

ISSUE BRIEF

THE DAY AFTER: Anticipating Trouble in the Event of a US Withdrawal from Syria

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SYRIA

The United States has approximately nine hundred troops in northeastern and southeastern Syria, in a mission ostensibly aimed at preventing the reemergence of the Islamic State group (IS). The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, initiated by the Trump administration and completed by the Biden administration, was followed by the rapid collapse of the pro-Western government of Afghanistan and its replacement by the Taliban. This has led to questions about what will happen if and when US forces withdraw from northeastern Syria. This report aims to address some of those questions.

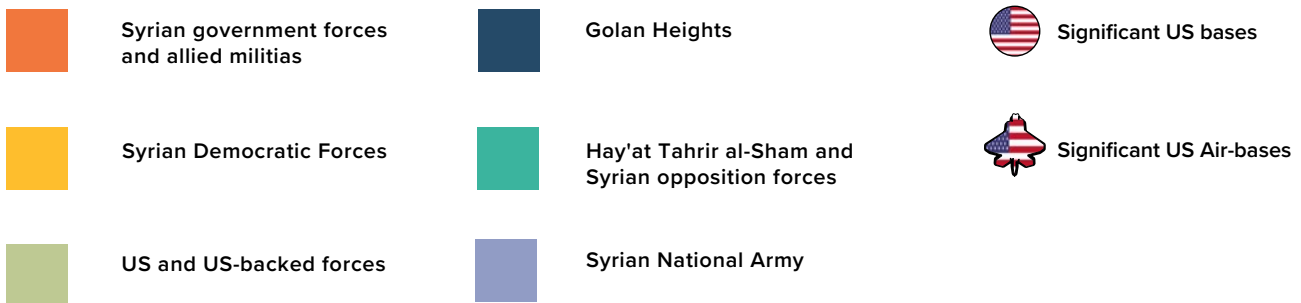
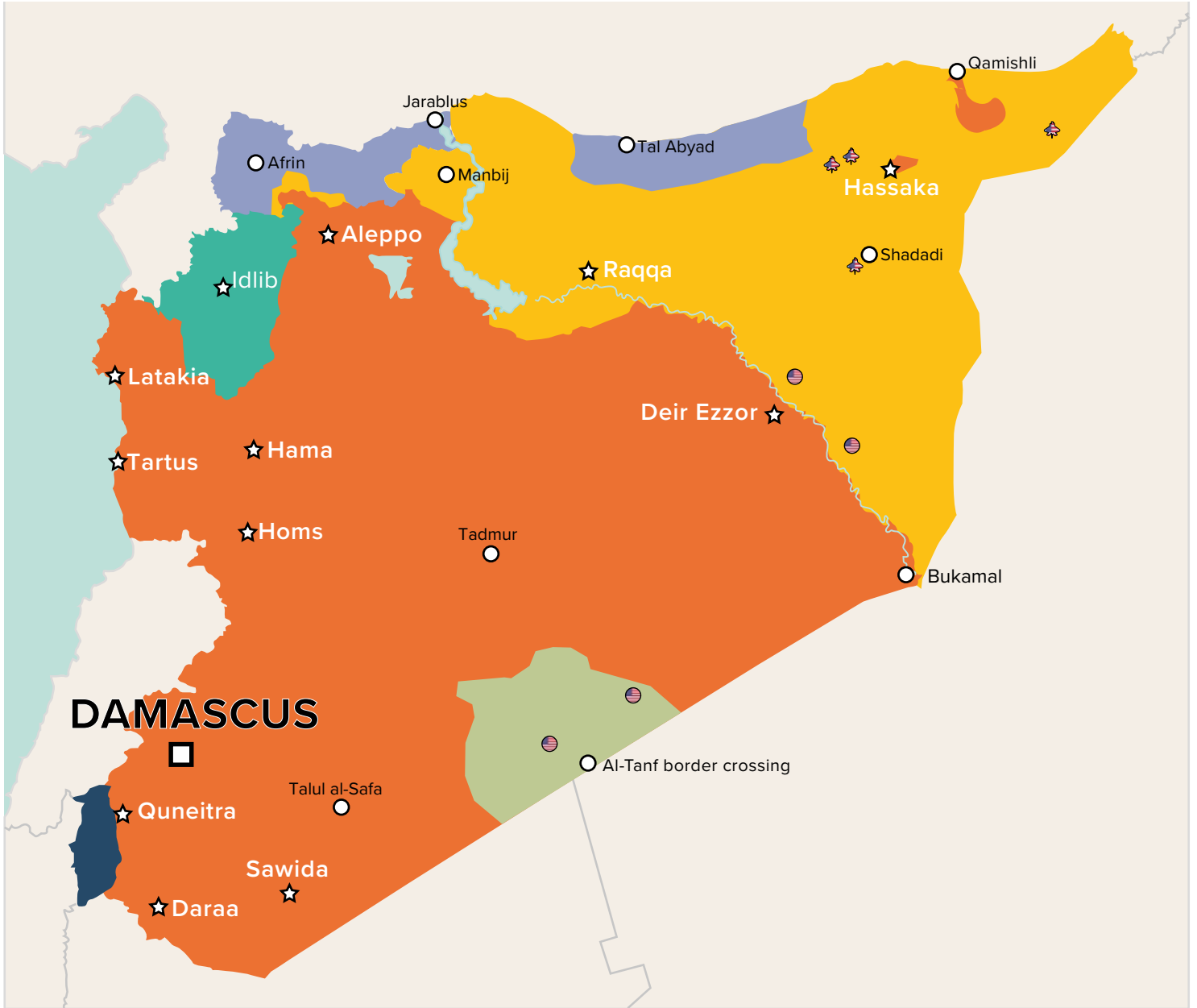
Biden administration officials have repeatedly indicated that the United States is unlikely to withdraw those troops from Syria in the short-to-medium term.¹ While there was speculation that the United States was attempting to forge negotiations between the US-backed autonomous governing administration in northeastern Syria and the Assad government during the early days of the Biden administration in order to facilitate a US withdrawal, it is widely understood that such plans have been shelved for the immediate-to-medium term.

