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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian war in 2021 hardly resembles the revolution that began a decade ago. A settlement between the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his opponents is no longer viable in the near term. The war is now so deeply intertwined with wider regional and global geopolitics that it cannot end without an international agreement. This transformation of Syria’s war since 2011 has created new threats to US national security and worsened those that emerged in the war’s first years.

The Syrian war will continue for the foreseeable future. No actor currently fighting in Syria can seize and hold all of the country and most are pursuing goals that are incompatible with a durable partition. Numerous actors are projecting insurgencies outward from their areas of control. Major ground operations have slowed, but future offensives remain likely including in Idlib. Assad’s superficial control within regime-held areas will continue to generate instability.

The United States is overlooking Syria’s centrality to Russia’s global ambitions. US policy framing that isolates Russia’s operations in Syria from Russia’s broader challenge to the United States and international order creates a dangerous blind spot that Russia is actively exploiting. Russia’s military expansion and adaptation in Syria allows Russia to apply new pressure on NATO operations in the Middle East and North Africa while developing capabilities to offset US and NATO advantages. Russia’s efforts to co-opt the UN-led diplomatic process in Syria are worsening the erosion of international mechanisms that have mitigated global conflict since the end of WWII.

Transnational terrorist organizations continue to proliferate in Syria and are evolving under US counterterrorism pressure to pose new and challenging threats. ISIS is reconstituting an insurgency fueled by the group’s global momentum and the significant opportunity created by the large population of vulnerable displaced persons across Syria and Iraq. Defeating the ISIS caliphate damaged but did not defeat the group. Al Qaeda offshoot Hay’at Tahrir al Sham is attempting to gain international recognition that could increase its access to revenue and legitimize its indoctrination and recruitment of Syrians.

Iran is exploiting the vacuum in Syria to entrench its own transnational networks in ways that will fuel continued regional instability and risk provoking a major war with Israel. Israel is degrading Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, but Iran’s long-term effort to gain social roots through religious, cultural, and financial outreach remains unanswered. Iran is positioned to neutralize the impact of a future deal for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria, which would leave Iran’s local influence intact.

The limited US commitment to Syria has achieved disproportionate impact, including constraining Assad’s war effort and preventing ISIS from fully reconstituting, but is untenable at current force levels. The United States could face a forced withdrawal if pro-Assad actors significantly increase their military pressure through insurgent attacks, a contingency for which they are preparing.

Multiple **strategic traps** await the United States as the Biden Administration reformulates its Syria policy.

- ⊗ Accepting Assad and lifting sanctions on his regime
- ⊗ Supporting Syrian Kurdish independence
- ⊗ Abandoning the Syrian Kurds to Turkey
- ⊗ Normalizing al Qaeda’s offshoots
- ⊗ Expecting Russia either to play a constructive role or fail in Syria.

The Russia traps are particularly dangerous due to Russia’s success in advancing disinformation that promotes them. The versions of this trap include outsourcing terrorism to Russia, expecting Russia to constrain Iran or deliver a diplomatic settlement that ends the war, or expecting Syria to become a “quagmire” that weakens Russia.

All of these traps, which surface frequently in policy discussions over Syria, do not provide viable pathways to accomplish US interests in Syria. Instead, they will lead to greater conflict and erosion of US military leverage and diplomatic influence while emboldening US adversaries including Russia, Iran, and Salafi jihadist groups.

Overestimating what is achievable in Syria is as likely to lead to strategic failure as a complete withdrawal. The United States must pursue modest goals that make longer-term interests, including a diplomatic settlement, more achievable over time. In the next five years, the United States should:

1. Constrain Russia, Iran, and Assad in eastern Syria
2. Deny Assad normalization and economic windfalls
3. Help the SDF build responsive governance and capable security structures in eastern Syria
4. Realign with Turkey in Syria by supporting it in Idlib and pressing the SDF for reform
5. Ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and SDF-held areas, including the al Hawl camp
6. Prevent an ISIS reconstitution and inhibit attacks by ISIS and/or al Qaeda against the West

To start, the United States should take the following steps to shore up its strategic position, posture the United States to mitigate worst-case scenarios, foster local resilience, and enable follow-on measures.

#### *Reinforcing successes*

- Evaluate the force requirements to stabilize eastern Syria, defeat ISIS’s insurgency in SDF-held areas, and assist the SDF in deterring attacks from Russia, Assad, Iran, Turkey, and their proxies.
- Commit to continued cross-border aid access even if Russia vetoes access in the UN. Pursue a deal with the EU and Turkey for a joint humanitarian aid effort.

#### *Constraining US adversaries*

- Uphold sanctions and maintain a firm position against political normalization or new financial support to the Assad regime, including from the IMF. Apply additional sanctions as appropriate including secondary sanctions against those still investing in Syria.
- Commission a congressional study of Russian war crimes in Syria, Ukraine, and other theaters as appropriate in order to combat Russian disinformation and reinforce international laws and norms against such tactics.
- Commit to supporting Turkey diplomatically and economically in Idlib in the event of a future Russian-backed offensive in order to foster cooperation while preventing a dangerous escalation in northwest Syria. Begin talks with Turkey to identify military support that may be necessary.
- Continue high-value strikes against al Qaeda leaders and attack cells. Publicize as much evidence as possible regarding HTS’s current and historic role in transnational terrorism including key elements beyond attack planning: foreign fighter recruitment, cross-theater logistics, and international financing.

