup>8</sup> The Trump administration has also maintained a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran since the administration's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018 through sanctions and other coercive economic activities that weaken the Iranian economy, potentially diminishing Tehran's ability to project power in Syria.<sup>9</sup>



*People shop at a pharmacy in February 2019 in Hajin, Syria. Civilians have begun returning to some small towns in Deir al-Zour that were recently liberated by the U.S.-led coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The United States plans on building up the capacity of local Syrian partner forces to secure post-ISIS areas such as this one and, with limited funding, will support some projects in these areas of northern and eastern Syria that promote governance, administration, and humanitarian support. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)*

## U.S. Sanctions on Syria

Economic pressure has been a key element of U.S. foreign policy toward Syria for decades and especially has been a tool relied upon since 2011 to punish Assad for his oppression of the Syrian people. The United States has imposed sanctions on Syria since designating it a state sponsor of terrorism in 1979. The sanctions program currently implemented by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) originated with Executive Order (EO) 13338, issued in 2004 to address Syria's continued support of terrorism, its occupation of Lebanon at the time, its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and its attempts to undermine efforts to stabilize Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Since 2004, presidents have renewed and also expanded the national emergency declared in EO 13338 in order to maintain and broaden the sanctions against Syria. In 2011, the national emergency was expanded to include concerns over the human rights abuses committed by the Assad regime against its people.<sup>11</sup> Current Syria sanctions have frozen and blocked the assets of the Syrian government and other entities it controls that were in or entering into the United States or in possession or control of U.S. persons. The sanctions also ban exports, sales, or new investments by any U.S. person in Syria; prevent any dealings by U.S. persons in Syrian oil or related products; and prevent the financing or facilitation of transactions involving sanctioned entities and individuals by U.S. persons.<sup>12</sup>

On May 9, 2018, Trump declared a one-year continuation of the national emergency as it pertained to the actions of the Syrian government, namely its violent repression of its people, support of terrorist organizations, pursuit and use of chemical weapons, and efforts to foster extremism that threatens the stability of the

**Trump reiterated the U.S. condemnation of the Assad regime's human rights abuses and the demand for Syria to cease hostilities.**

region.<sup>13</sup> Trump also reiterated the U.S. condemnation of the Assad regime's human rights abuses and the demand for Syria to cease hostilities.<sup>14</sup> In considering whether the national emergency will be extended again this coming May, the notice said that the administration would evaluate "changes in the composition, policies, and actions of the Syrian government."<sup>15</sup>

U.S. sanctions are accompanied by other efforts to keep pressure on Assad by the international community. The European Union (EU) maintains a sanctions program against the Syrian government that started in 2011 and now includes an oil embargo, prohibition of the sale of military equipment that could be used for violent repression, investment restrictions, freezing of the Syrian central bank's assets in the EU, and financial and travel restrictions on members of the Syrian regime and its supporters.<sup>16</sup> The sanctions were renewed last May until June 1, 2019.<sup>17</sup> At present, the European Union has continued to designate individuals who are backers of the Assad regime and subject them to asset freezes and travel bans.<sup>18</sup>

### The Future of U.S. Sanctions on Syria

There is an appetite, in Congress and among experts close to the issue, to expand and intensify the sanctions against Assad, his regime, and others associated with their activities. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, supported by the White House and with support on both sides of the aisle, is a congressional bill that seeks to hold the Syrian government accountable for its human rights abuses by doing so.<sup>19</sup> The bill would, if passed, sanction non-U.S. persons and entities that do business with the Syrian government and are involved in Syrian government-controlled construction projects, Syria's airline and energy industries, and more.<sup>20</sup> In a Senate version of the bill, its described strategy is to "deter foreign persons from entering into contracts related to reconstruction" in areas under the control of the Syrian government, Iran, or Russia.<sup>21</sup>

The bill would mark an increase in financial restrictions placed on the Assad regime's supporters and allies, especially as the fighting wanes and reconstruction efforts are poised to begin. Even in targeting regime-held areas, these measures will still greatly increase the risk of anyone seeking to engage in reconstruction and humanitarian efforts anywhere within Syria, given how hard it can be for companies to determine that they are not contracting or transacting with entities that may also act on behalf of the government of Syria or its allies. The current measures already have.<sup>22</sup> With only a minimal number of troops to remain in Syria, this bill is seen by some as a way to increase the United States' leverage on the Assad regime to push for a cessation of hostilities and for a political settlement through the Geneva process. Yet such measures would also likely worsen the humanitarian crisis in much of Syria and inhibit the return of refugees until the conditions of the statute were met for the sanctions to be lifted.



A visitor to the U.S. Capitol observes the display of photographs titled “Caesar’s Photos: Inside Syria’s Secret Prisons,” which provides strong evidence of some of the crimes against humanity by President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The Caesar collection is the inspiration for legislation that would apply robust sanctions on leadership within the Assad regime and its security services. (Samuel Corum/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images).

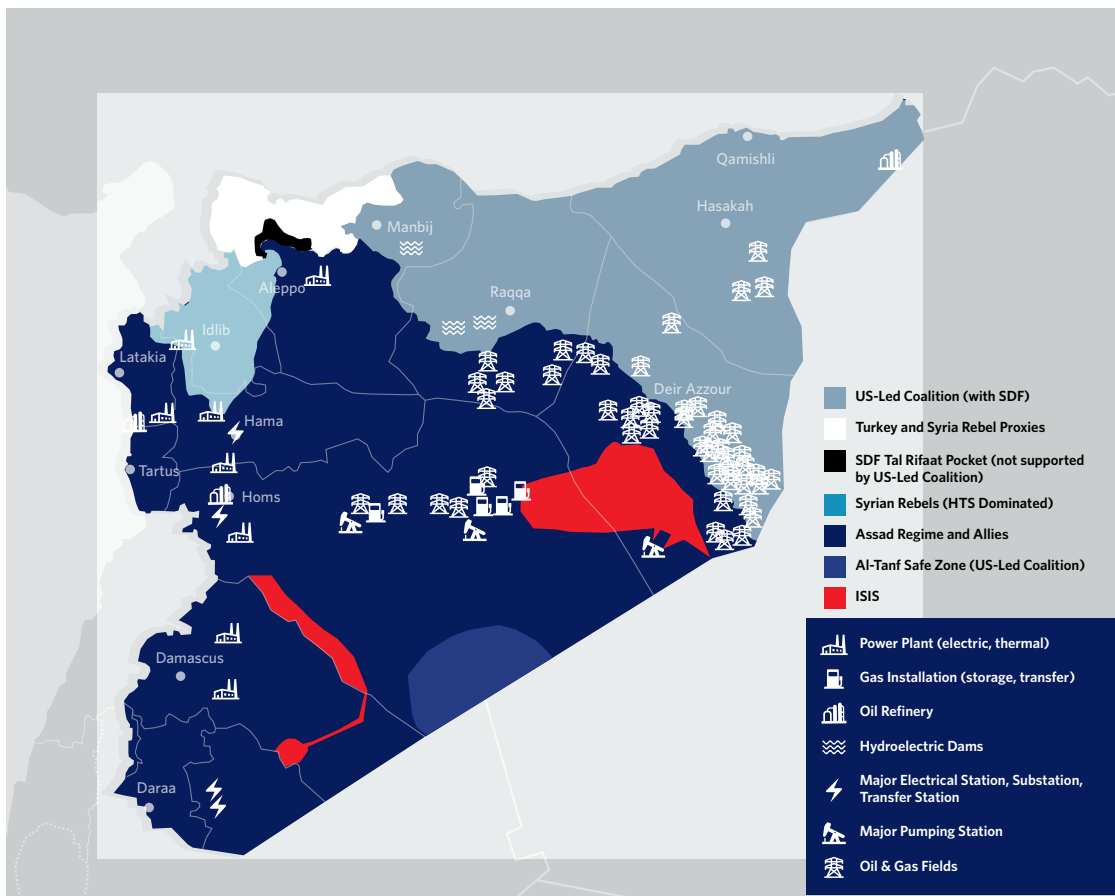
The bill would also impact wealthy Syrian expatriates who are not connected to the Assad regime who are interested in investing in projects related to Syria’s reconstruction. Engaging wealthy Syrian expatriates who are seeking to invest in re-building Syria is seen as the “lowest hanging fruit” for the Assad regime to begin and profit from reconstruction efforts.<sup>23</sup> However, the potential implementation of the Caesar bill sanctions has reportedly created a de facto freeze on Syrian expatriate investment in regime-held areas that is expected to hold for the foreseeable future.<sup>24</sup>

U.S. sanctions on Syria have yet to effect the desired changes in the regime’s behavior. If additional sanctions measures are enacted, like those put forth in the Caesar bill, it may be the Syrian people who suffer more than regime elites and their allies, who have already found ways to circumvent U.S. sanctions in the past for their own gain while the Syrian economy has continued its decline.<sup>25</sup> Either way, the economic pressure these sanctions deliver is most helpful if properly used as leverage in diplomatic efforts to reach a political agreement on an end state in Syria, whatever that may look like. However, this necessitates clear messaging on the part of the United States and its partners to delineate, publicly or through private diplomatic channels, what changes in the regime’s “composition, policies, and actions” would result in a lessening of the restrictions.

## Syria’s Fragmentation

Syria’s conflict is both less complicated and more complicated than it was when the United States began combat operations against ISIS in the country in September 2014. Events inside Syria in the last year have expanded the participation of foreign actors directly on Syrian territory, including by Russia, Iran, and Iran-backed groups working alongside the Assad regime, the U.S.-led coalition, and Turkey. The Syrian civil war is less complicated because the number of local, armed actors and the territory they control have significantly decreased, as a result of the ebb and flow of the war. However, the war is more complicated because the number of foreign actors with zones of control inside Syria has increased, and these foreign actors are by and large at odds with each other. At this stage in the conflict, the soft partition of Syria is well underway. Through the counter-ISIS campaign, the U.S.-led coalition has developed a zone of control in northern and eastern Syria that stretches across almost one-third of the country. This coalition zone, which is administered on the day-to-day level by the coalition’s local Syrian partners, especially the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces organization, possesses several natural resources—oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity production—that are vital for the future stability of Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Syria Resource Map<sup>27</sup>



*This map depicts the location of Syria's best natural resources, particularly its energy resources. The coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria is rich in oil and provides the United States with strong leverage to determine the end state in Syria.*

Access to these natural resources is highly coveted by the Assad regime and by its Russian allies. Systemic problems related to corruption, warlordism, and resource hoarding in regime-held areas of western Syria have disrupted the distribution of existential goods such as flour and essential goods such as cooking and heating oil and gasoline.<sup>28</sup> There is evidence that these systemic challenges in Assad regime-held areas are exacerbated by the Trump administration's policy of using sanctions against the regime and its enablers and maintaining an international consensus against normalizing Assad's regime.<sup>29</sup> This situation could mean that the United States has as much leverage through the coalition zone as it chooses to wield in order to influence decision making in Damascus and among Assad's allies, especially Russia.<sup>30</sup>

Further, Russia views access to the natural resources in the coalition zone as a key to alleviating these systemic challenges in regime-controlled areas and has made the causal link between recent strong U.S. actions to dissuade the SDF from selling oil to the Assad regime and the current fuel crisis in regime-held areas.<sup>31</sup> Russia reportedly regularly communicates to the SDF that if it wants Russian support and protection from Turkey, and a limited form of autonomy from the Assad regime, in a potential future where the United States has withdrawn its military forces from Syria, then it should allow the free flow of these vital natural resources from northern and eastern Syria to regime-held areas.<sup>32</sup>



## Matters of Concern for U.S. Policy on Syria

There are several matters of concern that are relevant to the United States in Syria, all of which impact U.S. policy toward the conflict there and the indefinite maintenance of U.S. forces in Syria. These matters relate to: (1) the “Assad dilemma”; (2) Turkey and sustaining the coalition zone; (3) refugees; (4) Salafi-jihadi violent extremist organizations (VEOs); (5) Russia’s role; and (6) prevention of a larger Israeli-Iranian conflict.

### The Assad Dilemma

The most important and longest-running challenge for U.S. policy toward Syria is how to approach the reality that the Assad government, with the generous military support of its allies Russia and Iran, is at its strongest position in the conflict since 2012. The Assad regime’s continued rule, and its strong resistance to changing its behavior and reforming, is the largest roadblock to advancing the United Nations-led process to end the Syrian crisis. Since 2011, the U.S. policy of isolating the Assad regime by building an international consensus around the understanding that its continued rule over Syria was unacceptable has not achieved results. And at present there remains no clear pathway to either change the regime’s behavior, the aim of current U.S. policy, or

Assad regime and its partners or has “reconciled” with the regime and exists under its heavy security presence.<sup>34</sup> This includes all of the country’s ports and its most populous cities. Indeed, the majority of the country’s remaining population, including millions of IDPs, lives in these areas. Most important, the regime has clear and unchallenged control over Damascus, Syria’s capital, for the first time since fall 2011.<sup>35</sup> Over the course of the last year, the regime’s steady consolidation of its zone of control, based in western and central Syria, and the expansion of its influence in eastern Syria have made it look as if the regime and its partners have “won” the war, which is threatening the U.S.-led international consensus to resist the re-normalization of the regime.<sup>36</sup>

This is not an insignificant challenge, and it is instructive for U.S. policy toward Assad, which is to sanction his regime and its Syrian and foreign enablers, to seek to retain the international consensus against rewarding the Assad regime, and to deny it international reconstruction assistance until there has been irreversible progress in the Geneva process.<sup>37</sup> On the Assad dilemma, the United States turns to pressuring Russia, because the Russians are viewed as the most powerful partner of the Assad regime that could potentially force changes in the regime’s behavior.

