

A 10-DEGREE SHIFT IN SYRIA STRATEGY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With an all-out fight for Syria's northwest province of Idlib looming, if not already beginning, the potential is growing for yet another round of immense human tragedy within the country. The consequences for regional stability, and for the possible future emergence or re-emergence of various extremist groups and associated sanctuaries, could be severe. Future events may soon require an updating of our analysis and ideas, but nonetheless, we offer the following as a realistic "10-degree shift" to U.S. policy in Syria at this crucial inflection point in the war.

Current U.S. strategy toward Syria has largely, though not completely, led to the battlefield defeat of ISIS there. But to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS or a related extremist group, limit Iranian influence in Syria, and address humanitarian and refugee stresses in the region that severely affect U.S. allies such as Turkey and Jordan, the United States should engineer what we call a 10-degree shift in strategy. Chief elements would include:

- Recognizing what is increasingly obvious: that President Bashar Assad will not be displaced or replaced through the current Geneva peace process. Instead, the United States should work over time to persuade his cronies and allies to convince him to step down in favor of a successor who is largely of his choosing. Other Syrian groups and the international community should have a say in the formation of additional elements of a new Syrian government, as a precondition for the provision of substantial reconstruction aid to and through the central government.
- Threatening and, if necessary, conducting limited reprisal air strikes against Syrian aerial assets, in retaliation for any future regime barrel bombing, particularly around Idlib. Washington should adopt a similar strategy toward Iran should its proxies attempt attacks against the United States or its allies.
- Promptly providing humanitarian and reconstruction aid to those parts of Syria not under government control, with U.S. forces remaining in roughly their current number and location to supervise the process and help train provisional local security forces (more like police than opposition forces bent on Assad's removal). The aid should be provided more locally than regionally, in part to discourage the formation of a single, strong Kurdish zone that would exacerbate Turkish fears of secessionism.
- Working with Turkey to weaken extremist elements in and around Idlib, including with limited military action if need be, and continuing U.S. military action against residual pockets of ISIS elements in the country's east until the battlefield defeat of ISIS is complete.

1) THE U.S. POSTURE IN SYRIA SINCE 2016

In April 2017 and April 2018, President Trump authorized limited strikes against military assets of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. These strikes upheld an important American red line—previously unenforced—that the United States would not tolerate chemical weapons attacks by regime forces against Syrian civilians. These strikes—conducted in cooperation with the British and French in 2018—signaled the Trump administration’s intent to distinguish its Syria policy from that of its predecessor.

The U.S.-led coalition against ISIS was equally limited in scope. While ISIS is not completely defeated, coalition operations have substantially degraded the organization. The United States still has 2,000 troops in Syria, deployed to support continuing anti-ISIS operations. Progress has been made, but much work remains. Between the enforcement of a red line and the fight against ISIS, U.S. actions have increased American involvement in a set of conflicts that profoundly affect U.S. interests.

The reality on the ground in Syria has drastically changed and the United States’ strategy for Syria should shift as a result. This document describes our view of the current situation and proposes a logical extension to the actions already taken by the Trump administration to protect compelling U.S. interests in a complex war.

2) THE NEW REALITY IN SYRIA

Any strategy regarding Syria must first accept that Assad has consolidated power in areas under regime control and that he maintains the capacity to extend this control. In places that the government has retaken, with support from Iran and Russia, there is no viable resistance to wrest that control back from the regime. After securing eastern Damascus in late May 2018, pro-regime forces are continuing to consolidate gains from Damascus to Deraa and possess the capacity to maintain these gains for the foreseeable future. Because of his secure position in western Syria, the international

community possesses few incentives that would persuade Assad to relinquish this control. Some policy proposals ignore the reality on the ground—Assad has no logical reason to give up hard-won gains. However, Assad’s approach to retaking territory and the regime’s post-capture governance fail to accommodate grievances of the population or address conditions that sparked mass protests in 2011, setting conditions that are favorable to the resurgence of groups such as ISIS.