The Biden administration recently completed its Syria policy review, outlining the following objectives as the guiding pillars of policy: countering IS, and keeping troops in Syria so long as the threat of terrorism remains; facilitating humanitarian

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 Lara Seligman, "Troops to Stay Put in Syria Even as Biden Seeks to End America's 'Forever Wars,'" *Politico*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/27/troops-to-stay-in-syria-biden-500848>.

US Military Presence in Syria



aid, including ensuring cross-border renewal; and sustaining cease-fires. In addition to these three pillars, two more issues remain guideposts for US policy: supporting accountability efforts for crimes committed by the Assad regime against civilians; and supporting UN Security Council Resolution 2254,² and the mission of the UN Special Envoy for Syria.

CHALLENGES TO US PRESENCE

Several key actors are opposed to US military presence in Syria. They include Iran/Iranian-backed militias, IS, Russia, and the Assad regime. While Turkey prefers a US presence it can work with rather than an uncontrollable northeastern Syria, it too has deep reservations about the mandate of a US military presence in that region. It would be fair to say that these key actors would prefer a withdrawal of US forces from Syria; it is unlikely, however, that any of them will proceed with a direct military conflict against US forces in order to spur such a withdrawal. Instead, these actors are more likely to inflict low-level attacks on US assets that, in sum, may become intolerable over time, knowing that little appetite exists for increased US military presence, and thus would precipitate willing US withdrawal from Syria.

Three of the above-mentioned actors—Iran/Iranian-backed militias, Russia, and IS—pose a dangerous, often underestimated threat to a US military presence and should be examined more carefully.

Iran/Iranian-backed militias: Over the past year, several significant yet low-level attacks against US bases were carried out. Beginning in February 2021, the United States retaliated in Syria against Iranian-backed militias that attacked an airport in Erbil, which killed a contractor with the coalition to defeat IS (D-IS), and wounded six other individuals, including a Louisiana National Guard soldier and four American contractors.³ On June 28, US troops were hit with multiple rockets in northeastern Syria, and on July 7, troops in al-Omar airfield were attacked by drones.⁴ Other attacks include two rocket attacks on US forces near the Conoco oil field east of Deir Ezzor on August 31, and five rockets fired on US forces on September 5 near the al-Omar oil field.⁵ Most recently, in late October, the Kataib Hezbollah al-Nujabaa, known for manufacturing their own suicide drones, launched a heavy attack of both drone and rocket systems to attack al-Tanf base.⁶ It is believed that this was in retaliation for an attack in Palmyra on Iranian-backed forces launched by Israel, which the groups claimed used al-Tanf airspace to conduct their operations. Beyond Iran's military presence, it has increasingly been focused on expanding its economic and social influence in Syria. Among these projects is expansion in Syria's power generation sector. It also has increased humanitarian programming across the country. Organizations like Jihad al-Bina, an Iranian-funded charity organization (with some non-Iranian financial backers),⁷ has set up health centers and restored schools in provinces like Deir Ezzor.⁸ The charity also provides financial assistance to Syrian "martyrs" that

2 "Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks," United Nations, Meetings Coverage, Security Council SC/12171, December 18, 2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>.

3 Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Airstrikes in Syria Target Iran-Backed Militias That Rocketed American Troops in Iraq" *New York Times*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/biden-syria-airstrike-iran.html>.

4 Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) Spokesperson (@OIRSpox), "Initial report: At approx. 7:44 PM local time, U.S. Forces in Syria were attacked by multiple rockets. There are no injuries and damage is being assessed. We will provide updates when we have more information," Twitter, June 28, 2021, 3:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/OIRSpox/status/1409596661698117632?s=20>.

5 Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Iran's Proxies in Iraq Undertake the World's Only Terrorist Attack Commemorating 9/11" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-proxies-iraq-undertake-worlds-only-terrorist-attack-commemorating-911>.

6 Crispin Smith, "Militia Propaganda Around the Attack on al-Tanf," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militia-propaganda-around-attack-al-tanf>.

7 "Iran's Construction Model to Revive Syria/Syrian Jihad al-Bina Modeled on Iran," *Moj News Agency*, September 15, 2018, <https://www.mojnews.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-3/242951-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%AD%DB%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%DA%AF%D9%88-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA#gsc.tab=0>. Jihad al-Bina also receives funding support from Lebanese and Iraqis with close ties to Iran.

8 Navvar Şaban, "Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria," *MENASource* (blog), Atlantic Council, November 5, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>.



Displaced Syrian boys ride on a truck with belongings in northern Idlib, Syria January 30, 2020. Picture taken January 30, 2020. Source: REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi

fought with Iranian-backed militias.⁹ Iran also has focused on expanding educational programs and Iranian cultural centers, so as to normalize Iranian culture in Syrian society.¹⁰

Russia: While Russia has avoided direct confrontation with US military forces, it has been keen to capitalize on US withdrawals from northeast Syria over the past two years. After the US military rearrangements in 2019, the Russian military presence expanded into southern al-Raqqa province, northeastern Aleppo province, and southwestern al-Hasaka province. In early December 2020, Russia assumed control of nine former US military bases. According to Syrian analyst Navvar Şaban,¹¹ in October 2021, the Russians began limited

reconstruction of several military structures, including select former American and Syrian government sites, in al-Raqqa and the northeastern provinces of Aleppo. For example, the Russians rehabilitated al-Tabqa and Sirin air base; at the latter, Russians recently deployed an S-300 defense system and expanded the runway.

