

ISSUE BRIEF

What Choices Remain for the United States in Syria?

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INTRODUCTION

Syria is the site of the largest and most devastating war thus far in the twenty-first century. Hundreds of thousands have died, millions are refugees, millions more are internally displaced, half the country is food insecure, and hundreds of thousands of buildings have been destroyed during the fighting (cost estimates for reconstruction were \$400 billion in 2019).¹ Syria is also a locus for insurgent threats against the United States and its allies and partners. Perhaps the greatest long-term concern in Syria is a “lost generation” of children who have suffered immense trauma as a result of the war. A survey of young people conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) found nearly half had a friend or close relative die in the conflict, and one in six said at least one of their parents had died.² At least 2.45 million children do not have access to education, a number that increased in 2020 due to poverty, COVID-19, and the need for child labor in refugee and displaced families.³

Syria’s conflict will endure regardless of the political settlement that ends the present military conflict. Nevertheless, a coherent US strategy in Syria represents an opportunity for the United States to build back better the multilateral humanitarian and security cooperation necessary to mitigate the world’s most pressing conflicts in a new, multipolar international system. It also presents an opportunity for the United States to prevent the deepening of another crisis moment in a region already suffering from deficient governing institutions, insufficient economic development, and terrorism.

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

- 1 Joseph Daher, “The Paradox of Syria’s Reconstruction,” Carnegie Middle East Center, September 4, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/09/04/paradox-of-syria-s-reconstruction-pub-79773>.
- 2 A Decade of Loss: Syria’s Youth After Ten Years of Crisis,” International Committee of the Red Cross, March 10, 2021, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-millions-young-syrians-paid-heavy-toll-during-decade-savage-loss>.
- 3 “Number of Out of School Children Doubles in Northern Syria as Coronavirus, Poverty Take Their Toll,” Save the Children, December 10, 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/number-out-school-children-doubles-northern-syria-coronavirus-poverty-take-their-toll>.

The current outcome of the Syrian conflict represents a modest strategic victory for US adversaries, particularly Bashar al-Assad, Russia, and Iran—the latter two of which continue to enjoy significant leverage and a strategic footprint in Syria that threatens US interests in the Levant and the Mediterranean. Predictions that Syria would be Russia’s or Iran’s Vietnam underestimated Tehran’s and Moscow’s approaches.⁴ Unlike the United States, which seeks an enduring resolution to Syria’s conflict, Russia does not need to resolve the root causes of Syria’s conflict to satisfy its interests. Instead, Russia prefers a reversion to a controlled Syrian state that is a client state of Moscow, and one whose security Assad can control. Iran, meanwhile, achieved its goal of establishing strong military and social footing throughout the country, linking Tehran to Beirut through Iraq and Syria. Tehran and Moscow share a symbiosis: Russia prefers Assad in power, but is unable to provide the troops necessary to do so; Iran is supplying the ground troops necessary to maintain Assad as head of state (its preferred candidate at the moment), simultaneously establishing itself as an indispensable on-the-ground security actor in Syria.

Over the last decade, Syria’s conflict has developed a gravitational pull on twenty-first-century geopolitics. Internationally, it has resulted in the largest displacement crisis since World War II, triggering xenophobic and anti-democratic forces in Europe.⁵ Regionally, the conflict further empowered Hezbollah, strengthening its grip in Lebanon, and exacerbated political discord with a NATO ally, Turkey. It catalyzed a civil war in Iraq through the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and heightened a security crisis on the Syrian-Israeli border, prompting Israel to carry out more than two hundred strikes against more than one thousand targets since 2012 to impede Iranian military buildup along the border.⁶

This piece outlines three strategies to consider as options for a US strategy that could set conditions to achieve US policy goals in Syria. Though a favorable settlement of the conflict seems

unlikely in the near term, a new vision for a political resolution that secures US interests is necessary. This vision is necessary not because a resolution to Syria’s civil war is imminent, but because strategic clarity about the United States’ involvement in Syria should guide its actions and commitments during the next phase of this unpredictable conflict.

THE FIRST TEST: HIGH TENSIONS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Before the Joseph Biden administration has an opportunity to delve into the longer-term issues concerning the Syria file, it will first be tested by Russia at the United Nations on two fronts this summer.