U.S. policy also seeks to raise the costs for Russia to remain invested as deeply in Syria, as long as the Assad

## The United States faces a quandary: Will the current approach to work against the regime achieve U.S. goals?

engage in a process that would remove the regime from power, which has also recently been a considered policy of the Trump administration.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which was passed in 2015, outlined a series of steps to reform Syria’s security and political structures, including a mechanism for transition from Assad’s rule. It remains the international standard through which the United States hopes to achieve a future Syria that is stable and is governed by an authority who is seen as legitimate by its people.<sup>33</sup>

Yet Assad continues to rule over Syria in a violent and oppressive manner eight years since the uprising against his regime began, despite U.S. and international efforts to change the regime’s behavior and incentivize reforms. Now the United States faces a quandary: Will the current approach to work against the regime achieve U.S. goals?

Estimates indicate that more than half of Syria’s territory is now back under the direct control of the

regime continues to resist irreversible progress in the Geneva process, thereby weakening Russian resolve to protect the regime from the consequences of its actions.<sup>38</sup> However, the challenge in this U.S. policy is that neither Russia nor Iran, Assad’s most powerful backers, nor even some of the regional Arab partners of the United States (such as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Jordan) believe there is an alternative to Assad, which weakens regional incentives to change his regime’s behavior short of narrowly focusing on ensuring that the regime and its Iranian patrons do not threaten the security of regional states with their activities.<sup>39</sup>

For the foreseeable future, the Trump administration will be challenged by the reality of the Assad dilemma. Ultimately, and possibly sooner rather than later, the United States may have to enact policies to overcome the Assad dilemma that will be controversial, and potentially region-altering. These policies range from accepting that Assad will stay in power to deciding that he must go and needs to be forcibly removed from power.

In deciding for Assad to remain in power, the logic could be for the United States and its partners, especially European partners, to work out a road map with Russia on how to re-normalize the government in Damascus, if not one that is ultimately led by Assad. This effort would seek to leverage Syrian expatriate and Arab (especially Gulf) investment in Syria's reconstruction first, rather than greenlighting European or other international investment in Syria right away.<sup>40</sup> Although there could be several permutations of how this line of effort would be staged, one example could be that in exchange for the United States' agreeing to stop preventing interested partner states such as the United Arab Emirates from upgrading relations and facilitating Syrian expatriate and Arab investment in Syria, Russia would agree to a U.N.-led—and, critically, U.N.-overseen—presidential election in 2021 and to dissuade Assad from running for president.<sup>41</sup> The objective of this course of action would be to respond to the reality that stability in Syria cannot be built until the reconstruction process has started.

This course of action accepts the reality that there are cracks in the global effort to punish Assad and his regime for its actions. There is a general mood, even among anti-Assad actors, that his regime has won the war and that what remains an open question is whether there is an opportunity to advance the Geneva process and achieve some of the UNSCR 2254 goals for reform and to provide a “runway” for Assad to transition from power sooner rather than later.<sup>42</sup> Further, the Assad regime is enacting a strategy to “outlast” international opinion against it, and is reportedly preparing to rule over a smaller, but more demographically manageable (i.e. fewer Sunnis), country for an indefinite period of time.<sup>43</sup> There is a legitimate question whether the U.S. policy, as it is currently defined to change the regime's behavior, has a prayer to work when the Assad regime and the Ba'ath Deep State that undergirds his rule is preparing to overcome U.S.-led attempts to attrite its base of support and to undermine the confidence of its allies in its continued ability to rule over Syria.<sup>44</sup>

This approach will be challenging because there remains an aversion within the United States and Europe to reward Assad (and other regime leaders) for taking actions that led to a conflict that has killed more than half a million people, led to the worst mass displacement crisis since World War II, created aftershocks that could eventually contribute to the collapse of other regional states, and provided the opportunity for VEOs to build safe havens, and for doing all of this while conducting security and military activities considered crimes against humanity.<sup>45</sup> There is a bipartisan mood within the U.S.

Congress, through various legislation, to punish Assad and his regime for actions that predate the Syrian civil war, including Assad's alleged support for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and assistance to VEO foreign fighters transiting Syria to fight against the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.<sup>46</sup> Further, U.S. courts recently ruled that the Assad government is criminally liable for the targeted killing in 2012 of Marie Colvin, a U.S. national and journalist who was reporting from Syria at the time of her death, and may also be ruled criminally liable for the execution in detention of Layla Shweikani, a U.S. citizen of Syrian origin who was apprehended by security forces loyal to the Assad government in 2016.<sup>47</sup>

Embarking on a cautious, staged re-normalization of the Assad government would therefore carry significant political risk for the Trump administration and would be a blow to international norms regarding human rights and the prevention of crimes against humanity. It would go against the will of the U.S. Congress and call into question the U.S. judicial system rulings regarding the Assad regime's culpability for crimes committed against U.S. persons. Beyond these serious concerns, it would

### **Embarking on a cautious, staged re-normalization of the Assad government would carry significant political risk for the Trump administration.**

also carry the risk that a status quo is created where certain interests, including those closely tied to U.S. partner states, benefit along with Assad and his regime, in exchange for a glacially moving or even frozen reform process. Assad and his regime could remain in power indefinitely, and Iran's increasingly entrenched position within Syria might not be reversed. Refugees may not want to return with Assad in power, and reconstruction might not benefit all of Syria, just regime-held areas. With these risks to consider, and with the continuing appetite to punish Assad and his regime and to prevent its re-normalization still part of a broad consensus within the U.S. national security and foreign policymaking community, the Trump administration may want to consider another line of effort to solve its Assad dilemma.

Alternatively, the United States could pursue a more aggressive course of action. Trump came into office with a higher level of skepticism toward the Syrian armed opposition, and the importance of direct U.S. support for opposition-controlled areas inside Syria, than his predecessor did.<sup>48</sup> Although previous President Barack Obama

once disparaged the Syrian armed opposition as “former doctors, farmers, pharmacists, and so forth,” he continued to maintain the policy of providing them with lethal support, whereas Trump very publicly commented on his disregard for the so-called Operation Timber Sycamore, including via Twitter.<sup>49</sup> While Trump has emphasized his distrust of the capabilities of the Syrian armed opposition, he has also displayed a similar distaste for Assad, referring to the Syrian leader as an “animal.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike Obama, Trump has also authorized two strike operations (in April 2017 and 2018) against Assad government military targets in response to the regime’s use of chemical weapons, which former Secretary of Defense James Mattis estimates cost the Assad government at least 20 percent of its operational combat aircraft.<sup>51</sup>

While the Trump administration has stopped direct support for the Syrian armed opposition, it has instead sought to create the conditions for removing Assad by increasing the sanctions pressure on his government, its enablers, and more broadly on Iranian organizations and entities that through their malign activities support the

This policy, though, could just as likely end with Assad still in power, despite widespread human suffering in regime-held areas. Whereas Obama’s policy of supporting the Syrian armed opposition artificially prolonged a war that may have ended, eventually, with a decisive victory by Assad and his allies, Trump’s policy implicitly (but not explicitly) makes the security of the people in Assad government-controlled areas its tool to seek changes in the behavior of Assad and his regime. In fact, analysts based in Damascus define the current U.S. policy toward Syria as “economic warfare” and are wary of the destabilizing effect it could have on regime-held areas moving forward.<sup>56</sup> In effect, the Trump administration policy could exacerbate the existential challenges of the population in Assad government-controlled areas, which are already bad due to the corruption and war-lordism of the regime and pro-Assad power brokers, to such an extent that the people who supported or tolerated Assad’s rule cannot bear to live under him anymore. This “sanction into submission” strategy toward Assad has been attempted by the United States before in

## **Eight years since the start of the Syrian uprising, the United States (and to be fair, the broader international community) is no closer to a solution to the Assad dilemma than it was in the summer of 2011.**

Assad government.<sup>52</sup> And although the Trump administration does not say so explicitly, its maximum pressure strategy could erode the stability of Assad government-controlled areas by inflicting pain on the population there in order to move it toward civil disobedience and uprising against the Assad family and the regime that supports it.<sup>53</sup> This policy could collapse support for Assad in the areas that have remained generally loyal to his government throughout the war and could force Russia to accept the reality that it cannot achieve its goal of shoring up its position in Syria for decades to come by unlocking reconstruction funding and stability programming through a process run through Damascus, so long as Assad’s regime does not change its behavior, or even remains in power over the long term.<sup>54</sup> Forcing this realization upon the Russians could move them closer toward the U.S. position on the need to implement the Geneva process and UNSCR 2254 and, most importantly, fast-track changes in the Assad regime’s behavior or even fast-track Assad’s departure from office and the start of the process to reform the regime and the security branches that undergird its power in order to create the conditions to achieve the Geneva process and UNSCR 2254 goals.<sup>55</sup>

other contexts in the Middle East, such as with Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Omar al-Bashir in Sudan; the strategy generally has failed and has led to mass human suffering that has strengthened the power of regime elites, not weakened it.<sup>57</sup>

Fundamentally, the pressing question of how to build stability in Syria so it is not a place where a major war will erupt and embroil the wider Middle East, but is instead one where millions of refugees can safely return and resettle, where the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction are not normal, and where Salafijihadi VEO organizations will not establish safe havens, is determined by Assad’s continued hold on power in Damascus. Eight years since the start of the Syrian uprising, the United States (and to be fair, the broader international community) is no closer to a solution to the Assad dilemma than it was in the summer of 2011 when calls for his removal from power began in earnest. Efforts by both the current and prior U.S. administrations have not succeeded in removing Assad, have not diminished Iran’s influence in Syria (thereby making a region-altering war between Israel and Iran more likely), and have not forced Russia to seriously seek out demonstrable

changes in the Assad regime's behavior or irreversible progress in the Geneva process. Russia seeks, but has failed, to unblock reconstruction aid and a process to return refugees back home.

The Trump administration could read the butcher's bill of the Syrian civil war and observe that Assad and senior members of his government and security forces are responsible for crimes against humanity on a terrifying scale. Trump could read that bill and see that Assad is responsible for the systematic use of chemical weapons against his population (which on two occasions led to U.S. airstrikes against Syrian military assets); systematic extrajudicial torture and execution in detention centers, prisons, and hospitals against his own people; systematic use of aerial bombardment and indirect fire against heavily populated areas in his own country; and the use of sieges and the denial of international humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in areas that his forces besieged.<sup>58</sup> Trump could then decide that the only course of action to solve the Assad dilemma and its challenge to the long-term stability of Syria is to act on his instinct—as he apparently ordered Mattis to do during the April 2018 strikes—to forcibly remove Assad.<sup>59</sup>

The Assad dilemma impacts U.S. policy toward Syria in multiple ways. One is that by pursuing the diplomatic route to apply international pressure to remove Assad from power, the United States is depending on other actors, especially its fellow U.N. Security Council member Russia, to act in good faith to change the Assad regime's behavior or find a viable pathway to advance the Geneva process and achieve UNSCR 2254 in order to create the conditions that could lead to an alternative to Assad and the most problematic actors within his regime. Russia's acquiescence to UNSCR 2254, and the potential that conditions in the Syrian conflict could bring Russia to agree to actively implement UNSCR 2254, continues to be one of the big goals in U.S. policy toward Syria.<sup>60</sup> This goal is unmet not only because Russia has acted as if it never signed on to UNSCR 2254, but also because it became a direct actor in the civil war in September 2015 with its military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime. The United States has tried twice to work via Russia to obtain and sustain major ceasefires (aka "cessations of hostility")—the nationwide cessation of hostilities in 2016 and the southwest de-escalation zone and "no Iran" (in southwest Syria) zone in 2017 and 2018—and these efforts have failed because Russia has been unable or unwilling to enforce them.<sup>61</sup> Further, efforts to engage with Moscow to advance the Geneva process have also failed because the Russians are embedded deeply in partnership with the Assad regime,

making them incapable and/or unwilling to identify any potential successor or successors to Assad.

Iran's long-standing patronage of Assad, members of his family, and members of his inner regime within the Ba'ath Deep State is another factor that complicates the Assad dilemma for the United States, its European allies, and Middle East state partners.<sup>62</sup> It remains an open question whether the Assad regime, simply out of the interest of regime survival by avoiding a potentially catastrophic war with Israel that would leave it severely weakened, can limit Iranian activities inside Syria, which was the power that the regime had to limit Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) activities in Syria before 2011. The Assad regime, especially the Ba'ath Deep State, should therefore in theory have an inherent interest in limiting the ability of the IRGC-QF to operate inside Syrian territory in a manner that would provoke Israel to move up the escalation chain to include operations against Syrian military forces.<sup>63</sup> This assumes that the Assad regime, the Ba'ath Deep State, and the Assad-loyalist branches of the Syrian security forces are able to act in "the Syrian interest," to reassert authority over how Syria's territory is used (if at all) by the IRGC-QF and Iranian-backed forces, and to keep the IRGC-QF from escalating against Israel.