The second reality any Syria strategy must wrestle with is the likelihood that rebel-controlled areas in Idlib and Aleppo provinces in the northwest, with a civilian population of more than 2.5 million, will become a focus of conflict. The anti-regime groups that govern these areas are diffuse and contain a multitude of subgroups, including some extremist elements. The influence of radical Islamist groups in the region caused European donors to pull out. Turkey, on the other hand, is expanding its influence in the area and is working to pull together a unified rebel front to deter a regime attack. In spite of the turmoil, close to 1 million internally displaced persons have been forced to relocate to Idlib, testing the limits of humanitarian resources.

Third, a Syria strategy must contend with Turkish actions in the areas of Syria where Turkey patrols as part of Operation Euphrates Shield and its successor operations. The newly erected 720-kilometer wall along the border will limit cross-border activities except those approved by the government in Ankara. This will affect not only the ability for militants to enter Syria, but also NGOs that now require Turkish approval to operate in these areas. The city of Manbij in the Aleppo Governorate presents a unique challenge as U.S. forces patrol in close proximity to Turkish forces, while Kurdish fighters withdraw from the city to the east of the Euphrates. Beyond a complex situation on the ground, Turkey’s long-term goals in this region are unknown.

Fourth, other questions remain regarding the northeast. Essential partners in the fight against ISIS, Syrian Kurds face pressure from Turkey and from Syrian Arabs east of the Euphrates. Further,

Kurdish groups have shown a willingness to work or negotiate with the Assad regime when under pressure, including when Turkey conducted its operation in Afrin starting in January 2018. More recently, talks between the regime and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) have suggested the two could forge some kind of agreement post-conflict, although the history of the relationship between the Assad regime and Syria's Kurds could mean that any reconciliation may be short-lived. Historically, the United States has not fared well in its efforts to balance competing interests among local actors in conflict zones. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict places the United States between two anti-ISIS coalition partners, one of which is a NATO ally that will not accept an independent Kurdish state, or anything resembling such a state, along its southern border.

There are issues throughout Syria not specific to geographic regions. First is the presence of a war economy, where local partners on the ground and their international partners are reaping vast rewards. As the Assad regime falls short on commodities, such as copper, wheat, and oil, it is establishing trade deals with the PYD to obtain them. Any external support for economic reconstruction provided through Damascus will further the reassertion of regime authority and reward loyalist individuals and groups that have profited from the war.

Second, Syria is host to large numbers of non-state armed groups that operate with high levels of autonomy. The Syrian military reportedly fields approximately 20,000 to 25,000 troops. The Syrian military also depends upon a network of localized militias. These may number some 50,000 to 70,000 fighters distributed in 500-man units. Additionally, Baathist militias provide another 6,000 to 7,000 fighters for the regime. The armed wing of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party also includes some 6,000 to 7,000 fighters.

These Syrian forces are bolstered with 10,000 to 35,000 fighters in Iranian proxy groups dispersed throughout regime-held territory, though some estimates of Iranian-backed fighters are as high

as 70,000. These fighters are organized into five predominant groups, each with many affiliates. These groups have 20-30 subgroups that can realign as necessary. Hezbollah provides another 7,000 to 10,000 fighters, while Russia maintains a force of approximately 5,000 in Syria, including both support personnel and private military contractors.

In the northeast, the People's Protection Units (YPG) field 10,000 to 15,000 fighters throughout Kurdish-held territory. The Kurdish National Council comprises some 15 affiliated groups, but has been marginalized on the ground by the PYD, the political wing that oversees the YPG. The Kurdish National Council's weak military wing does not maintain a meaningful presence in Syria.

Islamist groups are much smaller than in past years. ISIS still controls five or six villages along the border with Iraq and has a small presence in the southwest. While it has less than 3,000 fighters, perhaps 20-30 percent of the Sunni population in Syria view the group as a legitimate presence against the Assad regime.

Turkey has deployed roughly 6,000 troops into Syria to provide security on the far side of its border. The forces, originally deployed under Operation Euphrates Shield, secure civilian population centers under their authority and keep ISIS and Kurdish fighters from the border. Commanded from Gaziantep, Turkey's control over this territory is becoming institutionalized and the Turkish military deployment should be expected to last indefinitely.