There have been some clashes between Russian and US military convoys. For example, the United States intercepted a Russian convoy of six armored vehicles on the sections of the M-4 highway that Russia is not currently allowed to use. US forces have protected residents in Deir Ezzor province from Russian convoys including in October 2021 in the town of al-

9 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Reconstruction in Syria: an Interview with Jihad al-Bina," eponymous blog, January 4, 2019, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/22202/>.

10 Şaban, "Factbox."

11 Navvar Şaban (conflict expert specializing in Iranian influence in Syria, Omran Center for Strategic Studies), in discussion with the author, March 1, 2021.

Jeneina, where forces obstructed a Russian military convoy, and in November 2021 in Salhiyaa, when another Russian military convoy tried to pass.¹² Finally, in November 2021, US forces prevented Russian forces from holding joint military maneuvers with Syrian government forces near Tal Tamr, Hasakeh province.¹³ All of these incidents were considered Russian public relations stunts to try to appeal to locals.

Like Iran, Russia has also attempted to infiltrate the local populations. According to Navvar Şaban, they have failed to recruit in significant numbers from Kurdish populations from the areas that witnessed a U.S. withdrawal; the Russian goal was to integrate them into the new Russian-backed local forces.¹⁴ While Russia has attempted to convince locals in Kobani, Amouda, and Tal Tamr that the presence of the Russians is the only reason preventing a new Turkish military strike¹⁵, strong loyalty of the local Kurds to their Kurdish community/PYD has proven such Russian attempts futile. Local Kurds in this area refuse to work under Russian supervision, which they know would ultimately bring them back under the control of the Syrian regime.

IS: The Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve states that IS in late 2021 remains “unable to sustain coherent military operations against Coalition partner forces and [is] restricted to conducting isolated insurgent and terrorist attacks.”¹⁶ While the number of official IS-claimed attacks across Syria declined this year, the group’s presence remains substantial. According to analyst Gregory Waters, focusing

solely on the number of attacks is “misleading and relies on cherry-picked data that assesses [IS’s] strength purely through the number of reported attacks,” while ignoring the financial and logistical operations that have only grown stronger.¹⁷ It may also be the result of strategic underreporting on behalf of the group, especially in al-Badia, in order to consolidate its presence in a remote area used as a “vital transportation node for Islamic State fighters and supplies moving between northeastern and central Syria.”¹⁸ The Defense Intelligence Agency said that while IS-claimed attacks may have decreased, the group may be “poised to increase activity in the coming quarter after a period of recuperation and recovery.”¹⁹

Economic deterioration in northeastern Syria also continues to play to IS’s advantage. At least 630,000 people are displaced across ten camps in that region due to declining living and security conditions, as well as displacement following the D-IS campaign.²⁰ These worsening economic conditions have accompanied increased smuggling and illicit activity, exacerbated by growing mistrust between locals and the Kurdish-led autonomous administration—making residents more vulnerable to IS recruitment. During a closed-door roundtable at the Atlantic Council, a Syrian analyst from Deir Ezzor pointed out that partly due to grievances against the autonomous administration, IS is able to resonate with and become more embedded within the local population, especially among teenage boys. For example, the group asks young men to do minor yet critical favors, such as transporting money or individuals from place to place. The instrumentalizing

12 Şaban, in discussion with the author.

13 Şaban, in discussion with the author.

14 Şaban, phone interview.

15 https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_russia-seeks-build-local-force-northeast-syria/6181363.html

16 Offices of the Inspector General of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, July 1, 2021–September 30, 2021, 4, 20, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/08/2002889206/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20QUARTERLY%20REPORT%20JULY%201,%202021%20-%20SEPTEMBER%2030,%202021.PDF>, [hereafter cited as Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*].

17 Gregory Waters, “Smuggling Away the Future in Syria’s Northeast,” *CounterPoint Blog*, Counter Extremism Project, October 26, 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/smuggling-away-future-syrias-northeast>.

18 Gregory Waters and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State Under-Reporting in Central Syria: Misdirection, Misinformation, or Miscommunication?*, Middle East Institute, September 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-09/Islamic%20State%20Under-Reporting%20in%20Central%20Syria-%20Misdirection%2C%20Misinformation%2C%20or%20Miscommunication%3F.pdf>.

19 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

20 Sam Mednick, “Syrians Return to Camps Seeking Aid as Economic Crash Bites,” *The New Humanitarian* (news agency), June 28, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/6/28/syrians-return-to-camps-seeking-aid-as-economic-crash-bites>.

of locals has made it easier for the group to be embedded within civilian populations while remaining inconspicuous. Meanwhile, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have also had difficulty securing local support in some areas due to issues related to governance, which has hindered their ability to fight IS. Yet even inside areas under Assad's control, IS is a growing threat. In Hama, southern Aleppo, southern Raqqa, southern Homs, and al-Badia, local IS cells "conduct widespread smuggling and fundraising operations."²¹

Since losing access to oil fields, IS has sought other creative and lucrative sources of funding, such as smuggling goods between Iraq and Syria, including sheep. In east Hama alone, hundreds of sheep were purportedly stolen each week during the first few months of 2021.²² Some experts claim that IS is also collecting almost \$1 million in tax revenue a day, taxing oil trade operators' ferry boats operating on the Euphrates.²³ Reports indicate that autonomous administration officials are often required to pay IS or face threats against them or their families.