#### *Building for the future*

- Launch a new diplomatic initiative to begin an intra-Syrian dialogue through conferences and track II initiatives with inclusion from as broad of a cross-section of Syrian society as possible.
- Evaluate the funding requirements to accelerate stabilization in eastern Syria and identify priority target areas, which should include the al Hawl internally displaced persons (IDP) camp.<sup>1</sup> When security conditions allow, return civilian programmers and diplomats to the area and launch new stabilization programs based on the review.
- Push the SDF to reform its governance model to provide more political inclusion for Arab populations and better accountability mechanisms that improve civilians’ trust.

## INTRODUCTION

The war in Syria today hardly resembles the revolution that began a decade ago. Foreign forces—including the Russian and Turkish militaries; Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force and its Afghan, Pakistani, Lebanese, and Iraqi proxies; foreign jihadists; and US forces—now control or influence much of the Syrian battlefield. A meaningful settlement between Syrian president Bashar al Assad and his opponents is no longer achievable in the near term. Assad has spoiled all diplomatic efforts while fracturing and radicalizing his opposition and forcing much of its support base to flee.<sup>2</sup> While a compromise among Syrians remains necessary to end the war, an agreement between international actors is now a prerequisite that is unlikely to be met in the near future. The war in Syria is now intertwined with regional and global geopolitics that preclude a settlement. The war is on track to continue, with Syrians its first victims.

The repercussions of the first ten years of Syria’s war have been severe.<sup>3</sup> The flow of refugees fleeing the violence of Assad and his backers has destabilized Syria’s neighbors, polarized Europe, and caused conflict between the United States and Turkey. The stress of this refugee crisis will continue to damage the region and Europe as the Assad regime is committed to ensuring this population has no viable option for return.<sup>4</sup> The war has destroyed the country, which the UN estimated in 2017 would take \$250 billion to rebuild.<sup>5</sup> The cost has only grown since then. Syria’s collapse has provided enduring safe havens for Salafi jihadist groups, given Russia the opportunity to gain a strategic foothold in the Middle East, enabled Iran’s regional expansion and escalating conflict with Israel, and undermined international norms including those regarding weapons of mass destruction. Syria’s impact is global.

Conditions on the ground in early 2021 point to a new phase of the war that will produce even worse consequences in the coming years. The international community has done little to mitigate the damage of Syria’s war or foster the conditions that will make its resolution possible. The most decisive actors have been those willing to destroy the country and its people for their aims: Assad, Russia, and Iran.

## NO END IN SIGHT FOR SYRIA’S WAR

Waiting out the Syrian war is not an option. The war is on track to continue—with increasingly global repercussions—for the foreseeable future. No actor is capable of seizing and holding all of Syria, which is divided into three major zones. Assad seized large portions of western Syria from 2016-2018 with Russian and Iranian help but has been unable to consolidate control or advance into new areas. Turkey controls a swath of northern Syria along the Turkish border, which it secures and governs using Turkish military forces and infrastructure augmented by Syrian proxies. Finally, US forces enable the SDF to control the remaining approximately 1/3 of Syrian territory.

The Syrian conflict will not crystalize into a partition. Most major actors in Syria either seek to define the future of the entire state or view it as a component of a larger regional project. Assad has deliberately retained a foothold in all “four corners” of Syria in order to mitigate the possibility of partition.<sup>6</sup> Russia views Syria through the lens of resisting what Russia falsely claims are Western efforts to overthrow the Syrian regime or otherwise destroy its sovereignty and thus will not accept its division.<sup>7</sup> Iran views Syria as a lynchpin in its efforts to shape governance and security structures across the region along the model of its Islamic theocracy.<sup>8</sup> ISIS and al Qaeda and its offshoots seek to replace the regime with an Islamic state in all of Syria.<sup>9</sup> The PKK views Syria as a test case for its vision of an independent Kurdistan across the Middle East and a front line in its war against Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Turkey is pursuing its own regional hegemony that includes territorial expansion to defeat the PKK in Syria.<sup>11</sup> The ambitious goals of the major actors in Syria engender maximalist approaches that are incompatible with a durable partition.