The United States keeps approximately 2,000 troops in Syria in a chain of outposts along the Euphrates River up to Manbij. Their primary missions are to advise Syrian rebel forces and fight the remnants of ISIS in Syria, in conjunction with U.S. and allied air power based elsewhere in the region. In the north, these forces are placed between Turkish and Kurdish forces to prevent open conflict between the two sides. However, U.S. operations in Syria are a low priority for the Department of Defense, which is also dealing with North Korea, China, Russia, and Afghanistan.

This reality means that the war in Syria will not end any time soon. Even if the regime continues to gain ground, the many sides and alliances—often shifting—will preclude any clean victory or end to the conflict. Because of its relatively minor combat role, the United States currently has little leverage over the parties to this war, limiting American options to bring about an outcome conducive to U.S. interests.

3) WHY THE UNITED STATES NEEDS A NEW STRATEGY

The United States has a number of interests to protect in Syria, requiring a strategy to achieve them. First and foremost, the United States needs to defeat the remnants of ISIS and work to prevent the group's resurgence. As Assad consolidates his authority, his regime continues to rule with methods that drove the creation of ISIS in the first place, making further Sunni extremism a likely consequence of his empowered regime. The Syrian government will respond to opposition groups not only with violence, but also by withholding reconstruction support and continuing to privilege allies and supporters. Without a shift in U.S. strategy, Sunni extremism will likely intensify again.

Second, the United States seeks to counter an Iranian presence in Syria. A true land bridge from Tehran to Beirut may not be a practical strategic objective of the Iranian government, but preventing or limiting such an arc of influence is an important U.S. interest. Iranian successes in Syria, and those of their proxy Hezbollah, will embolden future adventurism and continue to destabilize the region. Current U.S. strategy will only affect this possibility on the margins.

Third, the United States has an interest in limiting the human costs of the war. While bringing an end to the war is unlikely at this juncture, continued Assad regime offensives into rebel-held territory will create a new wave of refugees. The regime has also taken measures that make it less likely that refugees will return to Syria in large numbers in the near future. These refugee waves have threatened

the stability of important neighbors—Jordan and Lebanon, in particular—and have changed the domestic political landscape for many of our European allies. Indeed, in the latter cases, such events have played into the interests of a Russia that seeks to undermine democratic governments within the European Union and NATO itself. Regional stability depends upon the minimization of refugee flows, and a strategy is needed to address this major issue.

Fourth, the United States should seek to gain and maintain leverage in Syria, maximizing the limited diplomatic opportunities that its small footprint provides. The Syrian government, Russia, and Iran have been operating freely in the country with little consideration of the United States. Building leverage at this stage, however difficult this will be, is needed if the United States is to have any hope of shaping the terms of a postwar settlement. U.S. air strikes in the aftermath of regime chemical weapons attacks against civilians reminded these actors that the United States can influence strategic calculations in Syria if it chooses to, but such pressure must be consistent and persistent to achieve real effects.

Despite this array of interests, the United States faces serious constraints. The administration, Congress, and the American people have no appetite for a major intervention that could bog U.S. forces down in an interminable war. And yet, our current strategy presents the possibility that none of the interests described above could be protected. We believe, as explained below, that a modest shift in strategy could attain changes on the ground conducive to U.S. interests.

4) PREVAILING OPTIONS

a. Complete withdrawal from the Syrian war

The United States is focusing its power on countering peer or near-peer competitors, mostly regarding Russia and China. This great-power competition prioritizes existential threats to the United States over lesser interests. This strategic paradigm has

driven some, in and out of government, to propose that the United States withdraw completely from Syria and leave the war to its current combatants.

Such a withdrawal strategy would create major security challenges for the United States. First and foremost, it would set the conditions for the return of ISIS, or a similar extremist group. At the prime of its power, ISIS not only threatened the very existence of states in the region but was also able to order and inspire attacks as far afield as the Philippines, West Africa, Europe, and the American homeland itself. A contributing factor to its rise was the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, ostensibly after a victory there against extremists. But left unchecked, a group previously thought defeated was able to reconstitute in greater numbers than during its direct fight against U.S. forces. A total withdrawal from Syria would remove one of the key obstacles to the resurgence of radical jihadi movements and create a void that would almost certainly be filled by Iran and its proxies. Iran will be looking to emulate its ascendancy in Iraq after the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Allowing Tehran to dominate in Syria would provide it with greater capacity to shape the future of the region with far-reaching implications for the interests of the United States and those of its allies in the Arab world.

