

## ISSUE BRIEF

# The United States in Syria: Why it Still Matters

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## Author's Note

Established by the US Congress in 2018, the Syria Study Group—twelve members appointed by six senior Republican and six senior Democratic members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives—has, since February 2019, examined the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to Syria and has now issued a final report, one featuring the Group's policy recommendations.

The Group's report is a consensus document. There are no footnotes indicating individual differences of opinion or clashing notions of policy emphasis on any of the findings or recommendations. Indeed, having served as a member of the Group and having affixed my name to its final report, this writer is aware of no profound, irreconcilable substantive disputes dividing the twelve members; clearly none that would have caused any of the twelve to withhold her or his name from the report.

Still, a report enjoying the baseline consent of twelve people with twelve different points of departure and twelve separate experiences with the crisis in Syria cannot reflect in full the priorities and preferences of each individual member. This writer applauds the final report of the Syria Study Group, appreciates the hard work and intellectual honesty of his fellow Group members, and proudly affixes his name to the document, all the while still holding a set of views on American national security objectives and strategy for Syria not fully replicated by the report itself. Indeed, it was not the job of the Group to replicate in its report the views of any single member.

This Atlantic Council report reflects, therefore, the considered views of the author. It differs from the Syria Study Group report mainly in terms of specifically identifying the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East examines the barriers preventing many people in the region from reaching their fullest potential and highlights success stories of individuals and institutions who overcame significant challenges in pursuit of social, economic, and political progress. Inspired by these examples, the Center provides practical policy recommendations that policymakers in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East can implement to unleash the region's economic and human potential.

as the central problem from which all other challenges to American national security—such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda—flows. It goes far beyond the Syria Study Group report in strongly emphasizing the geopolitical and humanitarian necessity of countering and neutralizing—with military means, where necessary—the mass homicide survival strategy of the Assad terrorist regime. The Atlantic Council report also argues that the incomplete defeat of ISIS in northeastern Syria offers the opportunity for a Syrian governance alternative to the Assad regime to take root if the United States and its allies engage effectively in post-combat stabilization and nurture local Syrian governance reflecting the consent of the governed.

The Syria Study Group has succeeded—at least momentarily—in getting Syria back into the news and onto the editorial pages. Implementation of the Group’s recommendations would accomplish much of what is sought here in terms of an Assad-free Syrian end-state. This report seeks, however, to supplement the final report of the Syria Study Group by adding emphasis to strategic priorities deemed essential by the author.

## The Objective

The objective of the United States in Syria must be a full political transition from criminal, terrorist rule by family and entourage to a consensual, legitimate system featuring rule of law. Absent this transition, other important goals—the enduring defeat of ISIS, the neutralization of al-Qaeda, the liquidation of Iran’s military presence, an end to armed conflict, protection of civilians from state and Islamist terror, the return of over six million refugees, sustained tranquility and reconstruction—will be very difficult or impossible to achieve.

The objective itself is—at the very least—in the “difficult to achieve” category. Its achievement would, barring

unanticipated regime collapse, take years of patient, focused, and disciplined effort. Adopting this objective would fly in the face of what often passes for conventional wisdom about Syria: that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—thanks to Russian and Iranian military intervention—has “won” the Syrian armed conflict; that his “victory” is what the world must accept and adjust to.<sup>1</sup>

Yet as Assad gazes over the ruins of a country he has destroyed to maintain the position of a family and clique, he appreciates the fragility of a “victory” in which there is no peace dividend for those who have supported him. Indeed, there is no peace. More than a quarter of the prewar population has fled the country.<sup>2</sup> Another quarter is internally displaced.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of thousands are dead,<sup>4</sup> tens of thousands languish in hellish detention centers,<sup>5</sup> an economy is destroyed, and a ticket out of Assad Syria is a prize of incalculable value for millions of Syrians. If this is “victory,” words like “catastrophic” and “Pyrrhic” come easily to mind.

Moreover, important parts of Syria remain beyond the control of the regime, its state terror apparatus, and its allies. The United States has waged war against ISIS in northeastern Syria, east of the Euphrates River, for five years.<sup>6</sup> The anti-ISIS coalition, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), remains in control of this third of Syria; rich in agriculture and oil. US forces also control the al-Tanf military garrison in southeastern Syria, astride a land route important to Iran.<sup>7</sup> Idlib province and other areas in northern Syria have not fallen to the regime, and Assad’s grip on southwestern Syria is weakening due to the regime’s renegeing on cease-fire terms. In short, Assad’s “victory” has important qualifications and limitations.