Syria’s current front lines are unstable and could not be readily transformed into borders. Numerous actors are waging insurgencies from their zones of control into those of their primary opponents. PKK elements within the

SDF are likely responsible for numerous insurgent attacks that are destabilizing areas Turkey seized from the SDF from 2016-2019.<sup>12</sup> Assad, Iran, and possibly Russia are enabling insurgent attacks against the SDF east of the Euphrates River.<sup>13</sup> The ISIS insurgency has reached all major zones in Syria except the coast. Major ground operations have slowed, but future offensives remain likely. Assad intends to attack Idlib again. Turkish forces and their proxies continue low-level attacks against the SDF and could launch a renewed offensive.<sup>14</sup>

Assad's control within regime-held areas is superficial and will continue to generate instability. Renewed insurgencies and protests threaten to destabilize regime-held areas again, especially in Dera'a where the revolution began in 2011.<sup>15</sup> Russian and Iranian forces and their proxies operate outside state control and are mobilizing Syrian forces that they will not fully submit to regime control. Assad faces growing unrest from loyalist populations including among the Druze population in Suwayda province and indications of growing dissatisfaction in the Syrian coast. Assad cannot seize and hold all of Syria, and could even begin to lose hold of some recently seized areas. The west has little reason to cede him Syria, which he is responsible for destroying and will fail to secure.

## NEW AND WORSENING THREATS IN SYRIA

The transformation of Syria's war since 2011 has created new threats to US national security and worsened those that emerged in the war's first years. The United States is overlooking Syria's centrality to Russia's global ambitions. US policy framing that isolates Russia's operations in Syria from Russia's broader challenge to the US and international order creates a dangerous blind spot that Russia is actively exploiting. Meanwhile, despite six years of US-led counterterrorism operations in Syria, transnational terrorist organizations continue to proliferate in Syria and are evolving to pose new threats that will be even more difficult to address. Iran is also exploiting the vacuum in Syria to entrench its own transnational networks in ways that will fuel continued regional instability and risks provoking a major war with Israel in the future.

**Russia's position in Syria is a grand strategic challenge to the United States and NATO.** Russia is using its air and naval bases in Syria's coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartous, respectively, as a springboard to build out military infrastructure across the Middle East and North Africa that could give Russia strategic depth it has not possessed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian private military companies (PMCs) deploying from Syria took control of an airbase in Libya and are fortifying it to enable what could become a permanent presence.<sup>16</sup> Russia is also establishing a naval base in Sudan that will enable it to repurpose its base in Syria from primarily a resupply facility to a multipurpose naval base.<sup>17</sup> Long-term, Russia seeks to expand the area of responsibility of its Black Sea Fleet to cover the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Persian Gulf while extending to Madagascar and India's west coast.<sup>18</sup> Russia's expanding military footprint provides it greater leverage over NATO in the Middle East and North Africa, positioning Russia to apply pressure such as threats to freedom of navigation through key naval chokepoints. If its expansion continues, Russia could develop even greater disruptive leverage.

Russia is also using its experience fighting in Syria to transform its military capabilities to bypass and offset US and NATO advantages, potentially leveling the playing field.<sup>19</sup> Russia's evolving doctrine prioritizes information operations and subordinates military operations to support their effects, a reversal of the US framework and for which the United States does not yet have a strategic response. Russia is also using its Syria experience to close several capability and technology gaps with the United States and NATO including command and control, expeditionary warfare, coalition warfare, precision strike capabilities, long-range drones, and counter-drone capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Russia continues to use the Syrian battlefield as a live-fire proving ground for new weapons systems and doctrine and will feed new lessons learned into its ongoing efforts to transform and professionalize its force.<sup>21</sup>

The experience fighting in Syria has already improved the capabilities of Russian command headquarters, airpower, PMCs, and Special Forces (Spetsnaz). Spetsnaz teams have supported pro-regime forces in frontline combat using heavy weapons and anti-tank guided munitions (ATGMs), including during the 2019 push by pro-regime forces

into Idlib Province.<sup>22</sup> Their experience in combat differs from the experience gained by US special operations forces in Syria, who have performed a train and assist mission with local partners and have not engaged in frontline fighting.

**US forces in Syria are already confronting a transformed Russian threat.** Russia has made eastern Syria a test case for a type of contested operational environment that US forces must prepare to face in the future. Russia is testing and fielding new electronic warfare systems to interfere with US operations, including disabling US aircraft and small surveillance drones and disrupting US communications. Then-US Special Operations Command commander General Thomas described Syria as “the most aggressive EW [electronic warfare] environment on the planet” in April 2018.<sup>23</sup> Russia’s EW toolkit includes a GPS spoofing capability that some military analysts in Russia claim caused multiple US cruise missiles to miss their target during the US strike on the Shayrat airbase in Syria in 2017.<sup>24</sup> Other Russian EW systems directed at Syrian opposition groups could be used to interfere with the United States and its partner force in the future, including phone jamming and text message/call spoofing.<sup>25</sup>

Russia is employing its new doctrine to shape social and political conditions in eastern Syria to be inhospitable to US forces. Russia seeks to shape the decision-making of local actors toward outcomes favorable to Russia through information operations reinforced by kinetic operations. Russia’s effort in Eastern Syria threatens to fragment the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and generate either or both local resistance to continued US presence or a decision by the SDF’s senior leadership to abandon the US partnership. Russia’s primary information operations frame the United States as an unreliable partner and stoke Arab tribal unrest against SDF governance, exploiting a seam between the SDF’s primarily Kurdish leadership and local Arab populations.<sup>26</sup>

Russia is also applying its successful model of fighting with indigenous forces in Syria to achieve other geopolitical interests.<sup>27</sup> Russia scaled up the recruitment and mobilization of thousands of Syrian proxy fighters in mid-2020. Russia has already deployed these forces alongside its PMCs in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Venezuela and likely will use this expeditionary capability in other theaters. If successful, this effort will provide a cheap expeditionary force that increases the scope and scale of the military operations Russia can sustain abroad at low risk to Russian personnel or domestic backlash.