Syria has been a key actor within the "Resistance Axis" that is led by Iran, and the geography of Syria is key to Iranian national security policy. Eastern Syria in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) is key to securing the Iraqi border, which is essential for Iran to secure its influence over Iraq and therefore use Iraq as a shield to protect Iran's territory. Western Syria is a site of strategic depth for Lebanese Hezbollah, which is an organization that provides Iran with the ability to apply

**Syria has been a key actor within the "Resistance Axis" that is led by Iran, and the geography of Syria is key to Iranian national security policy.**

strategic pressure on Israel, one of its deadliest foes.<sup>64</sup> The IRGC-QF and Iranian-backed groups were deeply involved in supporting Assad and his regime early on in the civil war, and the IRGC-QF has since expanded its influence and direct control throughout the security services (both old and new) that buttress the power of the Assad government. For all intents and purposes, Iran has been able to use its investment in Assad to expand its footprint in Syria and develop a stronger system of



military support, including missile storehouse and production facilities, in western Syria into Lebanon.<sup>65</sup>

This is not an insignificant challenge, and it is instructive for the current U.S. policy toward Assad, which is essentially to sanction his regime and its Syrian and foreign enablers and to continue to strongly insist that he cannot credibly be the future leader of Syria. The problem for U.S. policy is that neither Russia nor Iran, Assad's most powerful backers, nor even some of the regional Arab partners of the United States, such as the

## Further exacerbating the Assad dilemma for the United States is the lack of a clear answer on whether some alternative person, or group of people, could govern Syria instead of Assad.

United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Jordan, believes there is an alternative to Assad or is willing to come up with an alternative to him.<sup>66</sup> Although U.S. and European sanctions are biting into Assad's regime, these sanctions alone have not broken, and are unlikely to break, Russia and Iran's agreement that there is no alternative.<sup>67</sup>

This is a problem for the American side not only because the policy of the U.S. government is to pressure Assad to leave power, but also because it presents a "handover dilemma" with respect to the large U.S. zone of control in northern and eastern Syria. Who in Damascus, if anybody, would be a good choice for the United States to give the land back to?<sup>68</sup> The United States does not want to give the coalition zone back to Assad, usually arguing that his rule was the factor that led to the civil war and ensuing security vacuum, and ultimately the rise of Salafi-jihadi violent extremist organizations such as ISIS that necessitated direct U.S. military involvement inside Syria in the first place, and that Assad would therefore be unable to maintain peace and stability in the former ISIS areas conquered by the U.S.-led coalition.<sup>69</sup>

Further exacerbating the Assad dilemma for the United States is the lack of a clear answer on whether some alternative person, or group of people, could govern Syria instead of Assad. Neither Russia nor Iran is inclined to provide answers to that question, because to do so would undermine their position that the only legitimate leader in Syria is Assad, that foreign forces that are in the country without the approval of Damascus (especially

the U.S.-led coalition) should withdraw, that the reconstruction of Syria should begin, and that at some later date elections overseen by the government should be held to settle who should rule Syria.

The Trump administration has responded by designing a strategy that would in effect sanction the Assad government to the brink of collapse, therefore significantly and potentially prohibitively raising the cost for Russia and, to a lesser extent, Iran. It would appear that the Trump administration is essentially seeking to create a quagmire for Russia by using sanctions, and the pressure that comes from de facto American control over Syria's best oil, agricultural land, water, and electrical production, to undermine the stability of Assad's government, exacerbate shortages of existential goods and services in regime-held areas, and therefore foster mass discontent against the regime to deteriorate it to the point where it is no longer a stable or credible partner for Russia.<sup>70</sup> The goal of this policy could be interpreted to be to collapse the regime's position to the point where Russia, in the pursuit of its own interest in maintaining its military installations in western Syria and its continued strong influence over the future of Syria, moves to engage productively with the United States to advance the Geneva process and achieve UNSCR 2254 goals.<sup>71</sup>

The current U.S. strategy to put maximum pressure on the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran depends on the logic that the population in regime-held areas will eventually rise up against Assad and that such an uprising will occur when the regime is weakest. This is an uncertain



*Russian soldiers deployed to Syria march past a poster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during a parade in Aleppo to commemorate the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. The U.S. strategy toward Syria depends on Russia's support to force changes in the Assad regime's behavior and to apply pressure on Iran to remove Iranian-backed forces from Syria. (George Ourfalian/Getty Images)*

scenario because the Assad regime has weathered significant international sanctions since 2012, with support of Russia and Iran that is not wavering, and the population in regime-held areas could be very wary to launch another uprising after watching how far the regime is willing to go to defend its survival.

### Turkey and Sustaining the Coalition Zone

The success of the U.S.-led coalition's stabilization mission in Syria will be determined by the ability of the SDF and the Self Administration of North and East Syria that governs the coalition zone to develop into a structure that can provide security and good governance for the people of this region of Syria. Herein lies the challenge and the opportunity for the SDF. The SDF is a multiethnic military alliance—with a large part of its strength being the People's Protection Units (YPG)—an umbrella organization of local community-based militias, many of which are composed of ethnic Kurds, and a significant number of which are associated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD).<sup>72</sup> The PYD, which

Turkish military and the PKK occurred as the result of the breakdown of peace talks between the government, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the PKK in 2015. These most recent rounds of fighting between the PKK and Turkey have killed approximately 3,000 people, including civilians and combatants, and have led to widespread destruction in several cities in Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey.<sup>76</sup>

A semi-autonomous organization within the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), has conducted several high-profile attacks against targets in tourist areas of western Turkish cities that are frequented by foreigners, including in Istanbul and Ankara.<sup>77</sup> The Turkish government believes that TAK has established a safe haven in northern and eastern Syria in the zones controlled by the YPG (i.e., those under the influence of the U.S. military) to plan attacks inside of Turkey.<sup>78</sup> Turkish analysts also believe that more than 1,000 Turkish citizens (i.e., ethnic Kurds, most of whom Turkey believes are connected to the PKK) have traveled to Syria and are fighting with YPG.<sup>79</sup>

## For the time being, Turkey will remain a problem and a potential source of threats to the U.S.-led coalition's stabilization effort in northern and eastern Syria.

is the dominant Syrian Kurdish political party, is in turn strongly influenced by Abdullah Ocalan, the spiritual leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a predominantly Turkish Kurdish organization that is at war with the Turkish government and that the United States lists as a terrorist organization.<sup>73</sup>

The intellectual underpinning of the Self Administration of North and East Syria's governance model is the "Democratic Confederalism" theory first proposed by Ocalan. Ocalan's theory was written as a series of essays in 2005 in response to interethnic violence, mainly between Arabs and Kurds that afflicted northern and eastern Syria in 2004. Ocalan's ideas are given form with the establishment of the Self Administration of North and East Syria and are the governing framework that is replacing ISIS and serving as the partner for U.S. stabilization efforts.<sup>74</sup>

Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK and the U.S. relationship with the YPG and the PYD are significant and are a driver of tensions among the NATO allies. Since the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK began in 1984, it is estimated that 40,000 people, including civilians and combatants, have been killed.<sup>75</sup> The current phase of hostilities between the

Despite Turkey's assessment, the U.S. military has nurtured the development of the SDF, developing it from an alliance forged between the YPG and Arab-majority armed opposition groups. This alliance fought together to defend the northern Syrian city of Kobani from ISIS in the summer of 2014, and it was this successful example of interethnic cooperation under the leadership of the YPG at Kobani that piqued the interest of the U.S. military and its coalition partners.<sup>80</sup> Since 2015, the SDF, under the guidance of the U.S. military and other coalition partners, has been built organically to reflect northern and eastern Syria's communal diversity and to guard against the region's history of intercommunal violence that ISIS had previously used to its advantage there.<sup>81</sup>

For the time being, Turkey will remain a problem and a potential source of threats to the U.S.-led coalition's stabilization effort in northern and eastern Syria working through the Self Administration of North and East Syria and the SDF because Ankara views the PYD and by extension the YPG and SDF as an existential threat. Turkey's distrust of both the SDF and, to be frank, the United States will continue to create security problems for the U.S.-led coalition and its SDF partners in Syria. Over the last year, there have been a number

of assassination attempts, some successful, against SDF officials and their local, mainly Arab allies. These social, political, and security challenges—although for the time being manageable for the SDF—are easily exacerbated with greater Turkish attention and support, which seem forthcoming.<sup>82</sup>

In effect, the U.S.-led coalition wants the SDF to govern areas of northern and eastern Syria in the coalition zone that were under the control of ISIS and are Arab-majority, such as Manbij, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zour, in a manner that will conform to the wishes of the local population.<sup>83</sup> This is to keep the local population from wishing for the return of ISIS, but in so doing the United States wants the SDF to be a self-running machine, without too much input required from the U.S.-led coalition.<sup>84</sup> The challenge is that the SDF's default setting is to run a government according to Ocalan's vision and to set the social norms according to the ideology of the PYD, which is problematic for many locals in place like Manbij, Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, as it can cause discord that can be used by a range of opponents—be they ISIS, the Assad regime, or Turkey.<sup>85</sup>

Inconsistencies in U.S. policy vis-à-vis Turkey have not helped balance the concerns of Turkey with the concerns of the Syrian Kurds within the SDF. One example of this inconsistency is former Vice President Joe Biden's promise to Erdogan in 2016 that the SDF, not just the YPG units within the SDF, would withdraw from Manbij and back to the east bank of the Euphrates.<sup>86</sup> That broken promise is still remembered by Erdogan and the Turkish public who feel they were lied to by their NATO ally.<sup>87</sup>

However, U.S.-Turkish joint military patrols in the disputed region of Manbij, west of the Euphrates, are a positive step forward.<sup>88</sup> The Trump administration should remain wary of Turkey's intentions because Erdogan has insisted on his right to dismantle the SDF east of the Euphrates. Even in Manbij, an insurgency that has been launched by local opposition forces and that is likely tacitly backed by the Turks has succeeded in killing key officials from the Manbij Military Council, the Arab-majority affiliate of the SDF in the Manbij region.<sup>89</sup>

Turkey will likely not willingly surrender its territorial zone of control in northwest Syria back to Assad out of concern that it would lose territorial leverage there to prevent the establishment of a PKK safe haven.<sup>90</sup> And while that might seem to be an advantage for current U.S. policy, it is also a problem. That problem relates to Turkey's aggressive posture toward the SDF and the YPG, which is what brought the Turkish military on the ground in Syria to begin with when it launched Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016.<sup>91</sup> Erdogan's



*A new cohort of Raqqa Internal Security Forces (RISF) members is being inducted by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in March 2019. The RISF is an important example of the effort by the U.S.-led coalition to use the SDF as the vehicle through which to develop Syrian partner forces to provide security and prevent the re-emergence of ISIS. (Wladimir van Wilgenburg)*

decision to enter Syria, motivated by a desire to prevent what the Turkish government feared would be a contiguous, Kurdish-controlled zone stretching across its southern border with Syria, and to a lesser extent to clear ISIS from its last stronghold near the border, has been one of the most consequential decisions of the war.

Turkey is a NATO ally, but the intentions of the Turkish government toward the SDF-administered areas in the coalition zone east of the Euphrates should be a cause of great concern for the Trump administration. If Erdogan were to act on his desire to dismantle the SDF in the coalition zone, it would mean that Turkey would be directly undermining the U.S. stabilization effort in the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria, which would be a boon for ISIS.



Overall, Turkey is a problematic partner in Syria, and in regard to the effort to stabilize the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria, Turkey should be considered more an adversary than an ally. Erdogan's threats to launch a Turkish military-backed, Syrian rebel offensive in the areas east of the Euphrates in the coalition zone created the stress on Trump that led to the president's December 2018 decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Syria.<sup>92</sup> This would have been a decision that would have helped ISIS to take advantage of the ensuing instability. The United States has been providing Turkey with close cooperation in regard to threats from the PKK, and U.S. and coalition partner forces have surveillance in northern and eastern Syria to prevent the coalition zone from becoming a PKK safe haven for planning and executing attacks against Turkey.<sup>93</sup>

It is Turkey, not the United States, that has been the troublesome ally in northern and eastern Syria, and the Trump administration would do well to communicate

that consistently and persistently to Erdogan and his senior leadership. This does not necessarily mean that the Trump administration cannot achieve a *modus vivendi* between Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups and the SDF and its adjutant forces, but that agreement will likely be persistently threatened by Erdogan's domestic political calculations and need to demonstrate his toughness on matters of Turkish national security by targeting the SDF in Syria. Although power sharing between Turkish-backed local Syrians and the local Syrians who support the SDF and its adjutant forces would be ideal, especially in the areas stretching from the eastern bank of the Euphrates to the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi border region in northern and eastern Syria, any such deal should not come at the expense of the SDF. It is possible that a renewed peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK in Turkey could alleviate Ankara's security concerns toward Syria, which could alleviate pressure from Turkey on the SDF in the coalition zone.