## The Role of the United States

Still, the United States has the option of deciding that political transition in Syria is a bridge too far; that a dec-

1 Sinan Hatahet. *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria*, Chatham House, March 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.

2 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Syria Emergency,” *The United Nations*, last updated April 19, 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

3 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Syria Emergency.”

4 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2018: Right Trends in Syria*, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria>.

5 Hanny Megally. *Tackling the Impunity Gap in Syria: Detainees and Disappearances*, Center on International Cooperation, Sept. 13, 2018, <https://cic.nyu.edu/publications/Tackling-the-Impunity-Gap-in-Syria-Detainees-and-Disappearances>.

6 Samantha Raphelson. “U.S.-Backed Kurdish Forces Launch ‘Final Push’ Against ISIS In Syria,” *National Public Radio*, Feb. 10, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/10/693130494/u-s-backed-kurdish-forces-launch-final-push-against-isis-in-syria>.

7 International Crisis Group. *Al-Tanf, Syria*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/al-tanf-syria>.



An American soldier walks near a Turkish military vehicle during a joint U.S.-Turkey patrol, near Tel Abyad, Syria September 8, 2019. *REUTERS/Rodi Said*

laration of victory over ISIS and complete disengagement is a prudent course of action. Russia and Iran have, after all, stabilized the Assad regime to the point where it feels empowered to reject peace talks.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the prospect of disengagement may appear as the lifting of a heavy burden. Getting out of Syria altogether would strike many Americans as sensible and desirable.

Indeed, it would be arrogant and condescending to dismiss casually the ‘out of Syria altogether’ argument. The length of the conflict, the success (superficial though it may be) of Iranian and Russian military intervention, the apparent (though incomplete) suppression of one of the conflict’s most noxious symptoms (ISIS), the prospect of a long, open-ended commitment to stabilizing and protecting northeastern Syria, and the growing belief that America is engaged in endless wars with one percent of the population bear-

ing the burdens of military service; all these factors combine to produce a powerful and understandable ‘enough is enough’ sentiment with regard to Syria. When President Trump says, in essence, that Syria is a faraway place and that countries in Syria’s neighborhood—not the United States—should deal with the problems produced by eight years of armed conflict, he receives nods of approval not just from his usual supporters, but also from Americans strongly disinclined to support him on many other issues.

The president could, if he wishes, decide to disengage the United States totally from Syria. Set aside the reality that what happens in Syria does not stay there. Still, the view here is that a presidential decision to wash his hands of Syria would receive strong majority support in public opinion polling. And it would be mistaken—given the apparent military victory secured over the

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Wintour. “UN’s Syria Envoy Rejects Assad Claim that Geneva Peace Talks are Irrelevant,” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/15/un-syria-envoy-rejects-assad-claim-that-geneva-peace-talks-are-irrelevant>.

organization (ISIS) deemed by both the Obama and Trump administrations as the centerpiece of the Syrian conflict—to dismiss ‘out of Syria altogether’ sentiment as thoughtless or stupid.

Yet a decision to disengage should be preceded by careful examination of several questions. Could the first stage of the ISIS defeat in Syria—the destruction of the physical “caliphate”—be sustained (a) with thousands of ISIS operatives still at large,<sup>9</sup> (b) the anti-ISIS coalition disestablished; and (c) a corrupt, incompetent, and brutal Assad regime taking charge of territory liberated from ISIS by the United States and its coalition partners? Would an effort of five years to bring about the enduring defeat of ISIS be wasted by near-term American disengagement?

If liberated northeastern Syria is turned over to the Assad regime and its Iranian ally, what would prevent them from offering some at-large, skilled ISIS terrorists the option of employment for terror operations? Damascus and Tehran both have long histories of using Islamist terrorists for their own purposes.<sup>10</sup> The US intelligence community fears this very prospect.<sup>11</sup>

Alternatively, would the imposition of the minority-based Assad regime and Iranian-led Shia militias in Syria’s northeast enable ISIS to resurrect itself in the overwhelmingly Arab Sunni areas of the liberated territories? Would the Assad regime state terror be a better



A Syria Civil Defence (White Helmets) member uses an angle grinder among the rubble of a damaged building, looking for victims, after a deadly airstrike, said to be in Maarat al-Numan, Idlib province, Syria August 28, 2019. Picture taken August 28, 2019. *Syria Civil Defence in the Governorate of Idlib/Handout via REUTERS*

option for suppressing ISIS than effective local governance based on rule of law?