The strategic and operational threats Russia’s operations in Syria pose to the United States and NATO have gone unanswered. US sanctions have imposed some costs on Russian officials and companies involved in violence against civilians in Western Syria but do not mitigate the broader risks posed by Russia’s continued military expansion and adaptation. In Eastern Syria, US forces lack the support needed to respond to Russian pressure, including authorities to counter Russian information operations more effectively. The United States is also widening the strategic power vacuum in the Middle East by redeploying assets out of the Persian Gulf and signaling potential additional troop reductions to follow.<sup>28</sup> This re-posturing cedes an opportunity for Russia to extend its infrastructure and influence in the Middle East right as Russia is gearing up to do so. The United States will miss critical opportunities to disrupt Russia’s acquisition of new global leverage if US efforts to posture effectively for great power competition overlook the Middle East theater.

Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to dismantle the rules-based international order that makes the world safe for democracy and constrains disruptive actors like Russia. Putin envisions diminished American power and the creation of a multipolar world order in which Russia is a global power capable of imposing its will on others.<sup>29</sup> The UN is a key battleground for Putin’s campaign.<sup>30</sup> Russia’s veto power at the UN Security Council (UNSC) is a key source of Russian power. Putin is working to bolster the significance of the UN while simultaneously eroding the constraints it imposes, effectively repurposing the organization to enable Russia’s rise at the expense of the US and international norms. Consistent with Russia’s new military doctrine (discussed above), Russia is focusing its efforts at the UN on reshaping the global information space, using the UN to legitimize Russian operations across theaters.<sup>31</sup>

**Syria is central to Russia’s effort to reshape international mechanisms to favor Russia.** Weak international resolve to take action in Syria creates opportunities for Russia to tear down UN resolutions and mechanisms that constrain Assad and his backers, creating precedents Russia can apply to other theaters. Russia’s most concerning success has been to terminate the joint inquiry by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to investigate and identify those responsible for chemical weapons use in Syria.<sup>32</sup> France led an important effort to mitigate the damage by forming a separate investigative mechanism at the OPCW that has continued to investigate and publish in-depth findings regarding the Assad regime’s role in chemical attacks.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, Russia’s success forcing the investigation out of the UN reduces its impact and bolsters Russia’s efforts to normalize chemical weapons use.

Russia has also done significant damage to the UN’s ability to provide humanitarian aid to civilians in war zones. Russia has devastated the humanitarian aid effort in Syria in part by using UN coordinates to conduct illegal precision strikes against hospitals.<sup>34</sup> Russia is also working to eliminate UN-provided authority to bypass the Assad regime to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria. Russia has already used its veto power to scale the authorization down from four border crossing points to one and will likely vote against the final crossing in July, forcing the UN deeper into complicity with Assad.<sup>35</sup> Assad’s behavior to date indicates he will use the leverage to attempt to starve out remaining opposition-held areas while directing aid to loyalist communities.<sup>36</sup> Russia’s success will lead to greater cooptation of humanitarian aid by authoritarians including the Assad regime in the future.

**The US approach to diplomacy in Syria fails to account for Russia’s success in shaping the UN and the information environment surrounding Syria.** Russia has neutralized UNSCR 2254 as a potential mechanism to force major changes in the behavior of the Assad regime. The resolution outlines requirements for an end to the war including a ceasefire and the drafting of a new Syrian Constitution followed by UN-monitored elections. Russia seeks to repurpose 2254 to break Assad’s isolation and preserve his regime. Russia has made multiple attempts to this end, including proposing reconstruction funds in return for refugee resettlement.<sup>37</sup> While these efforts have failed, they have bought time for Russia and Assad to strengthen their position on the ground while further delegitimizing the diplomatic process. In 2021, Russia is again advancing an effort to implement UNSCR 2254 outside the UN framework, this time with support from Turkey and Qatar as well as potentially other Arab Gulf states.<sup>38</sup>

Russia’s success undermining the viability of the UN as a mechanism for upholding international law and constraining human rights abuses makes conditions much worse for diplomacy than they were in 2015 when UNSCR 2254 passed. The Syrian diplomatic process remains in a limbo that favors Assad and his backers while lending credence to a claim that Salafi jihadist groups use to recruit: Syrians have no option for justice except the full destruction of the Assad regime.