b. Major escalation of a U.S. intervention in Syria

In theory, the interests above could be protected through a major increase in the scale of the U.S. intervention in Syria against the Assad regime and its proxies. Sustained air strikes against the Syrian government and the possible infusion of ground forces could stop regime offensives in their tracks and possibly create the space for a negotiated settlement to the war. As we have learned from our lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, such a large-scale military effort does not guarantee a positive outcome, and certainly not on short time horizons. The military presence of allies and adversaries also creates the possibility of conflict escalation beyond the Syrian borders, and potentially with near-peer competitors. There is

zero political will within the United States to commit sizeable ground forces into a chaotic conflict with unknown consequences, and such a strategy is therefore untenable.

c. Continuation of the current strategy

The default option is to maintain the current minimalist strategy. This plan would maintain a small footprint, emphasizing special operations forces, to fight remnants of ISIS and to ensure that Kurdish forces remain east of the Euphrates. This strategy minimizes Turkish concerns along its southern border and discourages the Syrian government from encroaching on territory under control of U.S. allies. This minimal approach checks ISIS expansion in the east, giving Iraq the breathing space it needs to rebuild by removing the threat of a renewed ISIS on its western border.

However, this strategy would only counter remnants of the original ISIS and do very little against the likely successor organizations that could be created due to the actions of the Assad regime. This force posture provides little capacity to discourage Assad regime atrocities that drive refugee flows and the persistence of extremism. It also leaves the difficult task of checking the Iranian and Hezbollah presence to Israel, which is principally concerned with securing its own border.

d. A 10-degree shift in strategy

The strategic options presented here either do not protect U.S. interests in Syria or they are politically untenable. We propose that a modest shift in our current strategy could produce at least a modest change in the situation on the ground that aligns with U.S. interests in Syria. This strategic shift, described below, would affect the battle against the current ISIS and its next version, would provide a check against Iranian and Hezbollah aggression in the region, and would increase U.S. leverage to help end the war. Because this strategic shift is modest—what we are calling a 10-degree shift—the options described here should be politically acceptable both in Washington and abroad. It has the potential,

however, to effect much more than a 10 degree or 10 percent improvement in the outcome of the war over time.

5) SHIFT THE FOCUS FROM ASSAD

As a starting point, this strategic shift is premised on the near inevitability that Bashar Assad will remain in power. Given his recent gains and external support from Russia and Iran, forcibly removing him from power would require a level of effort that the United States cannot realistically be expected to make.

However, this logic does not suggest that Assad should be left to his own devices to wage the war as he sees fit. Reports suggest a willingness from Moscow and Tehran to consider alternatives to Assad. The United States should launch a political campaign to reach out to Russia to define conditions under which Assad's departure would be feasible, and be prepared to enter negotiations to help achieve such conditions. As part of this effort, overtures should be made to the Alawite community to ensure its security and protect its other interests in the eventuality that Assad leaves power. Further, a communication campaign should begin that highlights the costs of Assad's remaining in power: the likelihood of further violence and bloodshed targeting the Alawite community, and the near inevitability that reconstruction will produce few benefits for ordinary Syrians while Assad remains in power. A more assertive and proactive element of this strategy would include efforts to exploit internal divisions among communities that have thus far been unwilling to oppose the regime. Such efforts will create uncertainty within the regime, and potentially create incentives for regime insiders to enter a managed transition of power, perhaps even in the next year or two.

More likely, persuading Assad to step aside will take time. In that vein, Syrian presidential elections in 2021 present an inflection point in Syrian politics. The vote could be used as a way to ease him from power if he can be persuaded not to run.

Accountability for the regime's crimes against humanity requires a nuanced approach. No strategy for Syria should undercut or undermine existing efforts to preserve accountability for the Assad regime; taking this mechanism off the table would remove a significant leverage tool from international efforts to end the war. Until a political settlement to the war becomes viable, the United States should endorse ongoing efforts to ensure accountability. Ultimately, the responsibility of achieving justice for crimes committed during the conflict should rest with the Syrian people within the framework of a political deal to end the war.