Can the United States obtain for its Syrian partners—mainly Kurds, who have provided the ground force combat component of the war on ISIS—protection from the violent excesses of the Assad regime if the American presence in Syria is liquidated? If not, (a) what would become of those who have worked with the United States, and (b) what might be the implications of abandon-

ment for future American attempts globally to partner with indigenous forces?

What would be the implications for regional friends and European allies if the United States were to disengage from Syria? How likely is it that the Assad regime would repatriate six million refugees who fled its violence? What is the ability (and inclination) of the Assad regime to rule in a way that would preclude further massive refugee flows? Can the Assad regime refrain from kleptocracy and preside competently over a reconstruction process that would stabilize Syria politically and economically? Or—if shedding a heavy burden is what drives US policy—would the abandonment of friends and allies adjacent to Syria and in Western Europe be the inevitable adjunct to disengagement from Syria itself?

If the administration believes (as it does) that the Assad regime and (in particular) Iran enable, inspire,

9 Eric Schmitt, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Helene Cooper, and Alissa Rubin. “Its Territory May Be Gone, but the U.S. Fight Against ISIS Is Far From Over,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/24/us/politics/us-isis-fight.html>.

10 Bureau of Counterterrorism. “Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview,” *U.S. Department of State*, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224826.htm>.

11 Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. “State Sponsors of Terrorism,” *U.S. Department of State*, Accessed August 14, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/>.

and accelerate the phenomenon of global Islamist terrorism and extremism,<sup>12</sup> would disengagement from Syria and the effective abandonment of Syrian political transition as a policy goal serve the security interests of American citizens at home and abroad?

Recognizing that disengagement is not a cost-free option—that negative and unintended consequences will result—is essential. But this recognition does not suffice for policy formulation. If Syrian political transition is the goal, how to achieve it? What are the key elements of strategy?

## Past US-Syria Strategy

Kremlin accusations notwithstanding, there is a long-standing American political consensus that violent regime change should not be an element of US strategy.<sup>13</sup> Invading and occupying Syria has never been on the American agenda.<sup>14</sup> American aid to Syrian rebels resisting state terror was never of a quality or quantity to drive the regime from Damascus. That aid was unilaterally terminated in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, since the early stages of the Syrian uprising, the preferred American route to political transition has been one of Syrian peace negotiations under United Nations (UN) auspices. The Geneva Final Communiqué of June 30, 2012, embodied an agreement between the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council

that Syrian negotiators should populate, through mutual consent, a transitional governing body exercising full executive power in Syria while preserving governmental structures.<sup>16</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2254<sup>17</sup> upheld the Geneva formula. But the Assad regime rejected Geneva, spurned political transition, and mocked substantive peace negotiations.<sup>18</sup> Regime opposition caused Russia to renege on that to which it agreed in 2012.<sup>19</sup> And Russian military intervention in September 2015<sup>20</sup> reinforced the unwillingness of the regime to countenance compromise and consensus.<sup>21</sup>

If, therefore, the United States commits itself to Syrian political transition as the key that unlocks all other Syria-related policy goals, what are the elements of strategy that maximize the prospect of success without resorting to violent regime change?

## Stabilizing Strategies to Consider

Ultimately, sealing the victory over ISIS and maximizing leverage for peace talks is the main goal in stabilizing Syria; reinforced by denying northeastern Syria to the Assad regime and its allies. Syria east of the Euphrates River—rich in oil and agriculture—has been provisionally liberated from ISIS by the United States and its coalition partners<sup>22</sup>; liberated with no help from the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia. Indeed, the role of the regime in making northeastern Syria safe for ISIS and in pursuing a largely live-and-let-live relationship with

12 Heather Nauert. “Launching of Operations To Liberate Final ISIS Strongholds in Syria,” *U.S. Department of State*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/launching-of-operations-to-liberate-final-isis-strongholds-in-syria/>.

13 James F. Jeffrey. “How to Get Regime Change Right,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Oct. 3, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-get-regime-change-right>.

14 The Associated Press. “A look at US involvement in Syria’s civil war,” *Military Times*, Dec. 19, 2018. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/12/19/a-look-at-us-involvement-in-syrias-civil-war/>.

15 “Trump ends CIA support for anti-Assad Syria rebels,” *Al Jazeera*, July 20, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/trump-ends-cia-arms-support-anti-assad-syria-rebels-170719221850588.html>.

16 *Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué*, The United Nations, June 30, 2012, <https://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

17 “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks,” *United Nations*, Dec. 18, 2015. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>.