#### AFRIN: A CLOSER LOOK

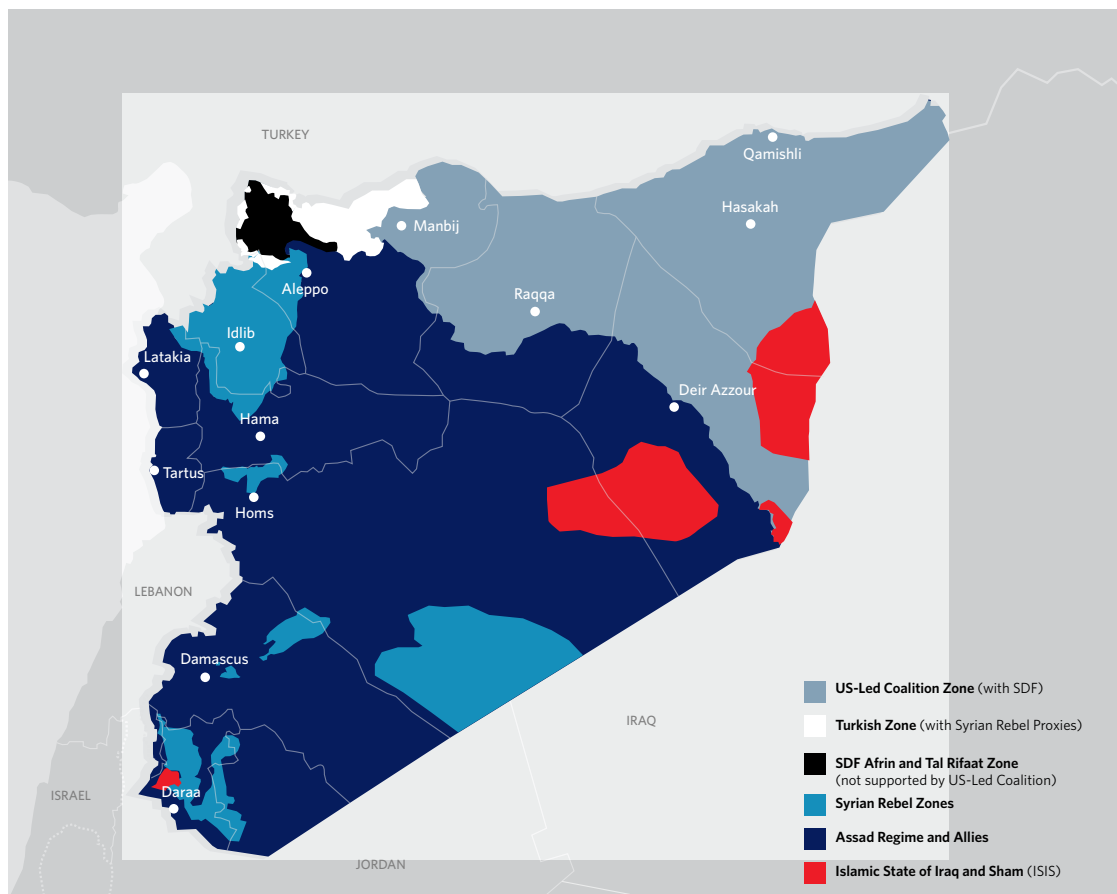
It is also worth taking a closer look at Afrin, a historically ethnic Kurdish region that over the course of the civil war was controlled by the People's Protection Units (YPG). Afrin remained relatively untouched by the war and was a haven for tens of thousands of people displaced from other regions of Syria, but after Turkish-backed forces captured the town in March 2018, the situation in Afrin has deteriorated significantly. The plight of its people has been a big hole in U.S. policy and deserves special attention because this region is very important to the YPG—a major component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and America's best and closest partner in Syria. The unresolved situation in Afrin could be the trigger for a larger conflict between Turkey and Syria's Kurdish community.<sup>94</sup> In fact, the SDF has set a goal to liberate Afrin after the territorial ISIS caliphate has been eliminated in northern and eastern Syria.<sup>95</sup>

According to the World Health Organization, close to 170,000 residents of Afrin have been displaced, most of them ethnic Kurds.<sup>96</sup> The Turkish-backed, Syrian armed opposition occupation force in Afrin has been credibly linked to human rights abuses, looting, and illegal seizures of property, including expropriating millions of dollars' worth of olive oil from predominately Kurdish-owned olive groves in Afrin.<sup>97</sup> In response, a coalition of YPG-linked resistance groups has embarked on a campaign, named "Wrath of Olives," to destabilize the Turkish-backed occupation forces in Afrin and to slow or prevent Turkish-imposed demographic changes that displace the Kurdish population of Afrin and give the formerly Kurdish-owned homes, businesses, and agricultural lands to internally displaced persons, predominantly Arab, who fled to northwest Syria from other, former opposition-held areas in Syria.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the consequences of the Turkish military operation in Afrin have been severe and are still causing tensions between the YPG and the U.S.-led coalition, because despite pressure from the coalition, the YPG will not surrender its right to liberate Afrin from Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies.<sup>99</sup>

Afrin has been largely forgotten by the United States because U.S. policy has been to categorize the YPG organization that exists east of the Euphrates River as the SDF, and therefore part of the counter-ISIS campaign, and the YPG organization west of the Euphrates as a separate entity that is not supported by the coalition. This of course is not how the YPG perceives itself, and the result of the Turkish campaign in Afrin was to cause the counter-ISIS campaign in eastern Syria to nearly grind to a halt in February 2018 as the YPG sent some of its forces from the battles against ISIS in northern and eastern Syria to confront Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies in Afrin.<sup>100</sup> The precedent set by Turkey in Afrin should be a cause for concern for the United States, as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has frequently stated that it is his intention to launch similar operations against the SDF in the areas east of the Euphrates.<sup>101</sup>



## Syria's Shifting Zones<sup>102</sup>



*This map depicts how the zones of control in Syria looked in February 2018 and shifted over the course of 2018-2019, with the most territory being won by President Bashar al-Assad's regime and its allies against the Syrian armed opposition in western Syria, and by the U.S.-led coalition and its Syrian Democratic Forces partners against the Islamic State group, also known as ISIS, in northern and eastern Syria. Afrin, in northwest Syria, was conquered by Turkey and added into the Turkish zone of control.*

### Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

Since 2011, more than 5.6 million people have fled the fighting and destruction in Syria.<sup>103</sup> Most reside now in Syria's neighboring countries, such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, which hosts the largest number of registered Syrian refugees at 3.3 million.<sup>104</sup> Only about 1 million asylum-seekers and refugees have made it to Europe, where Germany hosts the fifth-largest displaced Syrian population worldwide.<sup>105</sup> While the vast majority of Syrian refugees remain in the Middle East, much of Europe is still plagued by ideologically driven fears that Syrian refugees in Europe present a significant economic burden and threat of terrorism.<sup>106</sup>

In order for refugees to return to Syria, their areas of origin must be made habitable, which necessitates at the start a guarantee of their security, the rebuilding of physical infrastructure, provision of basic services, and

livelihood prospects. For these conditions to be in place, stabilization and reconstruction must be a priority of the international community and international donors, an effort that has been constrained by U.S. sanctions.<sup>107</sup> Many refugees are also concerned about their freedom and fair treatment upon return.<sup>108</sup> For those who fled because they protested and resisted Assad's brutal rule, they fear his regime may detain them if they go back. Protection of these refugees most likely depends on a cooperation agreement between the Syrian government and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), who has laid out the principles and resources necessary to increase the flow of voluntary repatriation to Syria.<sup>109</sup>

Important to note is that the issue of refugees is where the United States and Europe may diverge in their approaches to realizing an acceptable end state in Syria.

Movement to pull back sanctions on Syria is likely to come first from the Europeans, who have an interest in the return of Syrian refugees to their home country given increasing populist sentiments throughout the continent. Ensuring the safe and dignified return of refugees in significant numbers does likely rely on reaching an agreement between the Assad regime and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees as well as significant investments in the country's reconstruction. Neither of these efforts is soon to be realized. But it will not be a pretty picture if the United States is left alone in keeping sanctions on the Syrian government and continues to hinder reconstruction efforts while others have begun to normalize Assad in the name of a stable Syria.

In addition to the millions of refugees who fled the country, many millions are internally displaced within Syria: 6.6 million, according to UNHCR, with 2.98 million in hard-to-reach areas.<sup>110</sup> In the context of U.S. policy, special consideration should be given for the internally displaced persons residing in camps within the U.S.-led coalition's zone of control in northern and eastern Syria. There are hundreds of thousands of people in IDP camps throughout this zone, both in the areas that are administered by the Self Administration of North and East Syria and in the Rukban camp in the al-Tanf zone that is directly under the control of U.S.-led coalition forces

camp. There are credible reports of security and safety concerns in the camp due to the presence of criminal organizations and armed groups that are seeking to maintain control of the sporadic humanitarian assistance that enters the camp. According to Syrian opposition sources in the camp, approximately half of the Rukban residents are threatened from famine due to lack of access to food. Moreover, inflation on existential foodstuffs and potable water in the camp has made it increasingly unaffordable for residents to meet their nutritional needs. The U.N. also has had only sporadic access to the camp, and there is currently no frequent and reliable cross-border access to Rukban from Jordan, creating severe difficulty in getting humanitarian aid into the camp.<sup>113</sup>

### Salafi-Jihadi Violent Extremist Organizations

The challenge from Salafi-jihadi VEOs in Syria is shifting and will present a more complicated problem for the United States than would seem immediately apparent. Although Salafi-jihadi VEOs have succeeded in creating safe havens for their transnational operatives in Syria, especially al Qaeda and similar organizations in Idlib, these VEOs have also sought to become embedded into the local socio-politics. The manner in which the two most prominent Salafi-jihadi organizations in Syria,

**For refugees to return to Syria, their areas of origin must be made habitable, which necessitates at the start a guarantee of their security, the rebuilding of physical infrastructure, provision of basic services, and livelihood prospects.**

on the Syrian-Jordanian border in the central-eastern Syrian Desert. The humanitarian conditions in these IDP camps are challenging and are in dire need of being addressed. Various international and local nongovernment associations estimate that there could be more than 300,000 IDPs from eastern Syria in different camps in the territory administered by the Self Administration of North and East Syria and that SDF authorities have been occasionally linked to harsh security measures that prevent camp residents from moving freely out of these camps back to their homes.<sup>111</sup>

Rukban camp, which is near the U.S.-led coalition's forward military base in the al-Tanf zone, is home to 45,000 to 50,000 displaced Syrians, the majority of whom are from areas of central and eastern Syria that were formerly under the control of ISIS.<sup>112</sup> Jordan considers Rukban a threat to its national security because of the potential of ISIS operatives to be present in the

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and ISIS, are adapting to the changing dynamics in the Syrian conflict will require a persistent, but not overbearing, U.S. policy response.

In regard to ISIS, the would-be caliphate has been reduced to a zone of influence that it still maintains in western Iraq and eastern Syria, with a presence through its operatives in some areas of western Syria, especially in the northwest. ISIS has also been regrouping and rebuilding its ability to conduct clandestine attacks, both in Syria and elsewhere.<sup>114</sup> ISIS is becoming an organization that operates more like a powerful mafia, by "owning" territory through its influence and ability to exact violence and provide perks to members of the local population, and less a state-like actor that is creating a safe space for foreign fighters to plan attacks abroad.<sup>115</sup> ISIS also operates under the surveillance of the U.S.-led coalition, and other regional partner states such as Iraq and Jordan, which although not a perfect

response to the challenge that it represents, provides the United States with more options for preventing ISIS in eastern Syria and western Iraq from facilitating external attacks.<sup>116</sup> These options are in process, although they could benefit from more financial support from the Trump administration, and include supporting local Syrian partners to create security, governance, and administrative structures that are locally legitimate and resilient to ISIS; direct action against ISIS high-value targets through drone strikes and raids; and “owning” the territory that ISIS wants to reclaim.<sup>117</sup> However, all of these options will likely require an enduring U.S. military and intelligence presence in Syria, or at the least in the countries around Syria.<sup>118</sup>

Regarding al Qaeda, the largest concentration of that organization and similar ones in Syria is in what the U.S. government calls Greater Idlib, which includes areas of Idlib, Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo governorates in northwest Syria. Greater Idlib has become, according to the former U.S. Counter-ISIS Envoy Brett McGurk, “the largest al Qaeda safe haven since 9/11.”<sup>119</sup> In September 2018, Russia and Turkey agreed to implement a 9- to 12-mile demilitarized zone around Greater Idlib. Turkish and Russian militaries jointly patrol this demilitarized zone, and in it the armed opposition is supposed to remove all heavy weapons (such as tanks, artillery pieces, and surface-to-surface missiles).<sup>120</sup> Turkey also

agreed that it would work with its local Syrian armed opposition partners to remove al Qaeda and similar organizations from Greater Idlib, starting with HTS and other Salfi-jihadi VEOs from the demilitarized zone area itself.<sup>121</sup>