The first challenge is producing an acceptable draft of the United Nations (UN) Strategic Framework, revised every five years, through which Russia is currently trying to expand the UN’s authorized work in Syria. As expected, Moscow seeks to include activities akin to reconstruction through this framework. Meanwhile, the United States, the E3 countries (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany), and the European Union are seeking to limit the parameters of aid inside Syria, so as not to reward Assad’s destruction of his own country with international reconstruction and rehabilitation funding—including US taxpayer money. Commitment to limiting Russia’s ambitions on the framework is necessary for addressing broader concerns regarding Russia’s co-option of UN instruments to shape conflicts in its favor.

The second critical struggle at the UN, however, revolves around border crossings into Syria that the UN is authorized to use. Terms allowing humanitarian aid to cross into Syria via the last remaining border crossing, Bab al-Hawa, are set to expire in July, jeopardizing the lives of more than three million Syrians living in the northwest Idlib province.⁷ Humanitarian access to Syria is a fundamental strategic priority for the United States, regardless of how narrowly or widely it scopes

4 Alistair Bell and Tom Perry, “Obama Warns Russia’s Putin of ‘Quagmire’ in Syria,” Reuters, October 2, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes/obama-warns-russias-putin-of-quagmire-in-syria-idUSKCN0RW0W220151003>; Michael Bachner, “Bennett Warns ‘Syria will be Iran’s Vietnam,’” *Times of Israel*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-warns-syria-will-be-irans-vietnam/>.

5 “The World Bank in Syrian Arab Republic: Overview,” World Bank, March 9, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview>.

6 Ilan Goldenberg, et al., “Countering Iran in the Gray Zone: What the United States Should Learn from Israel’s Operations in Syria,” Center for New American Security, April 2020, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report-Gray-Zone-FinalID-web.pdf?mtime=20200421182823&focal=none>.

7 Charles Thépaut and Calvin Wilder, “Expanding Humanitarian Assistance to Syrians: Two Deadlines Approaching,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 23, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/expanding-humanitarian-assistance-syrians-two-deadlines-approaching>.



A convoy of U.S. vehicles is seen after withdrawing from northern Syria, at the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing in the outskirts of Dohuk, Iraq, October 21, 2019. Source: REUTERS/Ari Jalal

its interest in Syria. As a result, it is the most generous donor to Syrian humanitarian operations, donating more than \$13 billion since 2011.⁸

To prevent deadlock at the UN Security Council (UNSC) and counter Russia's expected veto, which will close the crossing, the United States has already committed high-level diplomatic attention to the issue. Secretary of State Tony Blinken has made clear that the United States will ask for three UN border crossings, including the two that were shut down last July—Yaroubia (Iraq-Syria) and Bab al-Salaam (Turkey-Aleppo, Syria)—as well as maintaining Bab al-Hawa (Turkey-Idlib, Syria)

for at least one year.⁹ Meanwhile, Russia is expected to veto such a proposal in the name of Syrian sovereignty, and both China and Russia have clearly indicated that sanctions relief is also on the agenda, as they have managed to turn attention exclusively on US/European sanctions, ignoring the billions in damage and carnage brought to Syria by its own government and its allies.¹⁰

Three potential outcomes exist for the July UNSC negotiations. First, there is a serious possibility that Russia will veto extension of UNSCR 2533 to maintain Bab al-Hawa crossing, expecting the United States to approve solely of cross-line UN

8 "Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at the Virtual Fifth Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region," United States Mission to the United Nations, March 30, 2021, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-the-virtual-fifth-brussels-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region/>.

9 "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the UN Security Council Briefing and Consultations on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria," United States Department of State, March 29, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-un-security-council-briefing-and-consultations-on-the-humanitarian-situation-in-syria/>.