18 Stephanie Nebehay and Lisa Barrington. “Syrian government negotiator quits Geneva talks, says may not return,” *Reuters*, Dec. 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks/syrian-government-negotiator-quits-geneva-talks-says-may-not-return-idUSKBN1DV4U8>.

19 Mohammed Alaa Ghanem, “The People of Syria Speak Again,” *HuffPost*, March 10, 2016, Updated Dec. 06, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-people-of-syria-speak\\_b\\_9422448](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-people-of-syria-speak_b_9422448).

20 “Russia joins war in Syria: Five key points,” *British Broadcasting Company (BBC)*, Oct. 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34416519>.

21 John Davison and Dmitry Solovyov. “Syria’s Assad says he will not negotiate with armed groups,” *Reuters*, Dec. 11, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrias-assad-says-he-will-not-negotiate-with-armed-groups-idUSKBN0TU2F920151211>.

22 Raphelson. “U.S.-Backed Kurdish Forces Launch ‘Final Push’ Against ISIS In Syria.”

the “caliphate” is a highlight of eight years of armed conflict in Syria.

Though the territorial “caliphate” is gone, thousands of ISIS operatives remain at large.<sup>23</sup> The key to completing and sealing the victory over ISIS lies in stabilizing liberated territories and facilitating the growth of competent, inclusive, and legitimate local governance. The prospect of ISIS waging a successful comeback via insurgency depends upon either (a) political overreach by Kurds in predominantly Arab areas, or (b) the return of a profoundly hated Assad regime on the shoulders of Iranian-led Shia militiamen.

Stabilizing liberated areas—with heavy contributions (personnel and funding) from US allies and partners—and facilitating the growth of legitimate and effective governance mandates excluding the Assad regime and its allies from northeastern Syria. Exclusion does not mean Syrian partition. Neither does it mean barring Syrian civil servants from their jobs or denying food to Syrians languishing under regime rule. Exclusion applies to the rapacious “security” and “intelligence” organs of the regime and to external forces supporting the regime.

Successful stabilization—resulting in effective, legitimate local governance—will be neither easy nor quick nor cheap. Burden-sharing among allies will be essential and will depend on allied evaluation of American commitment to the task. Agreements with Kurdish-led partner forces on reducing their governance role in predominantly Arab areas and an accord with Turkey covering a safe zone and defining Ankara’s role in supporting stabilization will likewise be essential. The potential contributions and participation of the democratic Syrian opposition should be maximized. And although stabilization will be neither the exclusive province of American taxpayers nor officials, American commitment and leadership will be essential.

Successful stabilization will also require an ongoing American military presence on the ground, supported by the United States and coalition air combat power. Local ground forces would secure the Euphrates River de-confliction line, supported by coalition (including

American) ground assets and air power. Having US forces on the ground assures two things: (a) ongoing operational focus on neutralizing at-large ISIS operatives; and (b) decisive lethality in response to any attempts to breach the Euphrates River line by the regime and its allies.

## A Stable Alternative

The advent of effective, inclusive, and legitimate local governance in Syria east of the Euphrates River would offer to all Syrians that which has been sought since the beginning of the uprising: a systemic political alternative to the Assad regime; one that is not sectarian, extremist, criminal, or exiled; one capable of creating a stark contrast with a violently larcenous regime; and one ultimately prepared to negotiate a transitional governing body or a consensual government of national unity if and when the regime’s resistance to peaceful conflict resolution is overcome.

## How Assad Remains in Power

Minimizing the effects of regime mass homicide on Syrians, their neighbors, and European allies by applying limited military means, is crucial in protecting civilians and neutralizing the regime’s main survival strategy.

The survival strategy of the Assad regime has featured mass civilian homicide aimed at separating, through state terror, armed rebels from a popular support base. The result has been a humanitarian abomination killing hundreds of thousands of people, producing over six-million refugees, and (in 2015) sending a politically destabilizing migratory wave of Syrians across Western Europe.<sup>24</sup> Effectively undermining a survival strategy rooted in war crimes can protect vulnerable populations, weaken the regime, defend allies, and promote political transition.

Twice the United States has responded militarily to the Assad regime’s use of Sarin nerve agent on defenseless populations.<sup>25</sup> Although the regime has a special affection for the terror-inducing properties of chem-

23 Eric Schmitt, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Helene Cooper, and Alissa Rubin. “Its Territory May Be Gone.”

24 “Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts,” *BBC*, March 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>.

25 Larry Kaplow. “History Of U.S. Responses To Chemical Weapons Attacks In Syria,” *National Public Radio*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/13/602375500/history-of-u-s-responses-to-chemical-weapons-attacks-in-syria>.