HTS, the former al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, and Hurras al-Din (HaD), which is the official al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, are increasingly becoming embedded into the local society in Idlib and northwest Syria and now have a majority of Syrian fighters, operatives, and support network members.<sup>122</sup> However, HTS and HaD continue to maintain a significant foreign fighter presence within their organizations, including transnational operatives who could be considered high-value targets for the United States and its allies and partners.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the United States does not have relative freedom of action in Idlib, or the broader northwest Syria, because that region is under the control of Turkey via an agreement with Russia and Iran, and the Turks—and previously Russia—have prevented the United States from conducting reconnaissance and strike activities that would be needed to disrupt transnational operatives hosted by HTS and HaD.<sup>124</sup> Further, HTS is actively consolidating its control over other armed, and unarmed, actors within the Syrian opposition in Idlib, which is providing it with the momentum to embed into the local society for the long term.<sup>125</sup>



*New members of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a powerful Syrian Salafi-jihadi organization with ties to al Qaeda, parade during their graduation from boot camp in the northwestern Syrian governorate of Idlib in August 2018. HTS dominates large areas of northwest Syria and is building a local governance structure that provides community cover for future generations of transnational Salafi-jihadists. (Omar Haj Kadour/AFP/Getty Images)*

What makes Greater Idlib so difficult is that there is no easy path for Turkey and the United States to uproot al Qaeda and similar organizations from this region because these groups have developed a significant degree of community cover from the local population. All of the Salafi-jihadi VEOs in Greater Idlib, including Huras al-Din with an estimated 500 fighters, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham with an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 fighters, the Turkistan Islamic Party (which was founded by ethnic Uighur jihadi fighters) with an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 fighters, and Jund al-Aqsa (which has ties to ISIS) with an estimated 1,500 fighters, are to one degree or another tightly woven into the local community in Greater Idlib. These organizations, although they include a significant number of foreign fighters, also possess many Syrian members and are actively involved in the security and governance of the region.<sup>126</sup>

Regarding al Qaeda, the United States is dependent on Turkey to allow it access to opposition-held areas in Greater Idlib where HTS and HaD are present, both on the ground and in regard to overflight for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to monitor potential external attack operatives.<sup>127</sup> Turkey may seek to gain U.S. support for Turkish, or Turkish-backed

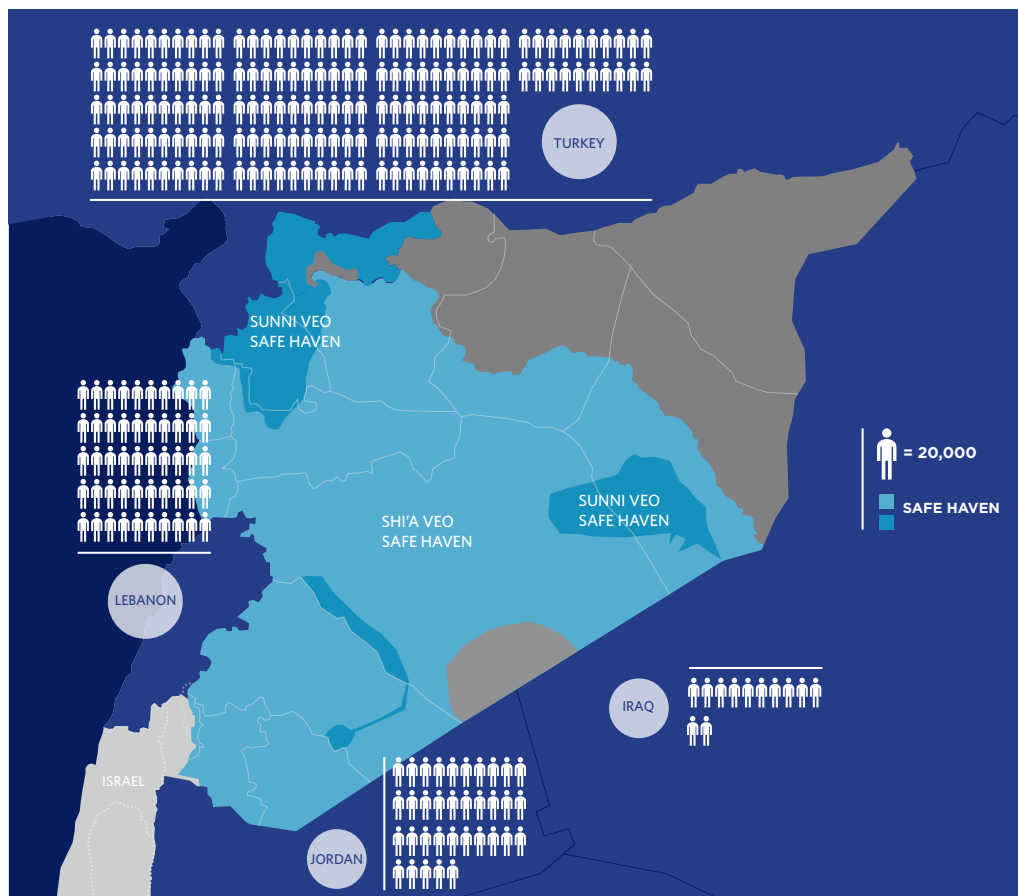
**There is a gap in the U.S. effort to support rehabilitation and stabilization in the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria that ISIS will try to exploit.**

Syrian rebel, operations in northern and eastern Syria, in exchange for facilitating the ability of the United States to monitor, and if necessary, carry out strikes against members of Salafi-jihadi VEOs in Greater Idlib.<sup>128</sup> This could be a Faustian bargain, trading away the security of the SDF, the best local partners of the coalition, and therefore potentially leading to a conflict that could displace tens of thousands more people and lead to ethnic cleansing of Kurds as occurred in Afrin, or tempt the re-emergence of ISIS in the ensuing instability, for a limited U.S. ability to strike in Greater Idlib. However, there could instead be opportunities to expand on the U.S.-Turkish cooperation regarding the PKK leadership in Iraq, in exchange for Turkish guarantees not to enter northern and eastern Syria and Turkish cooperation in facilitating U.S. operations in Greater Idlib.

In regard to ISIS, leaving large areas of the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria without support for rehabilitation and stabilization through security, governance, administrative, and humanitarian assistance for an extended period would give the terrorist group a great opportunity to play on local dissatisfaction and rebuild a wide base of support.<sup>129</sup> There are pressing needs in northern and eastern Syria for programs providing humanitarian assistance and security; establishing a mechanism for peace and conflict resolution, local power sharing, good governance and public administration; supporting nascent local civil society; and rehabilitating civilian and critical infrastructure.<sup>130</sup> The United States has thus far resisted providing sizable financial assistance for these efforts to build a stable post-ISIS order in the coalition zone. There also remain questions whether the innovative technical assistance that the United States was providing to coordinate rehabilitation in the coalition zone, spearheaded by the State Department, will ever return to pre-December 2018 levels.<sup>131</sup> This is a gap in the U.S. effort to support rehabilitation and stabilization in the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria that ISIS will try to exploit. So long as there remain questions concerning the extent to which the United States will financially support the rehabilitation and stabilization of post-ISIS areas in the coalition zone, there will likely be gaps in U.S. ally and partner funding for rehabilitation and stabilization in the zone. International and local NGOs can do a lot of work on the ground, but their resources are not unlimited and there are other areas of the world that also require humanitarian support and support for stabilization projects that can help rehabilitate war-ravaged and underserved areas in the coalition zone.<sup>132</sup>



## VEO Strongholds in Syria and Syrian Refugee Population in Surrounding Countries<sup>133</sup>



*This map depicts the main areas of influence and control for Salafi-jihadi violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and Iranian-backed groups inside Syria. This map also shows the concentration of refugees in the countries surrounding Syria. U.S. policy toward Syria will continue to be challenged by how to address the threat from VEO organizations that have made Syria a safe haven, recruiting area, and training ground to improve their capabilities. Another big challenge for the United States will be addressing the strain that refugee populations place on Syria's fragile neighbors, all U.S. partner states.*

### Russia's Role

Since the Cold War, Syria has been consistently part of Russia's sphere of influence, not that of the United States.<sup>134</sup> Prior to its September 2015 military intervention on behalf of the Assad government, Russia in partnership with China provided significant diplomatic top cover for Assad in the United Nations.<sup>135</sup> Russia also acted as an arbiter on behalf of Assad with the United States, most notably on the September 2013 agreement that was supposed to result in elimination of the Assad government's chemical weapon stockpiles.<sup>136</sup>

What has changed since September 2015, beyond the obvious effects of the Russian military's direct participation in the war, is that Russia is investing in an active and overt effort to rehabilitate and reshape the next generation of the Assad government's military forces. Russia's

effort in this regard concerning the loyalist Syrian Arab Army (SAA), including building up the so-called 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of former armed opposition fighters, is running parallel to and in concert with Iran's own effort to establish a parallel system of local Syrian security forces that are under the authority of the IRGC-QF.<sup>137</sup> However, Russia emphasizes building up the capability of the SAA and reinforcing the power of the state security forces (even if these institutions are ultimately subordinate to the regime and not to the Syrian nation), whereas the Russian perception of Iran's effort in Syria is to weaken the state security forces by focusing on building a network of militias loyal to the regime and to the IRGC-QF.<sup>138</sup>

For the time being, Russia and Iran are generally in sync with their efforts, as both view their projects

to shape the next generation of the Syrian security regime as benefiting Assad's government and therefore benefiting both Iran and Russia in their position in Syria. This reality demonstrates the challenges that are inherent with the United States' seeking to advance the Geneva process and the implementation of UNSCR 2254, because as dynamics on the ground are developing, neither Russia nor Iran has incentive to reform the Syrian security forces in a manner consistent with the U.N. process. The Russians do not have anywhere near as pervasive a presence on the ground in Syria as Iran does, and perhaps most important, Russia does not have incentives to break with Iran in Syria at the moment if the Russians want to maintain a hassle-free administration of their growing air and naval bases in western Syria.<sup>139</sup>

Over time, Russia and Iran may contest each other for exclusive control over the Assad regime, although for the time being they remain allies committed to ending the war with a victory for Assad.<sup>140</sup> Russia's deal with Turkey in Greater Idlib was made out of a desire to prevent attrition of the Assad's forces in a battle for Greater Idlib and to avoid a humanitarian crisis that would freeze the slow effort engaged by Russia to rehabilitate the image of Assad and re-normalize his government globally.<sup>141</sup> Russia cannot and will not finance the reconstruction of Syria, and Moscow needs the already painfully slow process of re-normalizing Assad to proceed apace and without interruptions.<sup>142</sup>

If the administration continues along its current policy pathway, it will be taking a big risk that Russia is willing and able to accomplish the following key requirements to diminish Iran in Syria:

- Overseeing the transition of Assad's wartime security forces away from IRGC-QF-mobilized, Syrian and foreign militias.
- Keeping Iranian and Iran-backed groups away from Israel's and Jordan's borders, and forcing these militias to withdraw from Syria.
- Eliminating the IRGC-QF's extensive logistical network of missile depots in central and western Syria that supply Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.
- Reducing or removing the strong Iranian influence over key decisionmakers in Assad's senior security, military, and governance apparatus.

In effect, the administration is saying that these tasks, each one monumental in its own right, should be Russia's job as the sheriff overseeing the stability of the western Levant (which includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and

## The United States is dependent on Russia to both stage-manage changes in the Assad regime's behavior and diminish Iran's presence in Syria.

Israel-Palestine) and preventing a region-shaking conflict between the Israelis and Iranians. This may seem to be the best of bad options for the administration, and indeed the Obama administration deserves equal blame for creating the conditions that allowed Iran to entrench itself in Syria, but it remains a gamble to make. Russia's military intervention in September 2015 and decision to provide the Assad regime with S-300 anti-air systems, and to maintain highly advanced, Russian military-operated S-400 anti-air systems, could still be used to limit Israel's freedom of operation in western Syria, which would benefit the IRGC-QF and Iran-backed forces.<sup>143</sup>

This policy also means that the United States is dependent on Russia to both stage-manage changes in the Assad regime's behavior and diminish Iran's presence in Syria. Not being present in western Syria in a meaningful way, the United States is now pursuing a strategy through sanctions, indefinite military presence, and refusal to support international reconstruction assistance for the Assad government that is designed to pressure Russia to force changes in Assad's behavior and the withdrawal of Iran.