10 "Russia and China Veto UN Extension of Cross-Border Aid to Syria," Al-Jazeera, July 8, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/8/russia-and-china-veto-un-extension-of-cross-border-aid-to-syria>.

aid delivered strictly out of Damascus.¹¹ According to the US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, this is not acceptable for the United States, given the politicization of aid out of Damascus and the regime's restrictions on aid into non-loyalist areas.¹² In this case, the United States and likeminded countries will need to consider less efficient, yet necessary, options of aid delivery from Turkey into northern Syria, including scaling up smaller nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) inside of Syria and/or a pooled funding mechanism for donors to contribute to and jointly manage. It should be noted, however, that all humanitarian experts strongly underscore that any alternative mechanism will fall short of the needs of the displaced populations of northwestern Syria. The UN mechanism is simply the only entity with the legal framework to negotiate cross-border operations with all parties, and the capacity and experience to ensure regular massive shipments of aid (twelve thousand trucks entered north Syria in 2020 alone).¹³ Without the UN administering a COVID-19 response (via the World Health Organization (WHO)) and feeding and sheltering millions, aid will be in the hands of biased and much less capable parties. This could spark new tensions on the ground, and may empower Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which has the ability to threaten actors to make them comply with aid-diversion tactics, which organizations have been able to repel given their coordination with the UN.

Second, Russia may authorize only the Bab al-Hawa crossing, vetoing the reopening of Yaroubia and Bab al-Salaam. In this case, aid would continue to flow as it currently does.

Finally, Russia may agree to maintain the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, along with reopening the Yaroubia and Bab al-Salaam crossings. If all three crossings are granted approval, this could open the door for modest, access-for-access aid adjustments in the short term. Here, the United States can also consider tools at its disposal within its current policy framework (in other words, without amendment to its sanctions and normalization policy). In exchange for expanded humanitarian-aid access, the United States would continue supporting the WHO in its

COVID-19 response, including vaccine delivery, accompanied by rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the WHO's work. One million vaccine doses were scheduled to arrive in Syria in recent months, and the United States and its allies could ensure access to more vaccines in both regime-held and non-regime-held areas.¹⁴ Further, medical manufacturers that produce ventilators and oxygen concentrators, which fear sending materials to sanctioned Syria—and, thus, are overly compliant due to sanctions—would benefit from US Treasury-issued comfort letters. The Bureau of Industry and Security, which also issues licenses for technology produced in the United States, can issue expedited licenses to export US-produced, COVID-related equipment as well. Finally, the United States and other donors can channel COVID aid through carefully vetted and respected local charities in Syria, such as Homs' Jamiat al-Bir wa al-Khadamat al-Ejtemaia and Hifz al-Ni'meh in the Damascus suburbs—although their work must remain limited and modest so as not to solicit regime attention.¹⁵

STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR US SYRIA POLICY

There are three main options available for a political settlement in Syria. While the Donald Trump administration can be characterized mostly as having employed a contain and pressure approach, the Biden administration can give increased attention to develop an overarching Syria strategy that aligns tactical efforts across all sectors (development, diplomacy, and defense). Progress made on specific issues absent a broader strategy (including securing humanitarian corridors, empowering the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to fight ISIS, and chemical weapons security and removal) may produce temporary gains, or may exacerbate conflict over the longer term rather than reduce it.

The three options for US policy in Syria outlined below vary in terms of the extent of US commitment of resources, from least to most engaged. The relative merits of each option also depend on the outcome of cross-border humanitarian aid negotiated at the UN Security Council in July.

11 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2533 (2020), U.N. Security Council, adopted July 11, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2533.pdf.

12 "Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on Syria," United States Mission to the United Nations, March 15, 2021, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-syria/>; Haid Haid, "Principled Aid in Syria a Framework for International Agencies," Chatham House, July 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-07-04-PrincipledAidSyria.pdf>.

13 Salman Husain and Yasmine Chawaf, "Syrian Lives in Peril: The Fight to Preserve Syria's Last Humanitarian Border Crossing," Atlantic Council, June 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Syrian-Lives-in-Peril-The-Fight-to-Preserve-Syrias-Last-Humanitarian-Border-Crossing.pdf>.

14 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syria to Get First Deliveries of COVAX Vaccines within Weeks: WHO Official," Reuters, March 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-syria-vaccine-idUSKBN2B92GQ>.

15 Ammar Azzouz, "The Role of Local Charities in Reconstructing Syria," Chatham House, January 2019, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-role-of-local-charities-in-reconstructing-syria-1>.