**Syria remains a durable haven for Salafi jihadist groups, which are evolving to pose new threats.** The sizes of these forces are difficult to verify, so available numbers should be treated with some skepticism. The available evidence indicates a substantial jihadist presence in Syria that constitutes a major counterterrorism challenge. Estimates from the UN in 2021 indicate there are roughly 30,000 jihadist fighters on the Syrian battlefield, including ISIS’s insurgent force and various al-Qaeda-linked groups.<sup>39</sup> Another 10,000 ISIS fighters are currently detained in SDF-held prisons, including 2,000 foreign fighters whose countries of origin have refused to repatriate them.<sup>40</sup> In aggregate, Syria is second only to Afghanistan in terms of the relative size and diversity of its jihadist movement.

**Absent sustained counterterrorism pressure, ISIS could re-establish a physical caliphate.** ISIS remains an organized and capable global organization. It is focused on resurging outside Iraq and Syria to regain momentum and reinvigorate its brand. It has expanded its operations across the African continent, including creating multiple



new provinces that have generated momentum and resources that can fuel ISIS’s recovery in Syria and Iraq.<sup>41</sup> In Syria, ISIS is reconstituting fastest in areas held by the Assad regime and its backers including in the central Homs desert, where ISIS maintains a durable base from which it can prevent pro-regime forces from transiting the area and seize energy infrastructure. ISIS’s secure base in central Syria also positions ISIS to scale up operations in other provinces in the coming months.<sup>42</sup>

An unaddressed IDP crisis across Syria and Iraq provides ISIS its greatest opportunity. After defeating ISIS’s physical caliphate in 2019, the anti-ISIS coalition has failed to enable the reconstruction and stabilization necessary to enable tens of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi IDPs to return home safely. This population’s continued vulnerability provides ISIS a major recruitment opportunity. In Syria, ISIS is recruiting additional members within the al Hawl IDP camp, which hosts 50,000 children under the age of 18 who are particularly vulnerable.<sup>43</sup> ISIS also conducted a major assassination campaign in the camp in late 2020.<sup>44</sup> ISIS is similarly recruiting among the 30,000 IDPs at the Rukban IDP camp near the border with Jordan.<sup>45</sup> Forced returns of these populations began in late 2019 and are worsening the problem, sending civilians to destroyed homes and often to hostile communities where they are even more vulnerable to ISIS.<sup>46</sup> New grievances provide ISIS additional inroads with the population.

**The United States faces an even more dangerous threat from the al Qaeda network in Syria,** which is insulating itself from counterterrorism pressure. Hay’at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the successor to al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, is attempting to become a legitimate governance provider in northwest Syria. HTS’s force of approximately 10,000 fighters in Idlib Province now leads a governing body titled the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) that has consolidated control and positioned itself as a Turkish partner.<sup>47</sup> HTS seeks to gain more international support for the SSG in the form of humanitarian aid and has begun to indicate a desire for political recognition. HTS’s bid to govern reflects a new phase of its careful approach in Syria. HTS has prioritized gaining local support and legitimacy in order to deny the United States opportunities to leverage popular resistance to defeat the group, as we did to al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from 2007-2011 and ISIS from 2014-2019.<sup>48</sup>

HTS’s control in Idlib increases the terrorism threat the United States faces by providing other al Qaeda-linked groups and ISIS haven, positioning HTS and other groups to indoctrinate and recruit among Idlib’s vulnerable IDP population, legitimizing HTS’s extreme ideology, and enabling HTS to raise significant financial resources. HTS claims to have severed its ties to the al Qaeda global organization but has not moderated its ideology nor forcibly expelled al Qaeda elements who are planning attacks against the West. The financial resources HTS can mobilize are particularly dangerous. An HTS official claimed in late 2019 the organization makes \$130 million per month via taxes, oil, extortion, and land seizures and sales.<sup>49</sup> HTS is also fundraising abroad, including through cryptocurrency trading.<sup>50</sup> It is unclear from publicly available information how much money HTS provides the broader al Qaeda network.

**New al-Qaeda-linked groups are emerging in Syria.** The most prominent group, Tanzim Hurras al Din, has approximately 2,000-2,500 fighters and publicly asserts its intent to conduct attacks against the West.<sup>51</sup> The Turkistan Islamic Party, another prominent al Qaeda-linked group that the UN estimates has 3,500-4,000 fighters in Syria, openly declares its intent to attack China and Russia and may be linked to at least one attack abroad from Syria.<sup>52</sup> Other apparently al Qaeda – linked groups have begun to emerge, including one that has claimed multiple attacks against Turkish forces deployed to Idlib as well as Russian forces north of Raqqa City.<sup>53</sup> The continued proliferation of jihadist groups in Syria demonstrates that the United States will continue to face a terror threat from Syria for the foreseeable future.