The Russians have thus far failed to get the Assad regime to honor its commitments through the reconciliation deals that the regime signed with former rebel-ruled areas in western Syria, or to successfully persuade the regime that expropriating property of displaced civilians in areas of western Syria to give to regime loyalists or Iranian-backed foreign forces, especially in and around Damascus, is a bad policy that inhibits, not promotes, the return of refugees.<sup>144</sup> Russia to date has also failed to prevent the Iranians and Iran-backed forces, especially Lebanese Hezbollah, from establishing a zone of influence in the former rebel-ruled areas of southwest Syria, especially on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, which has increased tensions between Israel and Iran and Israel and Russia.<sup>145</sup> The Golan region is especially sensitive for Israel, which does not want to be surrounded by what it views as Iranian-backed groups on three sides—in Gaza, in southern Lebanon, and on the Golan—and Russia's ability to be an actor that can manage Iran and the end of the conflict in Syria will be in no small part judged by the Israelis based on how it manages the Golan situation.<sup>146</sup>

However, Russia could potentially become a collaborator with the United States in regard to Syria, but it will likely require the Trump administration's pressure campaign to really bite into the Assad regime, and the behavior of the regime to tire Russia out. In that regard, there are signs that Russia views Assad as an impediment to moving forward in Syria, particularly in regard to his regime's refusal to consider any decentralization, even in a transition period back to the rule of Damascus, for former rebel-ruled areas or for the SDF and its adjutant forces in the coalition zone. Russia views the decentralization policy—which was made as part of Legislative Decree 107, part of a package of reforms offered by the Assad regime in 2011 in an attempt to halt the uprising against it—as a pragmatic move that could open up channels for international reconstruction assistance to flow into Damascus and move forward on ending the war and stabilizing Syria.<sup>147</sup> The Assad regime's refusal to engage pragmatically on this issue is apparently bothersome for the Russians, as is the sense the Russians get that now that Assad believes he has won the war, he is trying to take a page from his father Hafez's playbook by playing Russia off of Iran off of the Arab states that want to re-engage more actively with his regime.<sup>148</sup> If Assad's behavior continues to draw the ire of the Russians, at least in their own private assessments, there could be opportunities for the United States to engage with Russia to make progress on the Geneva process and the implementation of UNSCR 2254.<sup>149</sup>

### Prevention of a Larger Israeli-Iranian Conflict

Syria is the area of the Middle East where the IRGC-QF's expeditionary capabilities are the most developed, and it is also the part of the region most likely to trigger a region-wide conflict, one between a close U.S. partner—Israel—and Iran.<sup>150</sup> Arab states such as Saudi Arabia could also be brought into this conflict if the IRGC widened the aperture of the battle to include the Gulf.<sup>151</sup> To date, the Israelis have tried to keep the conflict with the IRGC-QF in Syria and Lebanon in a “gray zone,” following a policy of maintaining the freedom of operation against the IRGC-QF and Iran-backed groups inside Syria, and seeking to use deterrence through military and non-military means to diminish and force the withdrawal of the IRGC-QF and Iran-backed groups from Syria.<sup>152</sup>

The Syrian civil war has also provided the IRGC-QF with the opportunity to scale up and expand the activities of the transnational “Hezbollah Network” of mainly Shia jihadi fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to fight on behalf of Assad. This network of thousands of fighters has been deployed to Syria throughout regime-controlled areas and, most concerning for U.S. forces engaged in the

counter-ISIS campaign, has been used as a tool of the IRGC-QF and its Assad regime allies to test the resolve of the United States and its partners in eastern Syria.<sup>153</sup> Some of the groups within the Hezbollah Network, mainly Iraqi groups, and the IRGC-QF's junior partner, Lebanese Hezbollah, have improved capabilities as a result of their participation in the Syrian conflict, especially in combined arms operations, and those improved capabilities could be used in some future conflict against Israel, including on Israeli territory.<sup>154</sup>

Israel and Iran are also at a state of open war in Syria. Over the last year Israel has conducted approximately 200 airstrikes inside Syria against approximately 1,000 targets linked to the IRGC-QF and its junior partner,

## Israel and Iran are at a state of open war in Syria.

Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>155</sup> The conflict between Israel and the IRGC-QF in western Syria has been carefully managed by the Israelis, whereby Israel has conducted strikes in Syria with relative impunity but has refrained from escalating against Lebanese Hezbollah inside Lebanon out of concern for an escalation that could trigger an even larger conflict.<sup>156</sup> Israel is especially concerned with preventing the IRGC-QF from using Syria as a transit point for providing Lebanese Hezbollah with precision-guided missiles (PGMs), and using the Syrian-Lebanese border region west of Damascus to stockpile PGMs for use by Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>157</sup> From the Israeli perspective, Israel's critical infrastructure (roads, ports, electrical power-producing plants, and airports), its hubs of economic activity, and Israeli military bases, would all be put at grave risk of destruction if Lebanese Hezbollah used significant numbers of PGMs against it.<sup>158</sup> This situation is highly combustible, and although the escalation chain has managed carefully between Israel and Iran to this point in their conflict in Syria. The Israelis believe that they can muddle through with deterrence and postpone a larger conflict with Iran in Syria, but the situation is not stable and therefore not ideal from the perspective of the United States.

The conflict between Israel and Iran in Syria is putting increased importance and strain on Israeli-Russian engagement and de-confliction, as Israel increases its military activities in Syria against Iran and the Assad government. De-confliction between Israel and Russia in Syria has not always been successful, as evident in the September 2018 Israeli airstrikes in Syria, which resulted in confusion from Assad's forces that subsequently shot down a Russian plane landing at the Hmeimim air base in Latakia, Syria.<sup>159</sup>



Israeli soldiers look toward Syria from an observation point next to the Syrian border on July 23, 2018, in the Golan Heights, Israel. The Israeli soldiers were observing as Russian planes bombed the Israeli-Syrian border as part of the continued fighting in Syria. (Lior Mizrahi/Getty Images)

As a result of Iran's expansion in western Syria over the course of the Syrian conflict and Lebanese Hezbollah's large mobilization of fighters and deployment to Lebanese-Syrian border regions, western Syria has effectively become strategic depth for IRGC-QF-linked forces against Israel in the next war between the two parties.<sup>160</sup> Israel's northern border, southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, and western Syria have over the course of the Syrian war become one theater of conflict.<sup>161</sup>

The IRGC-QF's steady entrenchment in western Syria also allows it and its Hezbollah Network to have the potential to launch and sustain missile strikes on the Israeli homeland from western Syria in the event of another war between Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel.<sup>162</sup> Lebanese Hezbollah is steadily building up the capacity to launch missile strikes into Israel from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. This is a new development that began after the collapse of the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone in the summer of 2018.<sup>163</sup> The position that the IRGC-QF has established in Syria could allow it and its Hezbollah Network to launch and sustain missile strikes into Israel even in the event that the Israelis engaged in an invasion deep into Lebanon. In the worst-case scenario, the IRGC-QF's presence could force an Israeli invasion all the way to Damascus to stop the missile strikes.<sup>164</sup> And in the effort, this would likely force the Israelis to spark a larger-scale conflict with Iran in the Middle East.

Between Iranian advisors, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Hezbollah Network, at least tens of thousands of Iranian or Iranian-backed forces have at different points in the conflict been garrisoned in Syria, including at least several hundred in close proximity to the Golan Heights.<sup>165</sup> Further complicating the challenge from the IRGC-QF in Syria is the reality that the IRGC-QF is building an entire parallel structure within the Assad regime's security forces that is modeled on Iran's *basij* militia system for local homeland defense, or Iraq's *Hashd Shaabi* system.<sup>166</sup> This parallel security structure is directed by high-ranking officers with the Assad regime's security and intelligence services, and this corresponds with evidence that the IRGC-QF has gained strong influence over the decision making of a segment of the Ba'ath Deep State that supports Assad.<sup>167</sup>

Part of the difficulty that comes from the challenges of Iran and Iranian-backed forces in Syria is that they require deterring Iran's ability to use this area of the Middle East to apply massive strategic pressure on Israel, while simultaneously diminishing the IRGC-QF's presence in Syria. The Trump administration's policy to date, particularly as it pertains to the civil war in western Syria, has not created the conditions that would either deter Iran from building a military infrastructure in western Syria or diminish it by forcing the withdrawal of Iranian and Hezbollah Network forces. Further, there is a credible case that can be made that by simply pursuing changes in the Assad regime's



behavior, rather than seeking a transition from the regime entirely, the United States is in effect guaranteeing Hezbollah the power to dominate Lebanon and pose a grave threat to Israel for the indefinite future.<sup>168</sup>

The challenge for the United States is that Iran has little incentive to scale down its activities to provide support for Lebanese Hezbollah via an infrastructure in Syria because this line of effort allows it to apply considerable strategic pressure on Israel.<sup>169</sup> Removing all Iranian or Iranian-backed forces from Syria, which is the current objective of the United States, will be difficult to achieve without a more aggressive U.S. military campaign against Iran. Pursuing this course of effort could quickly lead to conflict between the United States and Iran, or Iran-backed groups, and the IRGC-QF could seek to target and attack U.S. personnel and U.S. and partner interests throughout the Middle East in response.

Aware of this type of threat to Americans and close U.S. partners, the United States seems to have settled on a course of action toward Iran in Syria that features a “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign against Iran, while allowing Israel to strike at Iranian and Iran-backed forces at will in Syria. The downside to this approach is that it reduces the leverage the United States has to control escalation that might occur between Israel and Iran in Syria, and this approach is unlikely to remove Iran from Syria. This means the United States will need to assess the level of Iranian presence in Syria moving forward that it would find acceptable, because the alternatives to the current strategy are to acknowledge that Iran will remain in Syria in some capacity for the foreseeable future (as it was prior to 2011) or to pursue more aggressive military action against Iran in Syria, which has the aforementioned downsides. A third path would be to try to engage in a trilateral U.S.-Russia-Iran high-level dialogue that would seek to resolve issues between the three countries in regard to Syria.<sup>170</sup> However, the Iranians are so invested now in Syria that it is questionable what would be achieved by this dialogue because Iran’s objectives are currently very different from the United States’ in Syria.

## The Impact of the Assad Dilemma on Future U.S. Policy Options on Syria

Despite the churn in the Trump administration’s policy approach to Syria over the last year, the administration has now settled on a policy that rests on two pillars. The first is to continue to maintain a residual U.S. military presence inside northern and eastern Syria, alongside the military forces from coalition nations such as the United Kingdom and France, to work with local Syrian partner forces in seeking to build stability in the wake of ISIS and prevent its re-emergence. U.S. forces based in Iraq could also be cycled into and out of Syria on short deployments to assist coalition and local Syrian partner forces, and some paramilitary presence could be deployed in Syria as well.<sup>171</sup>

According to Trump administration officials, control over the important natural resources that are in the U.S.-led coalition zone (oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity generation) is ancillary and a byproduct of the coalition’s counter-ISIS campaign, and was not the objective that was actively sought to be achieved by that campaign.<sup>172</sup> However, these resources, which are coveted by the Assad regime and its allies, especially Russia, in order to stabilize regime-held areas of Syria, can support the second pillar of the Trump administration’s strategy in Syria. The second pillar is to use sanctions on regime elites and their supporters and sources of wealth to the Syrian government, the withholding of reconstruction funding to Assad regime-held areas, and the maintenance of an international consensus against normalization of Assad’s regime to press for “irreversible progress” in the Geneva process.

Notably, the current U.S. strategy toward Syria focuses on changing the behavior of the Assad regime, rather than creating a post-Assad political order in Syria, in contrast to what was outlined by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in his January 2018 speech on Syria policy at Stanford University.<sup>173</sup> In addition to changing the Assad regime’s behavior, this pillar also seeks to apply maximum pressure on Russia and Iran, with the goal, according to Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in his January 2019 speech in Cairo and confirmed by other administration officials who focus on Syria policy, of forcing the withdrawal of all Iranian-linked forces from Syria.<sup>174</sup>

Overshadowing the current strategy is the fact that Trump has frequently sought the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria. Trump’s very public back-and-forth over whether to maintain a U.S. military presence in Syria, and the discord this has caused among U.S. allies

and partners, shapes the policy options that are presented in this study. Trump's most recent, and highly public, decision in December 2018 to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria is an example of the challenge that his uncertainty presents to a coherent U.S. policy toward Syria. This uncertainty is complicating the decision making of key U.S. allies in the coalition that are also on the ground in northern and eastern Syria and that desire a firm commitment from Trump on his intentions in regard to maintaining a continuing U.S. military presence in this zone.<sup>175</sup>

The awful truth is that there is no completely satisfactory way to solve the Assad dilemma, due to the destruction and bloodshed of the Syrian crisis to date, if the current U.S. strategy of applying economic pressure to leverage change in the regime's behavior does not work. There is strong evidence that the Assad regime, through its behavior, precipitated a civil war that killed more than half a million people, including the regime's use of weapons of mass destruction against its own people, which led to the potentially permanent displacement of half of Syria's prewar population.

There is also strong evidence that the Assad regime has not changed its behavior toward the opposition at all, with credible reports of former opposition-controlled areas, such as in southwest Syria, the suburbs of Damascus, and former rebel-ruled areas of Aleppo, being subject to harsh security policies. Syrian refugees living in neighboring countries, who constitute the vast majority of refugees, do not want to return until Assad and his regime leave power. This likely means that fragile partner states such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, and NATO ally Turkey, will have to deal with a potentially generations-long challenge from the strain of Syrian refugees.