A woman pushes a baby cart as she walks past rubble of damaged buildings in Raqqa, Syria, May 29, 2019. Picture taken May 29, 2019. *REUTERS/Aboud Hamam*

ical weapons, these horrific devices account for an extremely small portion of the casualties produced by state terror.<sup>26</sup> By publicly highlighting chemical weapons use as the trigger for military retaliation, the United States and its allies have inadvertently signaled to the Assad regime that other tools of mass terror—barrel bombs, field artillery, rockets, Scud missiles, and conventional aerial bombs—are permissible. Mass homicide should, as a matter of US policy, be inadmissible regardless of the murder weapon. Communication of this policy—and the willingness of the United States to

use limited military means to enforce it—to the regime through Russia is essential.

State terror in Syria will continue so long as the Assad regime remains in place. The United States and its allies cannot stop it all short of invading and occupying the country: something that will not occur. Still, concentrating on preempting and punishing mass casualty events can save many lives, prevent refugee flows, and hurt the regime militarily. Significant damage can be inflicted on regime air, artillery, rocket, and missile

26 Al Mauroni. "Terrorists Sometimes Use Chemical Weapons, but the OPCW Should Focus on States," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Nov. 30, 2018, <https://thebulletin.org/2018/11/terrorists-sometimes-use-chemical-weapons-but-the-opcw-should-focus-on-states/>.

capabilities without placing manned aircraft in Syrian airspace. Protecting civilians through limited military force would neutralize the most destructive aspect of mass homicide while perhaps convincing some regime supporters of the limits and downsides of state terror and its perpetrators.

Russia supports and participates in mass casualty operations. Russian combat pilots have displayed a special affinity for bombing hospitals.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding overwhelming escalatory dominance, the United States should avoid responding militarily to Russian war crimes in Syria in favor of a diplomatic effort aimed at persuading Moscow to eliminate state terror altogether as a feature of the Syrian conflict. Such an effort would be aided by the clear willingness of the United States and allies to destroy, if necessary, the Assad regime's tools of mass casualty state terror.

## How to Deter Assad

First, it is essential to maximize political pressure on the regime by denying it recognition and reconstruction funding while maintaining a policy demanding full justice and accountability for crimes against humanity. The Assad regime has compiled a loathsome record of targeting civilians for mass homicide,<sup>28</sup> starvation/medical sieges,<sup>29</sup> and illegal detention featuring torture, starvation, rape, and murder.<sup>30</sup> It has behaved with impunity and unaccountability. It has set a dangerous strategic precedent for the survival strategies of corruptly violent regimes around the world, one whose human consequences threaten stability on a global scale.

Reestablishing a US diplomatic presence in Damascus while this regime remains in place should be unthinkable. Washington should make clear its own position on this matter and discourage friends and allies from

reopening embassies. Indeed, if legitimate local governance takes root in liberated northeastern Syria the United States should consider recognizing an alternate Syrian Arab Republic Government and working to seat that government in the UN.

No country in which government is accountable to taxpayers will be able to provide reconstruction assistance to Syria through the Assad regime. Grants, loans, trade, and investments not stolen outright (in part or in full) would be used by the regime for its own narrow political purposes.<sup>31</sup> Attempts to bypass the regime to restore damaged and destroyed infrastructure and facilitate refugee return, if feasible, should be supplemented by financial sanctions aimed at regime-related individuals and institutions that would seek to benefit from or dominate reconstruction assistance.

Humanitarian assistance would, ideally, flow to all Syrians in need. But the United States should work with the UN and other humanitarian aid providers to insure regime-associated individuals do not benefit financially or politically from humanitarian assistance activities.

There is no shortage of evidence—much of it from official Syrian sources—of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime. The United States should place accountability and justice front-and-center in its policy toward Syria. Bashar al-Assad and key members of his family and entourage are fugitives from justice. Keeping this fact front-and-center would be an important facet of a policy aimed at preventing broad normalization with a criminal enterprise and keeping alive the prospect of political transition.

## How to Support Syrians

Additionally, it is crucial to support the growth of civil society and the functioning legitimate local governance

27 "UN Asks Russia for Answers about Bombed Syria Hospitals," *Al Jazeera*, June 2, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/asks-russia-answers-bombed-syria-hospitals-190626070003253.html>.

28 Scott Lucas. "Mass Killings and a Humanitarian Crisis: an Introduction to Syria's East Ghouta," *University of Birmingham*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/thebirminghambrief/items/2018/03/mass-killings-and-a-humanitarian-crisis-syrias-east-ghouta.aspx>.