- **Option 1** would work regardless of the outcome of the July cross border negotiations, as it outlines a minimum-engagement strategy in Syria that includes full withdrawal of US forces.
- **Option 2** becomes more viable if negotiations in July are productive, as it outlines a step-for-step approach focused on modest improvement of humanitarian conditions.
- **Option 3** becomes more likely if Russia vetoes humanitarian access in northern Syria, as it outlines diplomatic pressure against the Syrian regime and its allies, as well as a continued US troop presence in northeastern Syria.

Option 1—Subnational Political Reconciliation:

In separate talks with the SDF and Russia, and indirectly with the Syrian government, the United States links the withdrawal of US forces and the provision of Syrian regime access to resources in the northeast to cessation of all hostilities against the SDF in northeastern Syria. The Syrian government would assume responsibility for the local and foreign national fighters held in temporary detention facilities in the northeast, as well as the displaced families residing in the northeast.

This arrangement would represent Syria as a theater of minimal US interests (e.g., humanitarian, counter-ISIS). It would be the least politically complicated and involve the lowest amount of US foreign policy resources and attention. This option envisions the complete withdrawal of all US troops currently stationed on the ground in Syria (whether in the northeast or at al-Tanf, which would be closed). Idlib would remain isolated, and Turkey would ensure its protection with US and NATO backing. The Syrian regime would be provided access to resources in the northeast, provided the Syrian government respects whatever memorandum of understanding it signs protecting SDF interests there.

Pros: This approach would involve the least US diplomatic attention and fewest resources, allowing the United States to focus on other pressing foreign policy challenges. It would fulfill a campaign promise to return US troops from the Middle East, while helping secure a political and security arrangement for the SDF, a vital counterterrorism partner. This

arrangement would allow for the United States, Israel, and Turkey to continue targeted attacks on ISIS/Iranian-backed groups from bases outside Syria, although US visibility on the ground would become more limited. It could also improve the US-Turkey relationship, as Turkey has long requested that the United States end support to the SDF. Military and civilian support from Turkey to opposition-held areas in northwest Syria would remain intact.

Cons: This option undermines previously stated US objectives for the Syrian conflict—mainly, pursuing a negotiated political transition under the auspices of UNSC 2254. It would not contribute to resolving the root causes of the Syrian crisis, only ending US participation in it. The Syrian government could renege on its promises after the United States has left, and the United States wouldn't have the ability to enforce those agreements. The option also does not guarantee the protection of the northeast from Turkish-backed incursions. Diplomatically, this option undermines European efforts at broader resolution to Syria's conflict, which is likely necessary for the return of millions of refugees, and it also puts European countries with nationals among ISIS detainees at risk of blackmail from the regime. From the standpoint of refugees, it would prolong their stay in neighboring countries, as most refugees tie their choice to return to the political situation in Syria.¹⁶ Idlib would remain in a precarious situation as a result of this option. While this option leaves in place targeted economic sanctions, and prevents the regime and its allies from gaining access to international reconstruction aid, this alone is likely insufficient to compel compliance. Syria's economy is severely weakened by sanctions, but the regime and its allies may be able to survive by further stripping dissident civilians and Syrians forced to flee of their housing, land, and property rights.

Option 2—Step-for-Step Political Negotiation:

In this option, a formal process led by the United Nations, with support by the United States and European allies, would outline specific step-for-step measures resting on priority portfolios, most of which are indicated in UNSCR 2254: a nationwide ceasefire, the release of Syrian prisoners (at least one hundred thousand detainees are held by the regime), humanitarian access across Syria, and return of foreign detainees or bodies for burial.¹⁷ Negotiations would focus on humanitarian access, a nationwide ceasefire, and release of prisoners and detainees, instead of the return of refugees,

¹⁶ "We Are Syria: Survey of 1,100 Displaced Syrians on the Reasons for Displacement and Minimum Conditions for Return," Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, July 2020, https://syacd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SACD_WE_ARE_SYRIA_EN.pdf.

¹⁷ "A Path to Conflict Transformation in Syria A Framework for a Phased Approach," Carter Center, January 2021, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/path-to-conflict-transformation-in-syria-jan-2021.pdf.