At this stage, the United States' most reasonable course of action is to accept that Assad will remain in power for the time being, reject normalization, and use a variety of tactics to bring pressure to bear on his supporters, providing them with incentives to navigate a change of leadership. Even if unsuccessful in the short term, such a course of action, coupled with the actions below, could eventually create the conditions needed to bring about a political transition to a post-Assad era in Syria, recognizing that Assad's successor will likely be drawn from a small group of established regime elites.

6) A POLITICAL-ECONOMIC-MILITARY SYRIA STRATEGY FOR THE UNITED STATES

The objectives of this strategy are as follows. First, to defeat ISIS remnants and prevent the resurgence of the group or other groups with similar goals and ideology. Second, to prevent the mass killings of civilians and regime actions that create waves of refugees that can destabilize American allies. Third, set the conditions for a political transition in Syria that removes Assad from power and increases the responsiveness of the Syrian government. Fourth, reduce Iranian influence, potentially through Russian assistance, but without Russia, if needed. This strategic shift will not immediately achieve all of these objectives, but it will lay the groundwork for doing so over time.

The first shift in strategy would be to increase the credible threat of force in protection of U.S. interests. This does not include an increased footprint on the ground. Building on President Trump's approach to chemical weapons attacks, humanitarian red lines would be drawn—particularly in the areas around Idlib—to prevent regime atrocities against civilians and Assad's further consolidation of power.

The Syrian military uses a template for retaking territory. As it encircles an area in preparation for a siege, it uses barrel bombs from rotary-wing aircraft to reduce infrastructure and coerce the target population to surrender in lieu of dying. These attacks are then closely followed with artillery barrages, the use of direct fire from armored vehicles, and finally soldiers to clear the rubble.

The United States can disrupt this operational model through the use of air power by directly attacking regime aircraft that have engaged in such sieges. A red line declaring these operations unacceptable could be enforced *post facto*; strikes against targets after they perpetrate humanitarian crimes may not stop these attacks initially, but attrition of these assets would deter their further use. Aircraft are difficult for the Assad regime to replace. Asserting our will to prevent their use against civilians would check Assad's advances. However, this approach requires a consistent application of that force over time, as circumstances require. One-off strikes can signal reticence from the United States. This is not to suggest a no-fly or no-drive zone, rather a statement that such operations will no longer be permitted by the United States generally. Washington must maintain the flexibility to respond as its interests dictate without being drawn into escalation. That said, only through consistent enforcement will the United States build credibility and leverage.

Integral to this military approach is assurance to Russia that U.S. force will not be used to decapitate the Assad regime or degrade its capabilities generally. The essential element of this course of action is credibility and reliability: when and only when specific violations of U.S. demands occur will specific attacks on the assets that conducted

those violations result. Persuading Russia that our actions are narrowly focused is the only way that Moscow would acquiesce to our increased military engagement in Syria. But tolerating atrocities, as during most previous periods of this war, suggests that our will is weak, potentially enticing Moscow, Teheran, or Damascus to test us even in the east. That is no solution either. Thus, this measured military approach protects Syrian civilians, while reducing risks of escalation and increasing U.S. leverage in determining the future conduct and end of the war.

The political-economic element of this strategy focuses on reconstruction of areas not under the control of the Assad regime. Reconstructing areas controlled by the Kurds and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and ensuring that assistance benefits local Arab populations too, will increase U.S. leverage in Syria. By offering Kurdish forces and local Arab communities alternatives to engaging with the Assad regime, the United States can contribute to building pressure on the regime, and expand options for post-conflict governance in the east.

European and Arab countries have interests in stabilizing the situation on the ground, and we believe that they can be convinced to provide much of the financing to begin reconstruction of subnational areas outside of the rule of Assad. But such an effort requires leadership that only the United States can provide. The strategy will not only improve the conditions of Syrian citizens, but also incentivize groups under Assad's control to seek the benefits of reconstruction that other Syrians are receiving, thereby increasing the pressure for political change even from within Alawite and Christian communities.

The political elements of this strategy would also require acting as an honest broker in the Kurdish regions of northeast Syria. Action must be taken to prevent Syrian Kurdistan from allying with the Assad regime against Turkey, while Turkey must be persuaded that the United States does not support a breakaway Kurdistan on its southern border.