29 "UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: The Siege and Recapture of Eastern Ghouta Marked by War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity," *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23226&LangID=E>.

30 "Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas," *Human Rights Watch*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/21/syria-detention-harassment-retaken-areas>.

31 Nick Hopkins and Emma Beals. "How Assad regime controls UN aid intended for Syria's children," *The Guardian*, Aug. 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/how-assad-regime-controls-un-aid-intended-for-syrias-children>.

in areas (such as Idlib province) not held by the regime, while seeking to neutralize terrorist elements in those areas. During eight years of conflict, Syrian civilians in many parts of the country have graduated from a one-party, one-clan dictatorship to developing a vibrant civil society and experiencing self-government for the first time.<sup>32</sup> Supporting these positive trends in non-regime areas will make it more difficult for the Assad regime to restore its brutally authoritarian system.

US support for civil society and local governance in non-regime areas is complicated—especially in Idlib province—by the prevailing military presence of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist extremist organization with ties to al-Qaeda. HTS reportedly also hosts and supports transnational Islamist terrorists.<sup>33</sup> Valid concerns exist in Congress and the US administration that some measure of taxpayer funding to support civil society and local governance in Idlib province might find its way to HTS and other undesirable recipients.

In World War II, the United States supported the French Resistance knowing full well that resources injected into France would, to some degree, end up in the hands of the occupiers, common criminals, and communists. Assistance was provided nonetheless;<sup>34</sup> the objective of undermining the occupation was paramount. By all accounts, the civilians of Idlib province resent and resist HTS attempts to dominate and dictate.<sup>35</sup> Their resistance merits support as they attempt to govern themselves and address social issues through civil society organizations and networks. One such organization, the civil defense “White Helmets,”<sup>36</sup> has a record of courage and selflessness unmatched in the Syrian

conflict. Failure to support civil society and local governance because some portion of the funding involved might be diverted into undeserving hands would be an error of disproportionate dimensions, given the high stakes and modest funding.

At present, US combat air assets are denied access to the air space over Idlib province.<sup>37</sup> The US administration should work with Russia and Turkey to remove this restriction so that terrorist elements may be effectively targeted and neutralized. And the United States should support Turkey in its efforts to uphold the de-escalation understanding it has with Russia governing Idlib province and to replace HTS with Free Syrian Army units. Ideally, a non-Assad Idlib province along with other non-regime areas in northern Syria might be linked to the liberated northeast to present a governance alternative to the regime in Damascus.

## Other Areas of Opportunity

A concurrent policy to stabilizing Syria should be supporting Israeli efforts to prevent Iran and its Lebanese proxy (Hezbollah) from consolidating Syria as a “resistance front.”

For Iran, the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon is a major foreign policy achievement. Hezbollah’s missile and rocket forces give Tehran a pressure point on Israel and a deterrent.<sup>38</sup>

Iran seeks to strengthen and protect its position in Lebanon by using Syria as (a) a supply route for weap-

32 Craig Browne. “Hope amid Despair: Syrian Civil Society,” *Middle East Institute*, June 30, 2015, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hope-amid-despair-syrian-civil-society>.

33 “TNT Terrorism Backgrounder: Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>.

34 John McVickar Haight Jr. “Roosevelt as Friend of France,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 3, April 1966, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20039185?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20039185?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

35 *The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib*, International Crisis Group, March 14, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/197-best-bad-options-syrias-idlib/>

36 Khaled al-Khateb. “How Syria’s White Helmets are Avoiding Regime Strikes,” *Al-Monitor*, Aug. 4, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/syria-white-helmets-killed-syria-russia-airstrikes-idlib.html>.

37 Ayla Jean Yackley. “As Idlib burns, Turkey focuses on another corner of Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/turkish-prepares-syria-assault-idlib-burns.html>.

38 Shaan Shaikh and Ian Williams. “Hezbollah’s Missiles and Rockets,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 2018, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180705\\_Williams\\_HezbollahMissiles\\_v3.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180705_Williams_HezbollahMissiles_v3.pdf).

ons, equipment, and personnel to Hezbollah,<sup>39</sup> and (b) an anti-Israel “resistance front”<sup>40</sup> that places Syrian civilians in jeopardy so that Hezbollah can continue to consolidate power in Lebanon relatively unmolested. Iran seeks to transfer the bulk of its anti-Israel harassment campaign from Lebanon to Syria.