LEGAL JUSTIFICATIONS FOR PRESENCE IN SYRIA

Over the last eleven years, two US domestic law arguments have been made to justify US military presence and operations in Syria.²⁴ The first, the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) of 2001 and 2002, were used by both Presidents Obama and Trump as a source of authority for the campaigns against IS.²⁵ This authorization has come under intense scrutiny over the last few years, and this may be one of the primary reasons the Biden administration has chosen to avoid using it when authorizing strikes on both IS and Iranian-backed targets.

The current administration instead relies exclusively on constitutional authorization, specifically Articles I and II, to defend its defensive operations in Iraq and Syria. While Article I, Section 8 gives power to Congress to declare war, Article II authorizes the president, as Commander in Chief, to act in defense of the United States. President Biden's letter to Congress stated clearly that the strikes in Iraq and along the Syrian-Iraqi border carried out in summer 2021 are part of his "responsibility to protect United States citizens both at home and abroad and in furtherance of United States national security and foreign policy interests, pursuant to [his] constitutional authority to conduct United States foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive."²⁶ It is important to note that neither the Syrian nor Iraqi governments approve of the United States using their territories to conduct such operations in Syria.²⁷ The Syrian government has stated that the strikes are a "flagrant violation of the sanctity of Syrian and Iraqi lands."²⁸ Legally, however, many scholars argue that such approval is not required if the states being targeted are either "unwilling or unable to suppress" non-state groups operating in sovereign states.²⁹

21 Waters, "Smuggling Away the Future in Syria's Northeast"; and Waters and Winter, *Islamic State Under-Reporting in Central Syria*.

22 Waters, "Smuggling Away the Future in Syria's Northeast."

23 Patrick Haenni and Arthur Quesnay, *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy*, European University Institute, February 17, 2020, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66224/MED_WPCS_2020_3.pdf?sequence=1.

24 Adam Saxton, "U.S. Airstrikes in Syria and Iraq: Legal Authorities and Presidential War Powers," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-airstrikes-syria-and-iraq-legal-authorities-and-presidential-war-powers>.

25 Brian Finucane, "Putting AUMF Repeal into Context" *Just Security* (online forum), June 24, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77088/putting-aumf-repeal-into-context/>.

26 The White House, "Letter to the Speaker of the House and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate Consistent with the War Powers Resolution (Public Law 93-148)," June 29, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/29/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-the-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-consistent-with-the-war-powers-resolution-public-law-93-148/>.

27 "Iraqi Military Issues Rare Condemnation of U.S. Air Strikes on Syria Border," Reuters, June 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-military-issues-rare-condemnation-us-air-strikes-syria-border-2021-06-28/>; and Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "U.S. Troops Come under Fire in Syria after Strikes against Iran-backed Militias," Reuters, June 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-iraq-strikes-blinken/u-s-defends-strikes-in-iraq-syria-and-iran-backed-militias-vow-revenge-idUKKCN2E4100>.

28 Stewart and Ali, "U.S. Troops Come under Fire."

29 Saxton, "U.S. Airstrikes in Syria and Iraq."



Women walk through al-Hol displacement camp in Hasaka governorate, Syria April 1, 2019. Source: REUTERS/Ali Hashisho

MAPPING THE US PRESENCE IN SYRIA

Writing about US withdrawal requires clarifying what US military presence in Syria looks like and what the goal of each facility is. Prior to the American withdrawal from northeastern Syria in December 2019, US forces were stationed at more than thirteen points including: northwestern Aleppo province (Kobani/Ayn Arab and Manbij), bases in Raqqa province located near the Turkish border, the city of Raqqa, and al-Tabqa air base. After the withdrawal, the US military presence was repositioned, to the extent that it would be fair to say that the withdrawal was ultimately not a withdrawal but a repositioning of those forces from Aleppo (near Kobani and Manbij) and Raqqa to other locations in al-Hasakeh and Deir Ezzor.

US forces are currently stationed at thirteen military points in al-Hasakeh and Deir Ezzor (seven in Deir Ezzor, six in al-Hasakeh), and of those, the United States has upgraded and even expanded a total of six priority bases (two in Deir Ezzor, four in al-Hasakeh).

According to Syrian analyst Navvar Saban, US locations are meant to achieve the following objectives:

- Increasing the area of the remaining bases in northeastern Syria and securing the surrounding area with trenches; improving air and ground defenses; and establishing runways for military and cargo aircraft
- Eliminating IS cells and dismantling its network both within and outside SDF-held areas and preventing Russia from expanding in northeastern Syria
- Securing the borders between al-Hasakeh governorate and the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq
- Securing the oil and gas fields in the northeast of al-Hasakeh governorate and Deir Ezzor province (in SDF-held areas)
- Overseeing three camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and prisons where IS foreign-fighter families and low-profile members reside

US PRESENCE AND IMPACT ON SYRIA'S ECONOMY

Today, about 90 percent of Syrians live beneath the poverty line.³⁰ The central bank, currently under international sanctions, is in desperate need of foreign currency. Meanwhile, the Syrian lira crashed over the past year.³¹ As a result, the Syrian government and its networks are looking for any sanctions relief—particularly in the reconstruction sector—to resume access to large amounts of foreign currency.

It is no secret that the Syrian economy is devastated due to a multitude of factors. These include the destruction of Syria's cities due to attacks on civilian infrastructure, mass flight, and targeting of Syria's educated and wealthy class, including Syria's young men, who are desperate to escape conscription into the Syrian Arab Army. Economic deterioration is also due to mass corruption and lack of transparency and various sanctions levied by US and European powers, some of which were imposed before 2011, due to Syria's support of terrorism, as well as more recent sanctions measures that limit access to large investments, especially reconstruction funds, from outside parties.³² Moreover, the crash of the Lebanese banking system and financial crisis there has added further strain on the Syrian economy, which relied on Lebanon as its gateway to international markets.