These problems, and the Syrian civil war itself, are directly caused by the Assad regime's behavior. With this butcher's bill in hand, it remains to be seen how the Trump administration will define "changes in the regime's behavior" in a positive way that addresses the fact that Assad's regime has been the chief cause of one of the worst conflicts, in regard to the scale of human suffering, in modern human history. With the Assad regime's ongoing consolidation of western Syria, and its view that it won the war and only needs to wait out or play its opponents off of each other, it is hard to see how the United States (and frankly anyone else) will achieve changes in the regime's behavior.

If the regime thinks it won the war by committing mass atrocities and crimes against humanity and that none of its allies has the right to tell it to leave power,

## **There is strong evidence that the Assad regime, through its behavior, precipitated a civil war that killed more than half a million people.**

then nothing short of removal of the regime, the linchpin of which is Assad and his family, might achieve the desired end state as currently envisioned by the Trump administration. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has not provided a clear answer on what it expects to be the answer to the Assad dilemma but has instead waffled on whether it is seeking a post-Assad Syrian order, or not.

Over the last year, the Trump administration has adopted a policy of seeking a post-Assad political order in Syria as an end-state goal, which is regime change, and then clarified that policy to mean that the United States simply seeks changes in the Assad regime's behavior, which means Assad has a pathway to remaining as leader. The current U.S. policy follows an internal logic in which the more ardently Washington seeks a post-Assad order in Syria, the more strenuously Russia will oppose the U.S. goals of working toward implementing the Geneva process and diminishing Iran in Syria.<sup>176</sup> Therefore, the current U.S. policy is meant to provide a runway for Russia to move toward the U.S. position and work toward the irreversible progress of the Geneva process, and work toward reforms of the Syrian state, even if that means that for the time being Assad stays in power.

This is a problematic approach, particularly because it means that the United States is for all intents and purposes outsourcing the task of changing the Assad regime's behavior to Russia, while waffling on whether Assad can stay in power or not. While this approach could work over time, it could also fail to achieve the desired results. In that circumstance, the United States could be back in a position of having to determine how to move forward in Syria with Assad and his regime still entrenched, which could ultimately result in an American decision to remove the Assad regime forcibly. All U.S. policy options toward the Syrian crisis will face the Assad dilemma, and whether the United States should work toward changing the regime's behavior, changing the regime, or letting the regime stay, even if the United States does not re-engage with the regime.

## Potential U.S. Policy Options on Syria

The six policy options proposed by this study are shaped by two variables: (1) whether the United States maintains a military presence in Syria; and (2) whether the United States seeks to change the Assad regime’s behavior, change the Assad regime, or allow the Assad regime to remain in power. The policy options are grouped in this manner because whether the United States decides to retain a residual force presence in the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria or not, the Assad dilemma will remain a policy conundrum that will need to be addressed.

All of these policy options are written with the assumption that the United States will continue to retain the ability to act in Syria if needed to address challenges to U.S. national security, or the national security of American allies and partner states, that may arise from Syrian territory. Also embedded in this assumption is that the Trump administration will continue to set a firm red line against the use of weapons of mass destruction by the Assad regime, particularly but not limited to chemical weapons, and will respond with military force if the regime uses these weapons again.<sup>177</sup>

Each policy option is described below, followed by the benefits and risks of each.

### Policy Option 1: Pressure Assad to Change His Regime’s Behavior with Limited Investment in the Coalition Zone.

This option would be to maintain the current U.S. policy, which seeks to change the Assad regime’s behavior as the end state. The current policy has two pillars. The first is to retain a residual U.S. military presence in northern and eastern Syria in order to combat the re-emergence of ISIS or a successor organization, without the United States’ investing financially in the rehabilitation and stabilization of those areas. The second pillar is to use sanctions and an international consensus not to normalize Assad, which includes closing off his regime’s access to reconstruction funding, to force changes in the regime’s behavior. This option relies on the assumption that Russia can be an actor that the United States can engage with over time to affect enduring changes in the Assad regime’s behavior and potentially even broker a post-Assad order in Syria.

#### BENEFITS

- Reassures European allies, regional partner states, and local Syrian partners that the United States will maintain a residual military presence in Syria.
- Sends the message to Russia that it will have to contend with the coalition for an indefinite time in

	INVEST IN SYRIA	DO NOT INVEST IN SYRIA
<b>CHANGE ASSAD’S BEHAVIOR</b>	<i>Policy Option 2:</i> Pressure Assad to change his regime’s behavior with greatly expanded U.S. investment in the coalition zone.	<i>Policy Option 1:</i> Pressure Assad to change his regime’s behavior with limited investment in the coalition zone.
<b>ACCEPT ASSAD’S LEADERSHIP</b>	<i>Policy Option 4:</i> Accept Assad as the ruler of Syria but use the coalition zone to shape an outcome that restrains him.	<i>Policy Option 3:</i> Withdraw from the coalition zone and slowly re-engage with the Assad regime through an interests-based relationship.
<b>SEEK TO OVERTHROW ASSAD</b>	<i>Policy Option 6:</i> Intervene militarily or through covert action to force regime change.	<i>Policy Option 5:</i> Withdraw from the coalition zone but continue a maximum pressure campaign against Assad to force the departure of his regime.

Syria, which raises the costs for Russia there, and might provide the impetus to get Moscow to work with the United States to establish reforms in the Damascus-run political and security structures or even a workable transition from Assad through the Geneva process.

- Gives time to protect local Syrian partners against the predation of regional state and non-state actors, in order to prevent disruptions in stabilization operations after ISIS in the coalition zone.

#### CHALLENGES

- Does not use the vital natural resources (oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity generation) located in the coalition zone as leverage to create outcomes that advance the Geneva process.
- Does not provide investments from the United States for the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria that could set an example for other allies and partners to follow to provide their own contributions to the rehabilitation effort in the coalition zone.
- Does not provide sustained financial and technical support for local Syrian partners to build security, governance, and administrative structures that are resilient against the re-emergence of ISIS.
- Could result in an indefinite U.S. military presence in Syria that could stretch well into the next decade, which could face strong domestic opposition in the United States and international opposition to leaving Syria fragmented indefinitely.
- Could be insufficient to force changes in the Assad regime's behavior as economic pressure has thus far been unsuccessful and some U.S. partners have already begun to restore minimal relations with the regime.
- Could be insufficient to force the removal of Iranian-linked forces from Syria, therefore potentially precipitating future U.S. or regional partner military action against Iran in Syria.
- Could lead to more widespread human suffering in Assad regime-controlled areas through the pressure of sanctions that leads to more instability and violence in Syria.

#### Policy Option 2: Pressure Assad to Change His Regime's Behavior with Greatly Expanded U.S. Investment in the Coalition Zone.

This policy option builds on the current U.S. strategy, with significantly increased U.S. economic support for rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria and the stabilization mission. This policy option would also continue to avoid seeking to change the Assad regime by force but change its behavior (and potentially create a post-Assad state) by the leverage of U.S. geopolitical and economic power. The policy option would be blunter about trying to use the gravitational pull of the resources controlled by the U.S.-led coalition and its local Syrian partners, which the Assad regime wants, as additional pressure on the regime and its allies. It also still relies on the notion that Russia can be a constructive actor that the United States can ultimately negotiate with to end the conflict and come to an acceptable end state.

#### BENEFITS

- Reassures allies and partners that the United States will maintain a residual military presence in Syria.
- Uses the vital natural resources (oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity generation) located in the coalition zone as leverage to create outcomes that advance the Geneva process.
- Sends the message to Russia that it will have to contend with the coalition for an indefinite time in Syria, which raises the costs for Russia there, and might provide the impetus to get Moscow to work with the United States to establish reforms in the Damascus-run political and security structures or even a workable transition from Assad through the Geneva process.
- Provides sustained investment from the United States for the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria that could set an example for other allies and partners to follow to provide their own contributions to the rehabilitation effort in the coalition zone.
- Provides sustained financial and technical support for local Syrian partners to build security, governance, and administrative structures that are resilient against the re-emergence of ISIS.
- Gives time to protect local Syrian partners against the predation of regional state and non-state actors, in order to prevent disruptions in stabilization operations after ISIS in the coalition zone.



**CHALLENGES**

- Could result in an indefinite U.S. military presence in Syria that could stretch well into the next decade, which could face strong domestic opposition in the United States and international opposition to leaving Syria fragmented indefinitely.
- Could be insufficient to force changes in the Assad regime's behavior.
- Could be insufficient to force the removal of Iranian-linked forces from Syria, therefore potentially precipitating future U.S. or regional partner military action against Iran in Syria.
- Could lead to more widespread human suffering in Assad regime-controlled areas through the pressure of sanctions that leads to more instability and violence in Syria.

**Policy Option 3: Withdraw From the Coalition Zone and Slowly Re-engage With the Assad Regime Through an Interests-Based Relationship.**

This policy option would seek to limit the exposure of the United States inside Syria, while finding ways to slowly engage with the Assad regime on pragmatic issues such as counterterrorism. The communication channels with the Assad regime would not need to be formal and

could be maintained informally by Russia or by America's Arab partner states that have expanded their diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, such as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, or Jordan. Through this policy option, the United States would determine that the best path forward is to not impede reconstruction funding from entering Syria, to start the process of rebuilding the country, even if the United States and its partners do not actively encourage engagement with Assad's regime.

**BENEFITS**

- Minimizes the U.S. presence on the ground in Syria and therefore the exposure of U.S. personnel, military and non-military.
- Addresses the concerns of allies and partners that the United States will have a yo-yo presence in Syria and clarifies that the U.S. strategy does not intend to maintain a residual military presence.
- Provides a pathway for constructive engagement with the Assad regime on discrete issues such as counterterrorism.
- Provides an opportunity to leverage U.S. partner Arab states to rebuild relationships with the Assad regime that could reduce Iran's military presence inside Syria;
- Increases U.S. attention to Iraq, where ISIS is regrouping.



*This Arab tribal council organized by the SDF in the town of Ain Issa, near Raqqa, in March 2019, was held for Arab tribal leaders and SDF leaders to discuss issues regarding building security, governance, and administrative structures in post-ISIS areas of northern and eastern Syria. (Wladimir van Wilgenburg)*

**CHALLENGES**

- Goes against the policy of the United States since 2011 not to normalize the Assad regime.
- Goes against the general sense of the U.S. Congress and increasingly within the U.S. court system that the Assad regime is liable for war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Could expose local Syrian partners to predation by regional state and non-state actors.
- Could lead to the re-emergence of ISIS or a successor organization if the Assad regime and its allies are unable to provide both a locally legitimate force presence in post-ISIS areas and sufficient funding to rehabilitate war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria.
- Could be insufficient to force the removal of Iranian-linked forces from Syria, therefore potentially precipitating future U.S. or regional partner military action against Iran in Syria.

**Policy Option 4: Accept Assad as the Ruler of Syria But Use the Coalition Zone to Shape an Outcome That Restrains Him.**

This policy option would be similar to Option 2 in maintaining both pillars of the current U.S. strategy being pursued by the Trump administration, but there would be greater investment in rehabilitating the coalition zone in northern and eastern Syria. But this policy option would not presume to change the Assad regime's behavior or seek a post-Assad order. Instead, it would seek to find a modus vivendi with the Assad regime, even if at first by engaging with Assad's ally Russia. Through this policy option, the United States would continue the coalition's counter-ISIS mission and hold onto the resources in the coalition zone while using Russia and the Assad regime's desire to regain access to these resources in order to re-engage directly in a high-level negotiation with Russia over the future of Syria.

**BENEFITS**

- Reassures allies and partners that the United States will maintain a residual military presence in Syria.
- Uses the vital natural resources (oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity generation) located in the coalition zone as leverage to create outcomes that advance the Geneva process.
- Sends the message to Russia that it will have to contend with the coalition for an indefinite time in

Syria, which raises the costs for Russia there, and might provide the impetus to get Moscow to work with the United States to establish reforms in the Damascus-run political and security structures or even a workable transition from Assad through the Geneva process.

- Provides investment from the United States for the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria that could set an example for other allies and partners to follow to provide their own contributions to the rehabilitation effort in the coalition zone.
- Provides sustained financial and technical support for local Syrian partners to build security, governance, and administrative structures that are resilient against the re-emergence of ISIS.
- Provides a pathway for constructive engagement with the Assad regime over time.
- Provides an opportunity to leverage U.S. partner Arab states to rebuild relationships with the Assad regime that could reduce Iran's military presence inside Syria.
- Gives time to protect local Syrian partners against the predation of regional state and non-state actors, in order to prevent disruptions in stabilization operations after ISIS in the coalition zone.

**CHALLENGES**

- Could result in an indefinite U.S. military presence in Syria that could stretch well into the next decade, which could face strong domestic opposition in the United States and international opposition to leaving Syria fragmented indefinitely.
- Goes against the policy of the United States since 2011 not to normalize the Assad regime.
- Goes against the general sense of the U.S. Congress and increasingly within the U.S. court system that the Assad regime is liable for war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Could lead to more widespread human suffering in Assad regime-controlled areas through the pressure of sanctions that leads to more instability and violence in Syria.
- Could be insufficient to force the removal of Iranian-linked forces from Syria, therefore potentially precipitating future U.S. or regional partner military action against Iran in Syria.