Trucks loaded with humanitarian supplies to be delivered for displaced Syrians, wait at the Jordanian city of Mafraq, near the border with Syria, Jordan July 1, 2018. Source: REUTERS/Muhammad Hamed

the drafting of a constitution, and UN-monitored elections. While these are all essential elements of UNSCR 2254, this option assumes that there are no indicators that the regime would be willing to enter into good-faith negotiations on the latter issues.

The regime would be expected take steps such as: releasing political prisoners, providing credible information to families about Syrian prisoners held in government prisons, permitting families to visit, and the release of foreign nationals (or their bodies for burial); halting hostilities and attacks on populations in Idlib and northeast Syria; providing transparent, consistent, and dignified access to humanitarian aid across Syria, in line with humanitarian principles; and enforcing chemical-weapons disarmament.¹⁸ In exchange for genuine progress on these fronts, the United States, through the UN, would release humanitarian funding in regime-held areas and offer sectoral-sanctions relief monitored by in-country observers. Any sector-sanctions relief should be strictly humanitarian in terms

of scope, such as exemptions for food, health, and education sectors, while maintaining targeted sanctions on individuals and businesses profiting from the war economy and carrying out war crimes.¹⁹ U.S. forces would remain in northeast Syria for ongoing counterterrorism missions and as continued leverage; Turkish presence would also remain in northwest Syria. Stabilization and humanitarian aid, focused on securing improved local governance, as well as education for a growing younger population, would be prioritized for both areas.

Pros: If the United States and the international community insist on negotiating any settlement during the next four years, this may be the only option that involves no further military commitments, in light of the reality that the regime and its allies currently maintain control of state institutions and the majority of populated territory. This option prioritizes the U.S. role in ensuring humanitarian aid flows to populations in Syria who need it, and facilitates minimal economic recovery if the Syrian regime abides by the arrangement's terms. If implemented

¹⁸ Some of these points are included in "A Path to Conflict Transformation in Syria" by the Carter Center.

¹⁹ Zaki Mehchy and Rim Turkmani, "Understanding the Impact of Sanctions on the Political Dynamics in Syria," London School of Economics and Political Science, January 2021, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108412/1/CRP_understanding_impact_of_sanctions_on_political_dynamics_syria.pdf.

properly, it would further reduce Syria's chemical-weapons arsenal, which continues to pose a threat to Syrian civilians and regional security. It would also achieve a limited political victory for the United States in the form of returned U.S. prisoners, and secure a base for continued counterterrorism operations in the northeast.

Cons: This option would concede that the United States is unable to pursue the political objectives broadly stipulated by UNSCR 2254. It also relies on affirmative steps toward political progress, a willingness yet to be exhibited by the regime and its allies. This agreement would not solve the root cause of Syria's conflict, and policymakers cannot guarantee continued progress or prevent the Syrian government from retracting any promises absent a credible military threat. The regime is capable of re-detaining released political prisoners if they remain in the country.²⁰ Additionally, the regime and its allies may continue to use the excuse of "terrorism" to conduct military operations in areas outside of their control, such as the northeast or northwest. Any sectoral-sanctions relief may also profit regime-related companies and institutions, given the remaining deficiencies in ensuring transparency, accountability, and tracking of funds inside Syria. Save for U.S. and foreign prisoner returns and release, the Syrian government can disregard the other components of the agreement, and the international community may be unlikely to muster the force of arms necessary to punish backsliding, including reimposing sanctions, if there is insufficient diplomatic will.

Option 3—Contain and Prevent the Regime and its Allies From Using the Strategic Benefit They Gained in Syria:

In this scenario, the United States puts sustained pressure on Russia, Iran, and the Syrian government directly, and through its allies and partners, by maintaining its military and diplomatic presence in northeastern Syria, supporting Turkey's presence in the northwest, maintaining economic sanctions on Syria, and pursuing other forms of pressure on the Assad regime (e.g., Israeli airstrikes on Iranian assets, political pressure on regional states to forego diplomatic rapprochement with Damascus, and prosecution of regime figures internationally). This option's requirement to maintain sanctions will require robust international consensus building—especially with regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab

Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain—because the sanctions regime will be less likely to work if Syria's trading partners are no longer sanctioned and the Syrian government is normalized, in whole or in part.²¹

Finally, in order to transform this pressure into a viable political resolution, the United States can help stabilize northern Syria by encouraging organized, decentralized governance in the northeast and northwest through its partners and allies on the ground.²² As in Option 2, the United States and its allies would resume stabilization aid across northern Syria, with a focus on civil society and education programming. U.S. counterterrorism operations would also continue, and would benefit from on-the-ground troop presence (perhaps even a slightly stronger military commitment) to contain ISIS and limit Iranian and Russian room for maneuver. Restarting political-settlement talks would only happen if there are indicators from Russia and the Syrian regime that conditions are ripe for negotiation—indicators not observable at present.