Even with a possible withdrawal of the remaining nine hundred US military personnel, American sanctions would likely remain

intact, at least on reconstruction projects, given that the Caesar Law remains in effect at least until December 2024 (when it would require renewal) and firmly prohibits such investment.³³

Currently, the US military presence and the backing of its partners on the ground have kept northeastern Syria's resources largely outside the control of the Syrian government. According to Syrian economist Joseph Daher, the United States and its allies support a bureaucracy in northeast Syria that currently employs about 250,000 individuals, including 70,000 soldiers, 30,000 police, and 150,000 civil servants.³⁴ About 20 percent of the population in northeastern Syria relies on income secured by the autonomous administration, ranging from bureaucratic positions to "private-sector workers heavily supervised by the Kurdish movement, particularly in the construction and agriculture sectors, and the employees of organizations supported by the coalition states' stabilization programs."³⁵ The departure of US forces would likely be coupled with the severing of such robust financial support for governance, at least in part. This would result in the loss of livelihoods in this region, exacerbating devastating living conditions for residents of the area governed by the autonomous administration and at least 630,000 IDPs, most of whom live in underserved camps.³⁶

In the event of a US military withdrawal, the Syrian government would demand immediate access to Syria's oil fields, which are located entirely in areas under US control and in need of desperate repairs. Given the Syrian government is currently

30 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: 2021 Needs and Response Summary*, March 2021, <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/2021%20Needs%20and%20Response%20Summary.pdf>.

31 "Sanctions on Syria's Central Bank Set Course for a Grim 2021," The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria Project, Implemented by COAR Global Ltd. (consultancy) in Partnership with European University Institute's Middle East Directions Programme, (funded by the European Union), January 4, 2021, <https://coar-global.org/2021/01/04/sanctions-on-syrias-central-bank-set-course-for-a-grim-2021/>.

32 Administration of George W. Bush, "Statement on Signing the Executive Order Blocking Property of Certain Persons and Prohibiting the Export of Certain Goods to Syria," US Government Printing Office, May 11, 2004, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/WCPD-2004-05-17/pdf/WCPD-2004-05-17-Pg865-2.pdf>; Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, 50 U.S.C. (2003); and Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, enacted as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-92, Div. F, Title LXXIV, 133 Stat. 2290, 22 U.S.C. 8791 note (2020).

33 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 116-92.

34 Haenni and Quesnay, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State."

35 Haenni and Quesnay, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State."

36 Mednick, "Syrians Return to Camps."



A man stands next to wreckage of an American helicopter that was blown up by the US special forces after facing mechanical issues and was no longer operational. The MH-60 Black Hawk chopper took part in a raid in the town of Atmeh that resulted in the death of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. American officials deny it crashed or was shot down. Source: Anas Alkharboutli/dpa

only able to procure 10 percent of its oil needs, this would be a priority.³⁷ However, there is little guarantee that oil would be distributed to those in need in Syria or that financial benefits would flow down to them.

It is important to note that the Syrian government's economic policies, which would extend to northeastern Syria in the event of a withdrawal, are not designed to extend economic benefits to average Syrians. Thus, reverting control of many of these resources to the Syrian government would not likely translate into increased public benefit and access. According to Daher, the government has "developed economic policies with the aim of consolidating their power and their various

patronage networks, all while allowing new forms of capital accumulation.³⁸ A central component of this strategy has been the promotion of a model of economic development that relies on public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the privatization of public goods." This translates directly to Iranian, Russian, and Syrian businessmen being offered investment opportunities to accumulate large profits from public assets, and is likely to increase as Chinese³⁹ and regional actors look to exploit economic opportunities in Syria. Most of the front men tasked by the regime to lead the privatization of public industries are connected to the Syrian security services and act as commercial intermediaries for the regime's influential personalities.⁴⁰

37 Joseph Daher, "Cuts to Oil Derivative Subsidies: Consequences for Syria," Middle East Directions Programme, European University Institute, October 2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/72764/QM-AX-21-045-EN-N%5b1%5d.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y>.

38 Joseph Daher, "The Political Economy of Syria: Deepening Pre-War Orientations" Arab Reform Initiative (think tank), October 30, 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-political-economy-of-syria-deepening-pre-war-orientations/>.

39 Ali Siddiqi, "China's 'Belt and Road' Risk in Syria May Reap Big Rewards," Voice of America, January 27, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-belt-and-road-risk-in-syria-may-reap-big-rewards-/6415768.html>.

40 Daher, "The Political Economy of Syria."

COUNTERTERRORISM CONCERNS

Counterterrorism operations by SDF forces are currently being supported in Syria through equipment and personnel transported by US and allied forces from Iraq. Air missions against IS targets by the D-IS coalition are ongoing, the recent targeting of the IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi being the most recent example.⁴¹ While the SDF assists with targeting in areas under autonomous administration, the forces remain weak in intelligence gathering and are largely involved in acting on intelligence once received and in coordination with the coalition.⁴² According to the latest Lead Inspector General report, the SDF continues to “rely solely on human intelligence for intelligence collection, without any ability to conduct persistent surveillance or maintain situational awareness.”⁴³

Al-Tanf air base is used primarily but not exclusively for intelligence gathering and counterterrorism targeting purposes, as well as halting weapons smuggling operations, and is essentially besieged by Iranian-backed forces. According to Şaban, a US military exit would create a security vacuum on the Syria-Iraq border, most likely to be filled by Iranian-backed militias, strengthening the militias’ security, military, and economic control of Syria’s eastern fronts from al-Malikiya to al-Tanf.