The United States should promote decentralized governance that sees power-sharing between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council, and is responsive to Arab communities in territory under the control of the PYD. The United States should stipulate that any continued assistance to the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, is dependent upon their willingness to share power with their rivals and their acceptance of Syrian sovereignty at the end of a negotiation process that should include options for decentralized local governance. Part of this dialogue would include proposals to bring Kurdish oil to broader markets, curtailing or at least capping revenue received by the Assad regime. A more proactive U.S. role vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue in Syria could reassure Turkey in a related way to how Ankara was convinced in the early 1990s that Iraqi Kurdistan would not transform into a breakaway state.

While the United States should tolerate Assad's continued rule for the time being, actions should be taken to set the stage for transition in the intermediate term, with 2021 as one opportunity for a change to take place. The United States and other donors should offer generous reconstruction packages for government-held areas in return for Assad leaving power. Assad is unlikely to accept such an offer, but the act of making it signals U.S. and allied interests in promoting the welfare of the Syrian people. The United States and its allies should establish specific conditions that the Syrian regime should meet that would then permit the flow of international reconstruction aid into government-controlled parts of the country, such as those specified in the No Assistance to Assad Act, currently before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Even though Assad is unlikely to agree, his political opponents would be given a tool with which to fight against him and seek his removal from power.

This strategy, as noted, provides a modest shift from the current approach that may initially produce only modest gains. But it can gain further traction with time. It can also help contain the otherwise

foreboding intensification of conflict in and around Idlib in the coming weeks and months.

The above set of proposals should not, however, be construed as a menu of possible activities, because the political, economic, and military elements need to work in tandem toward a single common objective.

7) LEVERAGING OUR ALLIES AND PARTNERS

The United States cannot act alone in shaping the contours of the Syrian war. It requires the assistance of Turkey and Israel to leverage their existing commitments to promote a transition to a post-conflict situation that is conducive to U.S. interests and regional security. Turkey has military forces already on the ground in Syria and Israel has demonstrated the will to use force toward its own ends. Jordan has taken more of an indirect approach in the de-escalation zone to contain violence in the south and preserve Jordan's own stability. In light of Syrian-Russian offensives in the south, and the threat of military operations against Idlib and the Aleppo countryside, action should be taken to bolster our partners' positions in Syria.

The benefit of working closely with these specific partners is that the United States has a working relationship with all three. The United States and Turkey, while experiencing differences in our respective current strategies in Syria, have been able to make agreements conducive to their mutual interests. This was best seen in the deal made to jointly secure Manbij to allow the withdrawal of YPG forces from the city. Additionally, as NATO allies, coordination and de-confliction mechanisms already exist between the two countries. Israel has been and remains a key security partner of the United States. From these starting points, the United States is well poised to work with these partners in pursuit of their collective aims.

a. Turkey

U.S.-Turkey relations have improved since the Manbij agreement was made. The primary area where the

United States could improve relations with Turkey further would be with regard to the Kurdish region of Syria. The United States still has some influence with the YPG and could play a major role in working toward a solution to this region's disposition in the long run. Turkey's principal objective is to prevent Kurdish self-rule and to prevent Syria's Kurdish region in the northeast from becoming a YPG-dominated statelet. The United States could affect this by working with the Kurds to make assurances that it would support decentralized governance frameworks that provide Kurds with meaningful authority over local issues in a context that includes Syrian sovereignty over the northeast, and by giving the Kurds security assurances that would precede their giving up heavy weapons. These two actions alone would create conditions that would prevent Syria's Kurds from seceding, provides Kurds with authority over local affairs, and also ensures that the Kurdish autonomous region does not become a safe-haven for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), meeting Turkey's primary objective.

The United States should be prepared to help the Kurds defend themselves from attacks from the air and on the ground. The assurance should not preclude Turkey's ability to cross into Syria in pursuit of militants that attack Turkish targets, in a manner akin to Turkey's "hot pursuit" of the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1990s and early 2000s. These security assurances to Turkey and Syria's Kurds aim for something of an equilibrium: the United States ensures the Kurds do not suffer the same fate as their counterparts elsewhere in the country, but at the same time adopts a posture that is accommodating of Turkish national security concerns.