Israel uses military force to interdict the transfer of sophisticated weaponry to Hezbollah and to counter violent harassment from Syrian territory. It reportedly has an understanding with Russia on these matters.<sup>41</sup> The United States should continue to support Israel’s policy of seeking militarily to neutralize the most destabilizing and dangerous Iranian activities in Syria.

Beyond that, it is important to remain open to and supportive of Syrian peace diplomacy. Russia and Iran have differing interests and priorities in Syria. What they share, however, is a determination to preserve the Assad regime indefinitely.

As long as Moscow and Tehran remain dedicated to regime preservation, the prospects for genuine peace talks are nil. Assad believes his allies have carried him to victory. He intends to dictate terms of peace; not arrive at them through compromise and conciliation. Unless his allies force him to the table and require him to yield significant power, genuine peace talks will not be possible.

Still, the United States should remain committed to political transition via negotiated compromise and open to changes in the positions of Assad’s allies. Dialogue with Russia should be maintained. Future Syria-related discussions with Iran should not be ruled out. Support for UN efforts in Geneva should continue.

There should, however, be no expectation that positive diplomatic results can be obtained without leverage. Leverage can, for the most part, be obtained (a) from stabilizing northeastern Syria and encouraging the growth of governance alternative to Assad, and (b) by adopting a policy of limited, but lethal military strikes in response to Assad regime mass casualty operations.

## The Long Road Ahead

The objective and accompanying elements of strategy outlined above would require sustained, disciplined heavy lifting—diplomatic and military—for what must be assumed to be a multi-year effort. Success is not guaranteed. Disengagement is an option, but one not immune to negative, unintended consequences. The failure, for example, of the United States to protect Syrian civilians from mass homicide contributed to the rise of Islamist extremism,<sup>42</sup> the encouragement of aggressive Russian policies around the globe, and the unfolding of a migrant crisis that roiled European politics all the way to Scandinavia while creating fissures within NATO.<sup>43</sup>

Without the support of American voters and their representatives in Congress the long march toward political transition in Syria cannot begin, much less reach the objective. The principal responsibility for making the case that the effort serves the security interests of Americans at home and abroad rests with the president.

US President Donald Trump has, to date, made clear his disdain for a Syrian dictator who murders civilians and inspires Islamist extremism and terrorism. By responding militarily to regime chemical attacks,<sup>44</sup> he disproved the thesis that American airstrikes would lead to invasion, occupation, or global conflict. Yet he has

39 David Adesnik, LTG. (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, and Behnam Ben Taleblu. *Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, June 18, 2019, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>.

40 “Assad And His Allies Threaten To Open A Front In Golan Heights,” *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, May 21, 2013, <https://www.memri.org/reports/assad-and-his-allies-threaten-open-front-golan-heights>.

41 “Russia Deploys Troops on Syrian-Lebanese Border to Stop Hezbollah Weapons Transfer,” *Albawaba*, Dec. 6, 2018, <https://www.albawaba.com/news/russia-deploys-troops-syrian-lebanese-border-stop-hezbollah-weapons-transfer-1222990>.

42 Petter Nesser. “Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State Terror Wave Rose So High in Europe,” *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, March 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/military-interventions-jihadi-networks-terrorist-entrepreneurs-islamic-state-terror-wave-rose-high-europe/>.

43 “Migrant Crisis: Russia and Syria ‘Weaponising’ Migration,” *BBC*, March 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35706238>.

44 Larry Kaplow. “History Of U.S. Responses To Chemical Weapons Attacks In Syria.”

also signaled his desire to quit Syria entirely.<sup>45</sup> For the president, there can be no comfortable, split-the-difference middle ground: either all-in by sealing the victory over ISIS with a stabilization program that could produce an alternative to Assad; or all-out, making the regime and its allies the beneficiaries of a five-year anti-ISIS coalition effort and placing American partners in dire straits. An extended draw-down with half-hearted efforts at stabilization will only feed a growing ISIS insurgency, ultimately undoing and reversing the destruction of the physical “caliphate.”

Even if President Trump opts for the heavy lift, a strategy aimed at promoting Syrian political transition will not implement itself. Full weight must be given to several points for the effort to have a reasonable chance of success.

## Support of Congress

A long-term effort of this nature cannot be sustained without congressional buy-in. Frequent voluntary consultations on the Hill are essential supplements to formal testimony. Although ongoing operations in Syria might—given the prominence of terrorism in the overall issue—be legitimately shoe-horned into the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF),<sup>46</sup> seeking a new, Syria-specific AUMF might help secure broad, on-the-record support for the undertaking.