Security analysts claim that al-Tanf is most useful to Israel given that it is assured that the US forces will not target

Israeli aircraft overflying al-Tanf. This reduces the risk to Israeli aircraft striking Iranian-backed targets. The loss of al-Tanf would increase the risk to Israeli aircraft, but not fully halt Israeli airstrikes against Iranian-backed militias. If the American presence at al-Tanf is withdrawn, the US ability to conduct operations against IS would either require permission from the Russian and Syrian governments, or would place the United States at risk from surface-to-air missiles or ground fire from regime and possibly Russian or Iranian forces.

Any SDF-Syrian government deal would likely try to ensure, for the shorter term at least, some military transition to incorporate SDF forces alongside the Syrian Arab Army. The SDF seems open to this; General Mazloum Abdi clearly stated that they would not maintain “an army within an army.”⁴⁴ The Syrian government, however, is unlikely to localize or surrender control of any security sector operations, and therefore would de facto fill the security sector vacuum after a US withdrawal, even if they allow for SDF fighters to supplement the government’s military capability. Therefore, the prospect of transferring counterterrorism operations to SDF forces upon a US withdrawal would almost entirely be at the mercy of the Assad government and its allies—who may, as they have done in the past, weaponize terrorists against the West or simply choose not to pursue them. Further, according to an anonymous counterterrorism expert,⁴⁵ such a deal cannot guarantee that future assassinations, e.g., of SDF leadership or key military figures, could be prevented.

41 Muhammad Haj Kadour and Ben Hubbard, “‘Those Who Remain Will Die’: Neighbors Recall Night of Fear in Syria Raid,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/middleeast/isis-raid-idlib-qurayshi.html>.

42 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

43 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

44 Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurdish Commander Says Russia Opposes Further Turkish Land Grabs,” *Al-Monitor*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/syria-kurdish-commander-assured-washington-turkey-wont-invade-again>.

45 Phone interview with counterterrorism expert, November 4, 2021.

IS PRISONS AND REPATRIATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Forecasting the fate of prisons and camps in northeast Syria is crucial for anticipating security challenges in the event of US withdrawal. Today, about 64,000 foreigners from fifty-seven countries remain strewn across northeastern Syria and Iraq, many in IS prisons and others in the al-Hol camp.⁴⁶ There are currently twenty-four prisons in northeastern Syria managed by the autonomous administration, housing more than 10,000 combatants, roughly 2,000 of whom are foreign fighters and 8,000 of whom are Syrians and Iraqis.⁴⁷ Among Western allies, the United States is among the leaders in repatriation of foreigners and repatriated twenty-six citizens, twelve of whom are adults.⁴⁸ Although Denmark and Germany have both made efforts to repatriate their citizens and in some cases even prosecute them, most European countries are deeply hesitant to do so, given their systems did not anticipate citizens joining a group like IS and worries about public backlash.⁴⁹ In other cases, European countries imposed sentences that ranged from only three to five years; others have difficulty showing battlefield evidence required to prosecute the fighters.⁵⁰ Although the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) is mandated to collect criminal evidence for use in home-country courts—and has done so for at least thirty trials in ten countries—the process is slow and not able to address the problem for the thousands of IS fighters and foreign citizens in a timely manner.⁵¹

The Iraqi government has repatriated about 1,700 IS prisoners and more than 400 family members.⁵² However, repatriation to Iraq is coupled with deficiencies in the Iraqi judicial system.⁵³

The shortcomings of the Iraqi judicial system include but are not limited to lack of due process for accused fighters; limited access by lawyers to their clients; and extreme punishment (the death penalty for combatants, a twenty-five-year sentence for noncombatants), even when there are grounds to suspect that a confession was extracted by force and/or torture.⁵⁴

As time goes on, imprisoned fighters are increasingly protesting and becoming more violent. In January of this year, a prison breakout attempt in Ghoweiran Prison led to the deaths of seven civilians, eighty-four IS members, and approximately forty-five Kurdish fighters and security forces.⁵⁵ Several other prisons, including al-Malikiya, Shedadeh, and Kasra, have posed serious security threats that are only likely to increase over time.⁵⁶ The United Kingdom recently pledged \$20 million to the primary prison in al-Hasakeh to construct more durable and livable facilities, and it is likely that funding from the US government may be allocated for similar projects at other prisons.⁵⁷ In the event of an American withdrawal, it is possible that more secure camps would remain managed by SDF affiliates that are trusted by coalition forces. If that is not possible, the prisons would likely be handed over to Russian and Syrian government forces including the Russian-run 5th Corps, known as Tiger Forces and comprised of Syrians, who may dangle the IS fighters as a security threat in order to extract further concessions from Western governments, even though they pose a dual threat to both the government and innocent Syrian civilians alike.

Relatedly, al-Hol camp is a growing problem with so far little hope for a solution. A camp housing approximately sixty thousand IS families, al-Hol has become increasingly dangerous and unstable over time. While the United States does not have any military presence in the camp, it supports

46 Lila Hassan, "Repatriating ISIS Foreign Fighters Is Key to Stemming Radicalization, Experts Say, but Many Countries Don't Want Their Citizens Back" *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, April 6, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/repatriating-isis-foreign-fighters-key-to-stemming-radicalization-experts-say-but-many-countries-dont-want-citizens-back/>.

47 Haenni and Quesnay, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State."

48 Missy Ryan and Louisa Loveluck, "Biden Administration Attempts to Overcome Reluctance of Nations to Repatriate Islamic State Fighters from Syria," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/islaime-state-prisoners-repatriation/2021/10/15/f8e722b2-2a91-11ec-92bd-d2ffe8570c7d_story.html; and Hassan, "Repatriating ISIS Foreign Fighters."