The hope is that this approach creates the breathing room for Turkey and the Kurds to reach some form of settlement in Syria. Getting Turkey to agree and participate in a U.S.-led Syria strategy does not entail solving the Kurdish issue for Ankara. Rather, the realistic goal is that the United States should hear and address as many concerns as possible and maintain a consistent framework for engaging both Turkey and the Kurds.

By helping to remove pressure from Syrian Kurds, the United States would be in a position to ask Turkey to leverage its existing footprint in Syria to aid in stabilizing the area in and around Idlib. Maintaining a robust de-escalation zone in northwest Syria is in Turkey's interest and it should be willing to take the lead on the ground if it has U.S. backing from the air and can conduct an economy-of-force operation focused west of the Euphrates. Turkey is positioned to support local actors to prevent their defeat by Assad's forces. Turkey could then oversee reconstruction efforts around Idlib and condition these efforts to prevent radical groups from exercising local power. Embracing existing Turkish efforts would allow a minimal American investment to achieve the goals of both countries.

b. Israel

Israel will not accept an Iranian presence along its border, as evidenced by its air strikes in April and May 2018. It has progressively escalated against Iranian forces to demonstrate resolve and capability, repeatedly hitting targets in Syria linked to Iran. Israel has shown its willingness to go to war over the security of its own border, with broad domestic support and agreement. A recent round of strikes occurred just two days after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, indicating the strikes were conducted with at least tacit Russian acceptance, if not approval.

Israeli efforts to establish a stand-off zone from its border increases the possibility of escalation between Israel and Iran. Thus far, Israeli-Russian negotiations to mitigate this risk have not been successful. Arab governments largely support Israeli efforts to contain Iranian influence in Syria, as evidenced for example by public statements made by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Israeli pressure in the southwest, coupled with Turkey's presence in the north and the United States along the Euphrates, contains Iranian activities and freedom of maneuver. The United States should support Israel's continued policy and support coordination mechanisms in southwest

Syria between the Israel, the United States, Jordan, and Russia to prevent escalation.

8) STRATEGIES FOR EACH OF SYRIA'S REGIONS

a. Northwest : SDF and Turkish-controlled territory

In the northwest area around Idlib, the United States should support Turkey's efforts to build a more unified front among armed opposition groups and promote local, non-radicalized governance structures anchored in civil institutions. It is in the U.S. interest to protect the near-term autonomy of this region and prevent its capture by Assad's regime.

Economically, the United States should promote European-backed, Turkish-led reconstruction efforts in and around Idlib. Reconstruction funds can be used to promote local government legitimacy and temper the influence of Jihadist armed groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Militarily, the United States should establish a red line that prohibits the regime from committing atrocities against civilians in the region. This should not be a non-encroachment area as this would require more resources than the United States is currently willing to commit. Much like the strikes after the Syrian military's use of chemical weapons, the United States should make it clear that attacks against civilians—with chemical weapons or barrel bombs—will evoke an American response against regime military assets. Such strikes could eventually degrade Syrian military capacity and prevent the application of the regime's operational model to retake territory. This limited approach does not require a significantly expanded U.S. deployment, but gives the United States some leverage in influencing the conduct of the war.

b. Northeast: Kurdish-controlled territory

Politically, the United States should seek to protect the current autonomy of the Kurdish-majority areas of Syria from the control of Damascus. However,

the current degree of autonomy would not be permanent, and the United States should make that position clear from the outset.

Within the northeast, the United States should facilitate political settlements that create local governance frameworks that work equitably for Arabs and Kurds. These local governance frameworks would facilitate the creation of decentralized zones, consisting of multiple efficient governorates that are designed to serve the needs of their constituents. These frameworks should favor power-sharing and create the conditions that support the return of displaced persons, security, and the protection of property rights. Such measures would lower the risk of radicalization in local communities.

Economically, the United States has two avenues of leverage. First, this region hosts Syria's largest oil reserves, with major extraction operations conducted in the areas northeast of Deir e-Zor. While having only low-quality crude, this area has been a critical source of cheap energy for the Assad regime, which has been reported to purchase oil via arrangements for sharing revenue or refined products with PYD partners. The United States could facilitate the purchase of this oil at slightly higher prices than the PYD receives from the Assad regime—but still well below global prices—to prevent its capture by the regime, while also economically supporting the Kurdish region. Access to these petroleum supplies should be used as part of any negotiations to end the war on the basis of political frameworks that provide for decentralized local governance.