## Commitment of Resources

An interagency task force large enough and with the requisite expertise and designated leadership would be required to implement a complex, multiyear strategy. Stabilizing northeastern Syria and key facets of that effort—military, diplomatic, developmental—will not be inexpensive. Neither should they be the exclusive, or even the primary responsibility of the American taxpayer. But significant American “skin in the game” will be required to recruit allies and other partners to the effort. A presidential commitment to the heavy lift in Syria would be empty without adequate resourcing of the effort.

## Recruitment of Allies and Partners

For states in the region and in Western Europe, the open-ended continuation of Assad regime misrule presents the looming threat of transnational terrorism and population flows. Although North America is far from immune to these threats, countries bordering Syria and those to the northwest are the first to feel the negative effects of regime state terror and Syrian state failure. They should be recruited aggressively to the undertaking.

Although resources—money and manpower—are important, the accumulation of effective partners is much more than a “tin cup” exercise. American leadership will be expected (and required) by all. Yet sustained consultations on strategy and tactics will be essential if a multinational team is to be effective.

Syrians—in Syria and in the diaspora—would be a vital component of a partnership to bury ISIS and produce an alternative to Assad regime state terror. Indeed, over time they would be the leading component.

## Evaluating Regime, Russian, Iranian Reactions/Countermeasures

Eight years of fighting in Syria have witnessed a sharp contrast between a strong Russian-Iranian desire to perpetuate Assad rule, and a much weaker Western desire to defend itself from the transnational effects of regime misrule.

If this imbalance in will continues, it will be impossible for the United States and its allies to sustain a long-term strategy aimed at political transition in Syria. Moscow counts on Western indifference and indecision to enable it to punch well above its weight in Syria and beyond. Tehran respects Israeli military power and little else.

It should be assumed that the regime and its allies will try, most likely through proxies, to produce American civilian and military casualties in the hope that the United States will fold its tent and vanish. For Assad,

45 Jordan Fabian and Ben Kamisar. “Trump signals he wants US troops out of Syria,” *The Hill*, April 3, 2018. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/381455-trump-signals-he-wants-us-troops-out-of-syria>.

46 *Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Those Responsible for the Recent Attacks Launched Against the United States*, 107th U.S. Congress, Sept. 18, 2001, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>.

the choice is stay in power or mount the gallows. For Russia, saving a client as unworthy as Assad signifies the return of the “Third Rome” to great power status. For Tehran, keeping Assad preserves one of the very few Syrians willing to subordinate a proud people to Iran and to Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

For years the policy of the United States was to cede escalatory dominance in Syria to a militarily inferior Russia. This policy has been at least partly reversed by post-chemical retaliatory strikes<sup>47</sup> and by the February 2018 defeat of Russian mercenaries trying to breach the Euphrates River de-confliction line.<sup>48</sup> Still, to embark on a long-term enterprise with an attitude of ambivalence is to concede defeat up-front. Regime, Russian, and Iranian violent push-back should be assumed. If the United States is unwilling to replicate the results of the February 2018 operation when appropriate, it should disengage from Syria entirely.

What has happened in Syria over the past eight years has not stayed there. More than a quarter of the pre-war population is outside the country.<sup>49</sup> Islamist extremists from one end of the Sunni Muslim world to the other have been inspired by the colossal excesses of a minority-based regime in Damascus.<sup>50</sup> Russia—sensing American weakness in Syria—has practiced aggression elsewhere, risking destabilization on a global scale.

A well-resourced and determined strategy to accomplish political transition in Syria would tell Moscow and others that the West is now determined to defend itself. Having liquidated the physical ISIS “caliphate” in Syria with no help at all from Russia, the Assad regime, and Iran, the United States and its partners must now face the consequences of an Assad regime that has burned Syria to save itself. This is a family and entourage whose existence recruits for ISIS and whose misrule guarantees that Syria will continue to be a black hole; a failed state in an important region that Iran seeks to dominate.

Absent Syria’s transition from rule by crime family to rule of law, nothing of lasting significance can be achieved by a West seeking to defend itself from the consequences of Assad regime misrule. As difficult as it will be to achieve this objective, pursuing it is the only real alternative to conceding the field to a mass murderer and his allies; a concession that would prove to be the farthest thing imaginable from cost-free. Russia, Iran, and other members of a growing global bloc of authoritarianism will measure the American and broader Western reaction to the challenge posed by Syria and will react accordingly. This has been the pattern to date. It is not likely to change.

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48 Thomas Gibbons-Neff. “How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>.

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