### **Policy Option 5: Withdraw From the Coalition Zone But Continue a Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Assad to Force the Departure of His Regime.**

This policy option would seem to be more consistent with Trump's frequently stated preference that the United States limit its direct involvement on the ground inside of Syria. It would refocus the United States away from trying to maintain a zone of influence in northern and eastern Syria, which could be a long-term endeavor without a clearly achievable end-state goal. This policy option would acknowledge the limitations of what the United States can accomplish in Syria, vis-a-vis the Assad regime and Iran, through the use of a territorial zone of control that is far away from the core areas of regime control and Iran's interest, in western Syria. However, the Trump administration would publicly announce that it is returning to a policy of seeking to build a post-Assad order as a major part of the end state following the Syrian conflict. The United States would adhere to the objective of building a post-Assad order through the implementation of the Geneva process and would seek to apply pressure on the Assad regime, and through it on Russia, through peaceful means, namely by maintaining the policy of sanctions and maintaining an international consensus against normalizing Assad's regime, to achieve regime change.

#### **BENEFITS**

- Allows for a full range of U.S. activities to seek to remove Assad and his regime.
- Minimizes the U.S. presence in Syria and therefore the exposure of U.S. personnel, military and non-military.
- Addresses the concerns of allies and partners that the United States will have a yo-yo presence in Syria and clarifies that the U.S. strategy does not intend to maintain a residual military presence.
- Sends the message to Russia that it will have to contend with U.S. pressure against the Assad regime indefinitely, which raises the costs for Russia in Syria, and might provide the impetus to get the Russians to work with the United States to create a workable transition from Assad through the Geneva process.
- Increases U.S. attention to Iraq, where ISIS is regrouping.

#### **CHALLENGES**

- Almost certainly will be insufficient to overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a post-Assad order that is more agreeable to the United States.
- If Assad is the one actor holding the regime together, and the regime is the Syrian state, and the state collapses without the Assad regime, chaos in the most populated areas of Syria could ensue. That could lead to millions more refugees flooding into neighboring states, violence among any remnants of the regime, and opportunities for VEOs such as ISIS and al Qaeda to enter into the vacuum.
- Could lead to more widespread human suffering in Assad regime-controlled areas through the pressure of sanctions that leads to more instability and violence in Syria.
- Does not use the vital natural resources (oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity generation) located in the coalition zone as leverage to create outcomes that advance the Geneva process.
- Does not provide investment from the United States for the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria that could set an example for other allies and partners to follow to provide their own contributions to the rehabilitation effort in the coalition zone.
- Does not provide sustained financial and technical support for local Syrian partners to build security, governance, and administrative structures that are resilient against the re-emergence of ISIS.
- Could expose local Syrian partners to predation by regional state and non-state actors;
- Could lead to the re-emergence of ISIS or a successor organization if the Assad regime and its allies are unable to provide both a locally legitimate force presence in post-ISIS areas and sufficient funding to rehabilitate war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria.
- Could be insufficient to force the removal of Iranian-linked forces from Syria, therefore potentially precipitating future U.S. or regional partner military action against Iran in Syria.
- Not guaranteed that the person who replaces Assad would be "better."



### **Policy Option 6: Facilitate Active Regime Change.**

This policy option builds on the current U.S. strategy, with significantly increased U.S. economic support for rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria and the stabilization mission. It would be coupled with a decision to intervene either militarily or through covert action to overthrow Assad.

There are many challenges, including legal ones that could constrain this course of action.<sup>178</sup> There are also second- and third-order effects from the implementation of this course of action in Syria and in the region that should give policymakers pause—most notably direct conflict with Russia or Iran. Moreover, given that U.S. policymakers have been loath to pursue this approach for the past eight years, there is little support in Washington or internationally for such a strategy. However, this course of action may be the only one that could decisively solve the Assad dilemma, once and for all, by removing Assad and potentially senior members of his regime. It could also lead to a breakdown in unified authority in regime-held areas, with different leaders within the regime's security structures competing for power and influence, that could make Russia and Iran act toward each other more like opponents than allies, which could benefit the United States (and the coalition if it stays together) to try to leverage the outcomes in the Syrian end state that the United States seeks.

#### **BENEFITS**

- Reassures allies and partners that the United States will maintain a residual military presence in Syria.
- Uses the vital natural resources (oil, agricultural land, water, and electricity generation) located in the coalition zone as leverage to create outcomes that advance the Geneva process.
- Sends the message to Russia that it will have to contend with the coalition indefinitely in Syria, which raises the costs for Russia there, and might provide the impetus to get the Russians to work with the United States to establish reforms in the Damascus-run political and security structures or even a workable transition from Assad through the Geneva process.
- Provides sustained investment from the United States for the rehabilitation of war-ravaged areas of northern and eastern Syria that could set an example for other allies and partners to follow to provide their own contributions to the rehabilitation effort in the coalition zone.

- Provides sustained financial and technical support for local Syrian partners to build security, governance, and administrative structures that are resilient against the re-emergence of ISIS.
- Gives time to protect local Syrian partners against the predation of regional state and non-state actors, in order to prevent disruptions in stabilization operations after ISIS in the coalition zone.
- Allows for a full range of U.S. activities to seek to remove Assad and his regime.

#### **CHALLENGES**

- Could lead to direct conflict between Russian military forces and U.S.-led coalition military forces inside Syria.
- Could precipitate a regional war between the United States and its partners and Iran.
- Could lead to Iran expanding and not decreasing its presence in Syria and/or increasing activities that threaten U.S. regional partners.
- Could lead to attacks by Iran-backed forces against U.S. military forces and personnel deployed throughout the region in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Afghanistan.
- If Assad is the one actor holding the regime together, and the regime is the Syrian state, and the state collapses without the Assad regime, chaos in the most populated areas of Syria could ensue. That could lead to millions more refugees flooding into neighboring states, violence among any remnants of the regime, and opportunities for VEOs such as ISIS and al Qaeda to enter into the vacuum.
- Could be insufficient to overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a post-Assad order that is more agreeable to the United States.
- Could lead to more widespread human suffering in Assad regime-controlled areas through the pressure of sanctions that leads to more instability and violence in Syria.
- European allies could be very upset with the United States, further straining trans-Atlantic relations.
- Not guaranteed that the person who replaces Assad would be “better.”
- Could lead to the collapse of the counter-ISIS coalition if allies and partners pull away from the United States as a “reckless actor.”



### **What Should Be the U.S. Policy Toward Syria?**

The Trump administration's current policy outlined in Option 1 is insufficient for the objectives that it has set out to accomplish. The best approach would be to follow the second policy option presented in this study by investing more in Syria and using that investment to change regime behavior. If the goals of the administration are now set to seek the lasting defeat of ISIS, to achieve irreversible progress in the Geneva process that would mean significant changes in the Assad regime's behavior, and to force the withdrawal of Iranian-backed forces in Syria, then the United States will need to invest more resources—mainly financially—into the rehabilitation of northern and eastern Syria than Trump has been willing to do. The rehabilitation of northern and eastern Syria not only supports local Syrian partners there that are seeking to create security, governance, and administrative structures that are resilient against the re-emergence of ISIS. American investment in northern and eastern Syria sets a precedent and makes a statement to allies and partners that they can feel confident that the United States will remain engaged on the ground in Syria and that it has an overarching purpose for the coalition's zone of control in northern and eastern Syria that can be used to gain leverage over the larger diplomatic battle to advance the Geneva process. This is the policy option that would offer the best opportunity for the Trump administration to achieve its goals, if it does not want to slowly re-engage with the Assad regime, or if it determines that forcibly removing Assad is not worth the risks.

However, the Trump administration should be honest with the American people that by following this policy option, the result could be a long-term U.S. investment in Syria that could potentially stretch well into the next decade. Syria's territorial fragmentation is a fact, and what was once one sovereign state is now divided into zones controlled by foreign actors. That "Syria" may not come back together into one entity well into the foreseeable future.

The Trump administration should also be realistic that this approach of trying to change the Assad regime's behavior is likely to fail and the United States would then have a series of unpopular options to choose from. Option 5—trying to overthrow the regime while not actually investing militarily in Syria—is unrealistic and could not possibly succeed. This leaves three other options.

It could re-engage with the Assad regime as described in Options 3 and 4. However, Assad's regime has been credibly linked to widespread human rights abuses and is credibly accused of committing war crimes, and its behavior has precipitated one of the worst crises in modern history. The Assad regime is now considered criminally liable for actions against U.S. citizens by U.S. courts, the general mood of the U.S. Congress continues to be to oppose the Assad regime's continued rule over Syria, and European states are beginning to seek senior officials from the regime to stand trial for crimes against humanity.

Alternatively, the administration could look to Option 6 and forcibly remove Assad and senior members of his regime from power, at the risk of entering into a military conflict with Russia, Iran, or Iran-backed forces and incurring international condemnation. It is likely to be incredibly costly and deeply unpopular at home.

But to be clear, the United States may ultimately have to choose one of these poison pills: re-engage and therefore legitimize a regime that is credibly linked to the mass murder and repression of its people, or act to remove that regime from power and risk sowing further chaos in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Syria has transitioned from a civil war between the Assad government and its rebel opponents and has now become an arena for interstate competition among foreign actors. This is a competition that the U.S.-led coalition is an active party to, through its control over and continued military presence in a zone that encompasses almost one-third of Syrian territory. The Trump administration should remain invested in northern and eastern Syria and build up to a sustained U.S. engagement within that coalition zone to work toward the enduring defeat of ISIS, and to leverage that zone's resources to support the diplomatic effort to force at minimum changes in the Assad regime's behavior. Trump will need to communicate clearly and consistently that the United States will remain invested in the outcome of the Syrian conflict and the stabilization of Syria, and that a U.S. presence in the country is likely needed indefinitely to achieve that overarching objective. However, to achieve a post-conflict Syria that is stable and that is not a source of threats to the United States or its regional and international partners, Trump may need to make some hard, and potentially region-altering, decisions regarding how to best advance U.S. policy toward Syria. Ultimately, the Trump administration may need to take more controversial, and perhaps uncomfortable, action to overcome the Assad dilemma that has impeded the United States from achieving its policy goals in Syria since the start of the crisis in that country in 2011.

**The Trump administration should remain invested in northern and eastern Syria and build up to a sustained U.S. engagement within that coalition zone.**

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  165. Discussions with Syrian analysts in Amman, Jordan, and Beirut in May 2018, and Syrian analysts in Amman, Jordan, from October 2018-April 2019, especially ETANA. Information also comes from authors’ ongoing collaboration with People Demand Change, Inc., which is an organization that has a large network of informants throughout Syria, including in Assad government-controlled areas and in “reconciled” areas of the country.
  166. Discussions with Syrian analysts in Amman, Jordan, and Beirut in May 2018, and Syrian analysts in Amman, Jordan, from October 2018-April 2019, especially ETANA. Information also comes from authors’ ongoing collaboration with People Demand Change, Inc., which is an organization that has a large network of informants throughout Syria, including in Assad government-controlled areas and in “reconciled” areas of the country.
  167. Discussions with Syrian analysts in Amman, Jordan, and Beirut in May 2018, and Syrian analysts in Amman, Jordan, from October 2018-April 2019, especially ETANA. Information also comes from authors’ ongoing collaboration with People Demand Change, Inc., which is an organization that has a large network of informants throughout Syria, including in Assad government-controlled areas and in “reconciled” areas of the country.
  168. Over the course of their research for this study, Lebanese and Syrian analysts who have engaged with the authors have expressed the consistent opinion that the key to diminishing Lebanese Hezbollah is to remove the Assad regime. According to these analysts, although Iran is the foremost patron of Lebanese Hezbollah, the group’s ultimate security depends on a friendly power like the Assad regime that is in control of the regions of western Syria that border Lebanon. These analysts assert that Lebanese Hezbollah most fears a change in the regime in Damascus to one that is hostile to it, and which then can assert influence in Lebanon that threatens Hezbollah’s power

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  170. Suggestion made by Qatari officials. Discussions with Qatari officials in Doha, Qatar, in October 2018.
  171. Discussions with U.S. military analysts working on the Syria issue in January 2019 and February 2019.
  172. Discussions with Trump administration officials working on Syria policy in October 2018, November 2018, January 2019, March 2019, and April 2019.
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  178. Currently, it is illegal for the Trump administration to use direct force against Bashar al-Assad or senior members of his regime through a "decapitation strike" (i.e. killing Assad or senior members of his regime). If President Trump would want to remove Bashar al-Assad or senior members of his regime in this manner, he would need to formally rescind former President Ronald Reagan's Executive Order 12333, which currently remains in effect, and which expressly prohibits political assassinations, such as through so-called decapitation strikes. Robin Wright, "President Trump Can Tweet About World Leaders, But He Can't Assassinate Them," *New Yorker*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/president-trump-can-tweet-about-world-leaders-but-he-cant-assassinate-them>; Michael Rubin, "It's time to assassinate Assad," *Washington Examiner*, April 10, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/its-time-to-assassinate-assad/>; John Walcott and Steve Holland, "Trump ordered Syrian air strike before dinner with XI," Reuters, April 7, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-trump-idUSKBN1792W4>.

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