The second source of leverage in the northeast is the use of reconstruction funds. Reconstruction along the Euphrates and Iraq-Syria border would mitigate the conditions that lead to extremism. Cutting off U.S. funding for Syria has endangered American forces on the ground, as well as American NGOs and local partners working in Idlib. While relying also on aid from our European and regional partners, the United States should re-institute and increase its aid funding for Syria under appropriate

terms and conditions. Only through such measures can the United States hope to create the leverage it seeks in pursuit of its interests.

Militarily, the United States should maintain its current presence in the northeast and east. The current deployment effectively supports continuing operations to eradicate ISIS, the security of the Kurdish region from the regime, and the prevention of armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurds.

c. Regime-held territory

For the foreseeable future, the United States should understand that Assad will remain in power. Its longer-term position should be that Assad must eventually leave power. Meanwhile, the United States should make efforts to foment divisions within Assad's alliance, and contribute to conditions that could lead elements of the regime's coalition to conclude that they would be better served by a change of leadership. Presidential elections scheduled for 2021 are a useful target date for such a transition, if it does not occur before.

Reconstruction assistance should be withheld from all areas under regime control until an acceptable end to the war, including a transition of Assad from power, is negotiated. Modest amounts of humanitarian aid might be treated somewhat more flexibly, provided that Assad ceases offensive operations against opposition forces in places such as Idlib.

Militarily, the United States should stay out of regime-held territory and make clear to the regime and Russia that the United States will not attempt to remove Assad by force. However, the United States should conduct limited, punitive strikes against Syrian military targets in the event that a red line against atrocities is violated.

9) RISKS AND MITIGATION

a. Risks of escalation with Russia and Iran

Increasing U.S. military activities, even in the limited ways we call for here, creates a risk of direct

confrontation between the United States or partner forces and Russian or Iranian forces. Measures can be taken to reduce the possibility of such an occurrence. Russia has proven willing to de-conflict with competitors to prevent escalatory events in the past, such as with the U.S. strikes on regime targets and Israeli attacks on Iranian targets.

Iran presents a more difficult problem. Its forces and proxies intermingle with Syrian forces and can be difficult to discern. For the United States, the consequences of this are modest. Thus far, Iran has avoided direct confrontation with U.S. forces in Syria, though it has issued threats against the United States. Nor has Iran yet targeted U.S. assets outside of Syria, whether in Iraq or the Gulf. U.S. threats of punitive retaliation against Iranian targets in the event of attacks against the United States seem to be taken seriously by Tehran. The greater risk may be a growing conflict between Israel and Iran. Iranian forces have attempted rocket strikes on Israel, and Israel has conducted a number of strikes against Iranian targets. Israeli attacks escalated in June 2018, with missile strikes on Iranian targets in eastern Syria and in the vicinity of Damascus itself. Further increases in Israeli military activity in Syria would raise the possibility of direct retaliation by Iran or its proxies. Specifically, the renewal of active hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah will become more likely.

b. Elections in the region

The political landscape of the region is in flux. With Hezbollah and the Sadrists winning parliamentary pluralities in Lebanon and Iraq, respectively, the governing coalitions of these states remain uncertain at this time. The impact of these groups leading coalitions on Syria's borders could have a profound influence over each state's policies with regard to Syria. Likewise, Turkey just returned Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the presidency with a parliamentary majority of his Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Economic conditions in Jordan, partially a result of the influx of refugees, have driven changes in

government there. Economic conditions in Iran, partially a result of expensive Iranian operations in Syria and Yemen, have caused widespread domestic protests against Iranian interventions. The political situation in both states carries enormous uncertainties. In Israel, Netanyahu's legal troubles may challenge his tenure in office, but his Likud party would likely remain in power, giving a high degree of probability to policy continuity.

c. Legal questions

Continued operations against ISIS would fall under the legal authority granted by the existing Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF),

and we do not see a need for a new AUMF to keep the existing U.S. force structure on the ground in Syria.

We believe that The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, enacted in 1951, would provide the legal authority to strike Syrian military targets in retaliation for Syrian atrocities.

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