49 Ryan and Loveluck, "Biden Administration Attempts."

50 Hassan, "Repatriating ISIS Foreign Fighters."

51 Hassan, "Repatriating ISIS Foreign Fighters."

52 Ryan and Loveluck, "Biden Administration Attempts."

53 Vera Mironova, "Iraq's Broken Justice System for Islamic State Fighters," *Lawfare* (blog), Lawfare Institute in Cooperation with Brookings Institution, July 24, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/iraqs-broken-justice-system-islamic-state-fighters>.

54 Mironova, "Iraq's Broken Justice System."

55 "IS Prison Break in Syria Sparks Days of Clashes," BBC, January 23, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-60100364>.

56 Haenni and Quesnay, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State."

57 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

actors that are involved in its security, and the US monitors its security from the Rubaria base. Indoctrination of children in the camp is a concern, because many have lived there for years since the deterioration of IS control over large swathes of territory. Others are becoming increasingly vulnerable given the little access they have to any formal education and the rise and normalization of violence.⁵⁸

The autonomous administration, as well as other Syrian populations, are not unreasonable to fear the creation of yet a new generation of IS militants in al-Hol camp. According to the US Department of Treasury, al-Hol receives illicit donations from international IS sympathizers that are smuggled in from Turkey via Iraq, or through hawala, informal money exchanges within the camp.⁵⁹ Clandestine phones are available in the camps with relative ease, connecting group members with IS affiliates located outside of the camp as well as outside of Syria.⁶⁰ About fifty people are caught trying to escape the camp daily.⁶¹ Further, IS courts are now operating in al-Hol, and the morality police is actively punishing immoral behavior, sometimes by death. Al-Hol, with its poor living conditions, unaccompanied minors, indoctrination activities, recruitment and connection with outside IS networks, and rampant widespread intimidation and violence, poses a serious security threat.⁶² Meanwhile, most foreign countries are doing little to extricate their citizens or move families to safe and/or deradicalized facilities.

SOCIAL RECONCILIATION AND HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

Social rehabilitation and cohesion are an obstacle to stabilizing post-IS areas, and US withdrawal may increase the likelihood of violence between locals, particularly the Arab and Kurdish components. Despite the fact that the autonomous administration oversees millions of Syrians of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds while supporting the fight against IS, many valid critiques of the group and its military/political model, i.e., the SDF and the Syria Democratic Council (SDC), remain unaddressed and concern behavior during the war against IS and in its aftermath. In particular, accusations by Turkey of the SDF employing Kurdish leadership affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (a group fighting for an independent Kurdish state within Turkey) instead of local Arab fighters (given the population is majority Arab) continue to sow discord. As a result, feelings of deep neglect and marginalization of locals are widespread in areas like Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, and have spurred resentment of both the SDF and its US backers.

The Syrian government has flirted with the concept of “settling” the accounts of locals who fear return to government areas, exploiting local-SDF tensions to do so. Raqqa’s citizens, for example, have languished under six different entities since 2011: the Syrian government, the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham (an Islamist rebel faction), the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, IS, and now the SDF, through the Raqqa Civic Council. It should come as no surprise, then, to say a majority-Arab area is now solely interested in stable, even if oppressive, governance. The US backing of SDF forces, which now manage the affairs of Raqqa, including its oil resources, is perceived by some as akin to the Syrian government, which also previously depleted Raqqa’s resources, returning little to the area in order to facilitate development. Today, this oil, for example, is not being used to reconstruct Raqqa, a critique locals level at officials of the autonomous administration.⁶³ The imposition of non-local leadership has fostered for some the feeling that IS “sheikhs” have now been exchanged for “hevals” (Kurdish term for comrades).⁶⁴ Similarly, in Deir Ezzor, the government and Iran have exploited the lack of a strong central government

58 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

59 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

60 Haenni and Quesnay, “Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State.”

61 Haenni and Quesnay, “Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State.”

62 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

63 “From the Syria Quarterly Update, January 2018: Summary of al-Raqqa Case,” London School of Economics Conflict Research Programme, Unpublished Paper.

64 “From the Syria Quarterly Update, January 2018: Summary of al-Raqqa Case.”

and Arab/tribal-Kurdish resentment to create incentives for residents seeking a “symbol of nominal authority.”⁶⁵ There, the regime is also exploiting IS sympathizers and IS sleeper cells in al-Badia to undermine SDF-dominated areas.⁶⁶ In the event of a US withdrawal, violent tensions between former American allies, like the SDF, and aggrieved locals should be expected.

Numerous reports have articulated the Syrian government’s chokehold on UN operations, of which the United States has been the most generous donor. Despite this, reports continue to circulate detailing the Syrian government’s manipulation of the Syrian pound, its nepotistic way of awarding procurement contracts, its micromanagement of UN and international nongovernmental organizations’ personnel hiring, and, most importantly, its continued obstruction of cross-line aid deliveries to northeastern and northwestern Syria, despite those deliveries being mandatory under the most recent version of the cross-border UN resolution, UN Security Council Resolution 2585.⁶⁷ Since its passage, only a handful of meaningful cross-line operations have taken place, signaling Damascus’s continued control over massive amounts of UN-sponsored and international nongovernmental organization aid that is meant to be wide-reaching and prioritize the most vulnerable. Further, in the event of a US withdrawal—and with it, the drying up of coalition resources, including stabilization assistance and the bureaucracy currently being funded by the United States and its allies—eastern Syria will be in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Given that the crossing at al-Yaroubia, on Syria’s border with Iraq, has not been an option for UN deliveries since January 2020, another entry way, coordinated between the Kurdistan Democratic

Party and Syrian Kurds, would need to be contemplated.⁶⁸ Some humanitarian experts suggest that an agreement to open the Fishkhabour-Semalka border crossing would be necessary but insufficient. Yet again, it must be stated that the Syrian government will move to ensure that it has control over all cross-border entry ways, severely limiting any meaningful control via Iraq that contravenes Syrian government objectives.