**Iran is attempting to build a long-term presence in Syria through a combination of permanent military infrastructure and social outreach, which could entrench Iranian presence and influence.**<sup>54</sup> Iran’s expanding military infrastructure has triggered an escalating Israeli air campaign, which has imposed costs that block the full scope of Iran’s intended build-out.<sup>55</sup> Iran’s social outreach is unaddressed, however. Iran is building religious,

cultural, and economic influence along the Euphrates River in eastern Syria that complement similar efforts along the Syrian coast and Syria’s southern Dera’a Province and leverage established Iranian-supported entities including Lebanese Hezbollah’s development organization Jihad al Bina to gain inroads into Sunni populations.<sup>56</sup> Iran is recruiting tribal fighters into its proxy militias, meanwhile.<sup>57</sup>

Iran’s social outreach in Eastern Syria increases the threat Iran poses to the region, Israel, and US forces deployed in eastern Syria. It supports Iran’s establishment of a land corridor that passes through Iraq and eastern Syria before reaching Damascus and then Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> It also positions Iran’s proxies to benefit from future cross-border trade between Syria and Iraq and to threaten US forces on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River (more on this below). Iran’s new local roots in Syria could neutralize a future deal that requires a withdrawal of foreign forces, which would leave Iran with strong inroads in local communities. Iran’s investment in Sunni-majority areas including Eastern Syria will also drive instability and sectarianism, creating an opportunity for Salafi jihadist organizations like ISIS to justify insurgent attacks.

Iran’s ability to gain traction among these communities is a product of the strategic vacuum in Syria more than the appeal of Iran’s ideology or material support. The greatest competition Iran faces is from Russian and regime units who are also recruiting and performing outreach to this population.<sup>59</sup> The poverty caused by the war is their primary enabler. The false starts of US withdrawals from Syria in 2018 and 2019 also undermined the SDF and created fear that drove some communities to embrace alternatives—including Iran, Russia, and Assad. It remains to be seen how durable their influence is if contested, however. The United States could disrupt their consolidation and potentially erode their influence by establishing and communicating an enduring presence in eastern Syria that strengthens the SDF and offers new opportunities for locals to gain employment and enjoy security.

## CURRENT US IMPACT

The current US commitment to Syria has achieved a disproportionate impact in support of US interests. US economic pressure is constraining Assad’s war effort and miring him in efforts to mitigate and offset the destabilizing effects of a growing collapse of the regime economy. The economic and diplomatic isolation US sanctions create have also disrupted Russia’s effort to gain reconstruction funds from Europe that would have been used to reward regime power brokers and Russia and Iran rather than rebuild the parts of Syria they have destroyed. Meanwhile, the deployment of roughly 900 US special operations forces to eastern Syria is enabling a minimum level of stability that prevents a major ISIS breakout and denies Assad, Russia, and Iran valuable energy assets and terrain.<sup>60</sup> US strikes after the last two confirmed chemical weapons attacks in Syria have thus far deterred future use. These outcomes are important and have prevented even worse scenarios from emerging.

The United States must not overestimate what more this commitment can achieve, however. Defeating the ISIS caliphate damaged but did not defeat the group nor eliminate the threat it poses to the West. Current US efforts will not end the war or cause a diplomatic settlement to occur, moreover. Statements by US officials that link US sanctions and stabilization efforts to the UN-backed diplomatic process reflect a positive orientation on a long-term settlement of the war but are counterproductive in the near term. Conditions are nowhere near set for implementation of UN resolution 2254, but the US focus on it has allowed Assad and Russia to spoil and discredit it as a workable solution, causing Syrians to begin to look elsewhere. The United States should uphold its objective of enabling a diplomatic settlement of the war, but must first re-establish the credibility of the diplomatic process. Granting Russia and Assad concessions in the pursuit of unattainable near-term wins has done more harm than good. It is time for the United States to re-evaluate.

Despite its success, the US position in eastern Syria is untenable for the long-term at current force levels. The United States faces acute risks in eastern Syria that could overwhelm US forces if they do not receive more support. US forces are stretched thin and cannot provide the scope and scale of local mediation needed to mitigate faltering

Arab tribal support for the SDF or reintegrate IDPs. US forces lack the resources and expertise to provide the stabilization assistance the SDF sorely needs, including the rehabilitation of basic services and governance. Moreover, the SDF's hold on eastern Syria is tenuous due to the combined pressure from ISIS's insurgency and sustained Turkish military pressure, which draws forces away from fighting ISIS. US forces are enabling targeted CT operations and play a role in deterring another Turkish offensive but cannot, at current force levels, bridge the gap in capabilities needed to secure the area.

An increase in attacks by pro-Assad actors could force the US into a contested withdrawal from Syria. Assad, Russia, and Iran are all postured to escalate and have been expanding their recruitment among local populations in eastern Syria including those in SDF-held areas.<sup>61</sup> The most dangerous possibility in the near term is an Iranian escalation in Syria in retaliation for US pressure elsewhere. The DIA reported to the DOD inspector general in December 2020 that “Iran has attempted to recruit local Syrians to collect intelligence on U.S. and Coalition forces in Syria and could attempt to leverage these individuals to conduct attacks on its behalf” including “in response to perceived support to strikes on regional Iranian-affiliated targets and to pressure the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria.”<sup>62</sup>

## STRATEGIC TRAPS IN SYRIA

Multiple strategic traps await the Biden administration as it formulates its Syria policy:

- ⊗ **TRAP: Accepting Assad.** The option to accept Assad in return for stability in Syria is a false one. The most likely consequences of such a decision would be to doom more Syrians to detention, torture, and execution; fuel Assad's campaign of revenge against the population that rebelled against him; render the refugee crisis permanent; fuel a new recruitment wave by jihadist groups; empower Russia globally; and allow Iran to establish long-term social roots and military infrastructure which could lead to a major regional escalation with Israel.