Pros: This outcome most closely reflects the spirit of UNSC Resolution 2254, which calls for maintaining pressure on Syria until the formation of a political transitional governing body in Syria that includes opposition and regime representatives. Russia and Iran would ultimately prefer a transition over complete state collapse, in which they could lose all leverage. Therefore, over time and with sustained pressure, this may become the preferred scenario for all major powers involved in Syria's war. Pursuing this option affirms that Syria cannot return to Assad rule after its behavior over the past decade. Further, this option would best allow the United States to weaken three adversaries—Russia, Iran, and Syria—by leading a coalition of likeminded allies to a sustainable political solution over the longer term. This option also utilizes allies and partners more directly, by energizing emergent cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states to contain Iranian regional activity.

Cons: Much of this option was the official policy in the last years of the Trump administration; however, desired objectives had not been achieved by the time the administration's tenure had ended. Succeeding in this option not only requires continued US troop presence in northeast Syria, but may even demand additional forces there to prevent an offensive. It would also require effective US-led coordination with allies and partners in the region and Europe, to maintain continued sanctions and

20 "We Are Syria."

21 Elena V. McLean and Taehee Whang, "Friends or Foes? Major Trading Partners and the Success of Economic Sanctions," *International Studies Quarterly* 54, 2, June 2010, <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/54/2/427/1796587?login=true>.

22 Mona Yacoubian, "The Best Hope for Sustained De-escalation in Syria," United States Institute of Peace, November 18, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/best-hope-sustained-de-escalation-syria>

isolation of the Syrian government until a satisfactory political settlement, consistent with UNSCR 2254, is reached. There may be insufficient attention, resources, and/or political capital domestically or abroad for this option to succeed. U.S. allies and partners, especially in the Gulf, are considering reengaging with Assad, with Russian nudging, even though there is no evidence of worthwhile, verifiable returns. Meanwhile, this approach may force the United States to be at least partially complicit in deteriorating economic conditions in Syria, which are unlikely to improve so long as the current regime and its allies maintain control of Syrian state institutions. Although not guaranteed, this may result in the collapse of the regime, leading to other issues for which the United States may be at least partially responsible (e.g., a power vacuum in which ISIS or other transnational terrorists stand to gain). If successful in reaching a political settlement, the United States and its allies and partners will need to step up with renewed diplomatic leadership and reconstruction costs, if and when conditions become ripe for a political settlement.

NO EASY CHOICES

Syria is one of the world's most complex conflicts. The chaos caused by the Syrian regime and its allies—within Syria, across the Middle East, and beyond—poses immediate and enduring threats. With its foreign policy promise to defend democracy and human rights, the Biden administration does not have the luxury of ignoring what happens in Syria.²³ Accepting that there are fewer options for the United States today than there were ten years ago does not mean normalizing the Assad regime or requiring the United States to turn a blind eye to Russian and Iranian efforts to tip the balance of power in the region. Syria is both an intractable crisis and a unique opportunity, because the outcome in Syria will shape global expectations about what the United States and the international institutions it supports can do to resolve complex global conflicts. This memo argued that there are three potential strategies in Syria: one prioritizing the withdrawal of US forces, a second protecting humanitarian access, and a third maintaining US support for partners and pressure on adversaries. Regardless of its specific approach, the Biden administration should seize this opportunity to establish a clear strategy in Syria. Such a strategy will help the United States align its defense, development, and diplomatic capabilities with those of its global allies and partners to shape a better outcome in Syria.

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23 Antony J. Blinken, “Putting Human Rights at the Center of U.S. Foreign Policy,” United States Department of State, February 24, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/putting-human-rights-at-the-center-of-u-s-foreign-policy/>.

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