The Rukban camp, located on the Syrian-Jordanian border near the al-Tanf military base, is the site of a humanitarian catastrophe neglected for years. The camp’s ten thousand residents, which include former rebels but also almost six thousand children, are technically prevented from attack by the US base nearby but remain stranded.⁶⁹ The Jordanian government has refused to allow them entry into Jordan due to security concerns, and the individuals who have left the informal camp (where there were initially fifty thousand residents) have been met with hostility, detention, and disappearances. A limited number agreed to be taken via UN-facilitated departures to shelters in Homs, an area controlled by the Syrian government.⁷⁰ However, many camp residents are deeply skeptical of anyone trying to relocate them, including the SDF, the Americans, and the Syrian government. The plight of ten thousand Syrians would be in jeopardy upon US withdrawal from al-Tanf. Most likely, the majority of Rukban residents would be transferred to government-controlled “shelters,” supposedly “settling” their issues with the regime (and likely in danger of future arrest), while “unsettled” fighters would likely be transported to northern Aleppo, where fighters from areas cleared out by the Syrian government are routinely sent.⁷¹

65 الإدارة الذاتية-تعتزم طرد الموقعين على المصالحة مع دمشق , November 20 2022, <https://7al.net/2021/11/22/7/الإدارة-الذاتية-تعتزم-طرد-الموقعين>; and “Damascus Doubles Down and Pushes Reconciliation Drive in Deir-ez-Zor,” The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria Project, COAR (website), November 22, 2021, <https://coar-global.org/2021/11/22/damascus-doubles-down-and-pushes-reconciliation-drive-in-deir-ez-zor/>.

66 “Damascus Doubles Down,” The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria Project.

67 Tessa Fox, “Assad Regime ‘Siphons Millions in Aid’ by Manipulating Syria’s Currency,” *Guardian*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/21/assad-regime-siphons-millions-in-aid-by-manipulating-syrias-currency>; 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>; Salman Husain and Yasmine Chawaf, “Syrian Lives in Peril: The Fight to Preserve Syria’s Last Humanitarian Border Crossing,” Atlantic Council, June 4, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/syrian-lives-in-peril-the-fight-to-preserve-syrias-last-humanitarian-border-crossing/>; “Security Council Extends Use of Border Crossing for Humanitarian Aid into Syria, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2585 (2021),” United Nations (press release), July 9, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14577.doc.htm>; and see UN Security Council 2585, Extending the Period for Cross-line Deliveries, S/RES/2585, ¶ 2 (July 9, 2021), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2585\(2021\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2585(2021)).

68 Natasha Hall, “The Implications of the UN Cross-Border Vote in Syria,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 4, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/implications-un-cross-border-vote-syria>.

69 “For Residents of Syria Camp, Slow Death or Risky Exit,” France 24 (state-owned network), October 1, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211001-for-residents-of-syria-camp-slow-death-or-risky-exit>; and Ellie Sennett, “Most Aid to Syria’s Rukban Camp Has Been Blocked for More Than a Year. Here’s Why,” *PBS News Hour*, March 14, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/most-aid-to-syrias-rukban-camp-has-been-blocked-for-more-than-a-year-heres-why>.

70 Lead Inspector General Report, *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

71 Sarah Dadouch, “In the Cradle of the Syrian Revolution, Renewed Violence Shows Reconciliation Is Still Elusive,” *Washington Post*, September 19, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-civil-war-daraa/2021/09/18/fa637108-1593-11ec-a5e5-ceecb895922f_story.html.

CONCLUSION

This report highlights some of the impacts a sudden or disorderly US withdrawal could have on Syria. While the US military presence remains limited in number, this report also underscores how aggregate US influence is much more potent than a force number of nine hundred suggests. US troop presence has enhanced counterterrorism operations, obstructed IS and Iranian smuggling routes, and facilitated humanitarian aid and economic benefits to a population in Syria that would be languishing under even more dire conditions. It can be argued that it has also limited local violence and halted a resurgence of public IS activities.

That said, according to the most recent Syria policy review, US presence is limited to the goal of counterterrorism operations, which implies that it is a conditions-based, not calendar-based deployment. Those conditions should include local Syrian forces that can reasonably deny IS a safe haven from which to plot terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies. It is well known that the Assad regime is not likely to provide the necessary capability to assure the United States and its allies that it can prevent IS's return. In reality, there is little room to positively read the reassertion of Syrian government control over northeastern Syria; and withdrawal from Syria would be a serious gamble for US national security concerns in Syria and the region. This leaves the further need for the United States to build up the capability of the autonomous administration to provide the necessary security and intelligence capabilities. The SDF and the autonomous administration have proved they can hold on—a marked contrast to the security forces of the former Western-supported government of Afghanistan. With additional help from the United States and its allies, the autonomous administration and the SDF may be able to continue to play this crucial role, provided the group invests seriously in diversifying local political and military participation

Finally, there are other factors, particularly those resulting from the calculations of Russia and Turkey that are not expounded upon here for purposes of length and also unpredictability. Yet it is important to highlight that Turkey's positioning in the event of a US withdrawal would be crucial and profound, and could have a positive or negative impact, depending on Ankara's actions and priorities, which include preventing the creation of a Kurdish state and securing Syria's border with Turkey.

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