Russia is working to draw the United States into this trap, nonetheless. To build pressure for normalization, Russia is making progress lobbying US allies in the Arab gulf to restart diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, welcome it back into the Arab League, and invest in reconstruction projects that will provide the regime a stabilizing windfall that rewards its powerbrokers. Russia is also attempting to foster support in the West for acceptance of Assad by pushing disinformation supporting the following false narratives.<sup>63</sup>

### False Russian Narratives in Syria

- The war is over and refusing to accept Assad needlessly prolongs Syrian suffering
  - Assad protects Syrian minorities
  - US sanctions are inhumane and illegal
  - Western intelligence organizations are fabricating reports of war crimes in Syria<sup>64</sup>
  - Russia can help return refugees to Syria with financial help
- ⊗ **TRAP: Supporting Syrian Kurdish independence.** A US-supported effort to turn SDF-held areas into an independent state would be particularly dangerous. Any significant step towards granting international legitimacy to the SDF's governing body (the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria or AANES) would incite another Turkish invasion that would destabilize northern Syria and significantly disrupt if not end the counter-ISIS effort. The risk that such an escalation expands to include PKK operations in Turkey and/or northern Iraq is high. Even if a Turkish escalation could be deterred, the recognition of an independent SDF-run state is counterproductive for US interests overall. It would further worsen the prospects of a diplomatic settlement of the war and could invite military escalation by other actors including the Assad regime, potentially with Russian support.
  - ⊗ **TRAP: Abandoning the Syrian Kurds to Turkey.** The United States should not withdraw from eastern Syria and allow Turkey to destroy the SDF. Turkey cannot seize and secure all of eastern Syria and would leave a significant vacuum in which ISIS

can accelerate its reconstitution. Abandoning the SDF also increases the risk of an expanding PKK-Turkish war. PKK elements currently invested in the success of the SDF as a cross-ethnic political project could instead rejoin the broader PKK insurgency against Turkey. Warning signs of this risk have already emerged in Afrin and other areas Turkey seized from the SDF, where new Kurdish resistance groups are claiming attacks against Turkish forces and their proxies.<sup>65</sup> Iran and Russia would likely also exploit a US withdrawal to gain new strategic positions and potentially access to natural resources in eastern Syria.

- ⊗ **TRAP: Normalizing al Qaeda’s offshoots.** The United States must resist the normalization of Salafi jihadist groups as acceptable or mainstream elements of the Syrian opposition. HTS’s leader, Abu Mohammed al Joulani, is making a new push for international acceptance, including the removal of the US terror designation of HTS. Joulani is waging a media campaign to bolster HTS’s image, granting Western journalists access to Idlib Province and conducting multiple interviews with PBS News and think-tanks writing for Western audiences.<sup>66</sup> Some analysts have already begun to argue that the United States must engage with HTS on humanitarian grounds.<sup>67</sup>

The United States must be prepared to confront Joulani’s false narratives and potential pressure to de-list HTS from Turkey, humanitarian organizations, and others. Humanitarian conditions in Idlib Province are dire but the United States must not allow HTS to exploit the situation to extort recognition that will grant it free access to funds and other resources.

- ⊗ **TRAP: Expecting Russia either to play a constructive role or fail in Syria.** The versions of this trap include outsourcing terrorism to Russia, expecting Russia to constrain Iran or deliver a diplomatic settlement that ends the war, and expecting Syria to become a “quagmire” that weakens Russia.

**Russia cannot deliver acceptable counterterrorism outcomes.** Russia has falsely attempted to frame its operations in Syria as primarily counterterrorism-focused since its 2015 intervention. Russia has not prioritized operations against ISIS or al Qaeda and has achieved little against either group. Russia does face an acute ISIS threat in Central Syria that is disrupting its ability to execute contracts to operate Syrian energy infrastructure. Russia is slowly allocating more resources to this security requirement. Russia has neither the intent nor capability to defeat ISIS’s broader insurgency, however. Russian-backed attacks on Idlib Province have accelerated HTS’s takeover while driving the proliferation of new al-Qaeda-linked groups. The minimal impact Russian forces can achieve against ISIS or al Qaeda and its offshoots is far too meager to offset the strategic costs of relying on Russia to do so, including the radicalization Russia’s tactics produce and the strategic disadvantage of further empowering Russia on NATO’s southern flank and in the Black Sea.

**Russia will not constrain Iran.** Russia has also sought to legitimize its presence in Syria by convincing Israel and the West that Russia can constrain Iran in Syria. Russia and Iran do sometimes compete at the tactical level, including for recruits and economic assets, but this friction does not extend up to the strategic level. Russia lacks the capability, including ground forces in Syria, to force Iran out, moreover. For example, a Russian-backed agreement with the United States and Jordan in 2016 to allow the Assad regime to retake Southern Syria included guarantees that Iran would not expand its foothold in the area.<sup>68</sup> Russia wholly failed to deliver.<sup>69</sup>

**Russia cannot deliver a diplomatic settlement that ends the war.** Russia has far less ability to deliver political outcomes in Syria than the United States often assumes.<sup>70</sup> Policy expectations that hinge on Russia pressuring the Assad regime to grant major concessions overlook how the Kremlin views Syria: as a front line in resisting what it perceives to be Western efforts to conduct regime change.<sup>71</sup> Delivering Assad’s removal from power or other meaningful change in the regime’s behavior is inconsistent with Russia’s objectives. Such policy approaches also assume the regime is weak enough to buckle under Russian pressure. In reality, Assad’s inability to provide security does not mean the regime itself is fragile. The network of power brokers that comprise the Syrian regime is highly resilient and is not exhibiting signs of the level of internal friction that could lead to major instability within the regime. The United States must not expect Russia to deliver an acceptable political settlement and especially must not grant Russia concessions in Syria in the hope of inducing Russia to try.

*Syria is not a “quagmire” that will weaken Russia.* The United States must also not tolerate Russia’s military expansion in and from Syria in the belief that these positions are not sustainable for Russia over the long term. The Syrian war is not analogous to Russia’s experience in Afghanistan in the 80s. Russia views its Syrian campaign as a major success and a replicable model of the kind of military operations that will be a defining element of future warfare.<sup>72</sup> The United States should not expect that time is on our side in Syria or that Russia’s Syrian operations will drain its resources to a meaningful level. The United States must face the strategic threat posed by Russian operations based out of Syria with the same seriousness the United States treats Russian military leverage in Europe.

## WHAT TO DO

Overestimating what is achievable in Syria is as likely to lead to strategic failure as a complete US withdrawal. There are no quick fixes. The United States must orient on modest goals that build on successes to date and make longer-term interests, including a diplomatic settlement, more achievable over time. Multiple phases will be necessary. The interim outcomes the United States should pursue over the next five years are:

1. Constrain Russia, Iran, and Assad in eastern Syria by enabling the SDF to compete more effectively for recruits and private sector employees
2. Deny Assad normalization and economic windfalls
3. Help the SDF build responsive governance and capable security structures in eastern Syria
4. Realign with Turkey in Syria by supporting it in Idlib and pressing the SDF for reform
5. Ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and SDF-held areas, including the al Hawl IDP camp
6. Prevent an ISIS reconstitution and attacks by ISIS and/or al Qaeda against the west

To start, the United States should take the following steps to shore up its strategic position, posture the United States to mitigate worst-case scenarios, foster local resilience. These steps alone will not accomplish all the objectives listed above but will set critical conditions that mitigate worst-case scenarios and enable follow-on measures.

### *Reinforcing successes*

- Evaluate the force requirements to stabilize eastern Syria, defeat ISIS’s insurgency in SDF-held areas, and assist the SDF in deterring attacks from Russia, Assad, Iran, Turkey, and their proxies.
- Commit to continued cross-border aid access even if Russia vetoes access in the UN. Pursue a deal with the EU and Turkey for a joint humanitarian aid effort.

### *Constraining US adversaries*

- Uphold sanctions and maintain a firm position against political normalization or new financial support to the Assad regime, including from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Apply additional sanctions as appropriate including secondary sanctions against those still investing in Syria.
- Commission a congressional study of Russian war crimes in Syria, Ukraine, and other theaters as appropriate in order to combat Russian disinformation and reinforce international laws and norms against such tactics.
- Commit to supporting Turkey diplomatically and economically in Idlib in the event of a future Russian-backed offensive in order to foster cooperation while preventing a dangerous escalation in northwest Syria. Begin talks with Turkey to identify military support that may be necessary.
- Continue high-value strikes against al Qaeda leaders and attack cells. Publicize as much evidence as possible regarding HTS’s current and historic role in transnational terrorism including key elements beyond attack planning: foreign fighter recruitment, cross-theater logistics, and international financing.

### *Building for the future*

- Launch a new diplomatic initiative to begin an intra-Syrian dialogue through conferences and track II initiatives with inclusion from as broad of a cross-section of Syrian society as possible.

- Evaluate the funding requirements to accelerate stabilization in eastern Syria and identify priority target areas, which should include the al Hawl IDP camp.<sup>73</sup> When security conditions allow, return civilian programmers and diplomats to the area and launch new stabilization programs based on the review.
- Push the SDF to reform its governance model to provide more political inclusion for Arab populations and better accountability mechanisms that improve civilians’ trust.

US policymakers still have the power to influence the consequences of the Syrian conflict. Syria is a mess that will continue to export instability while US adversaries use it to evolve militarily. However, a proactive US policy that focuses on attainable near-term goals that reinforce hard-won successes can make a significant difference when combined with sustained pressure on the actors responsible for the worst violence in Syria: Assad, Russia, and Iran. The US has tried a decade of avoidance, and the consequences are unacceptable. It is time to commit to a decade of engagement.

## ENDNOTES

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