

REFRAMING U.S. SYRIA POLICY: THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS RUNS THROUGH MOSCOW

DANIEL L. MAGRUDER JR. AND RODRICK H. MCHATY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing partnership between Iran and Russia in Syria has proved effective and successful since the outbreak of civil war in the country in 2011, preventing the fall of the Assad regime, contributing to the defeat of the Islamic State group (IS), and significantly increasing both countries' geopolitical, diplomatic, and military footprint and influence in the region. Yet Syria remains a dysfunctional state with multiple challenges to its sovereignty, security, and economy, in addition to human right violations against its population resulting in a continuing refugee crisis and a smoldering insurgency.

The path forward for reconciliation and reconstruction will be determined by great power competition and cooperation. Syria is facing colossal reconstruction costs in addition to ongoing humanitarian difficulties that are unlikely to abate any time soon. The United States has lost significant leverage as a result of inaction when self-imposed red lines were crossed and an incoherent foreign policy in recent years, which opened the door for increased Iranian and Russian influence. The small remaining U.S. military presence in Syria has become more of a burden than an advantage, since it gives Washington little diplomatic leverage while tying up considerable military support assets and corresponding legal liabilities. Nevertheless, the U.S. has strong motives to stabilize the country in order to prevent the resurgence of IS, reduce the Iranian proxy threat against Israel, and avert the reoccurrence of another refugee migration crisis.

U.S. policy towards Syria should recognize the primacy of great power competition and necessity of pragmatic engagement with Russia. The decisive Russian intervention in Syria provides Moscow opportunities for engagement with the West. In the long term, Russia knows that the West seeks a political transition from the Assad regime. However, in the short term, the U.S. should incentivize Russia through diplomatic and economic engagement and pressure to stabilize areas it controls, reduce Iranian proxy militia presence and weapon build-ups near Israel's borders, and continue cooperation with counterterrorism and deconfliction operations. When the time is right, Washington should reengage in the political reconciliation process and reconstruction. Taking action on restrained, short-term goals with higher probability of success is preferable to maintaining the status quo.

INTRODUCTION

The United States' approach to the Syrian conflict during the past few years has been purposely focused on counterterrorism. All the while, Russia and Iran have resuscitated the brutal regime of Bashar Assad while significantly increasing their overall geopolitical influence. The resulting loss of American influence and recent defeat of the Islamic State group necessitate a reassessment of U.S. foreign policy goals to focus on great power competition and mitigation of the Iranian proxy militia presence in Syria.

Russia and Iran have achieved significant successes in the Syrian civil war during the past few years. From preventing the fall of the Assad regime to diminishing the influence of the United States, the alliance of convenience between these two nations in Syria has proved to be enduring because of converging geopolitical interests. But how has this relationship developed and how do they cooperate in Syria? What are the friction points? And more importantly, what is the way forward for U.S. policy in Syria as great power competition eclipses countering violent extremists as a framework for U.S. strategy?

America's foreign policy goals in the Middle East have been traditionally focused along great power goals. Ensuring the stability of regional partners, especially Israel, thwarting the establishment of terrorist safe havens, and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction are the hallmarks of the U.S. security strategy in the region. This security focus undergirds the stable access to and free flow of oil and gas from the region. In Syria, former President Barack Obama initially balked at getting involved in the developing humanitarian crisis fearing an expansion of U.S. military commitment in the region. Accepting that Assad was likely to remain in power due to Russian and Iranian support, the U.S. intervened more forcefully in March 2017 out of a concern for a rising IS. However, by then, the die had been cast for those with leading roles in shaping events on the ground in Syria, and America was playing catch up.

Syria is a good case for observing regional power competition between Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Sunni Arab Gulf countries, Israel, and the United States. Russia and Iran, two of the main power brokers in Syria, broadly support the Syrian regime for a range of geopolitical objectives that will be outlined below. On the other hand, Turkey, the other regional power broker in Syria, has been slowly but steadily drifting away from the West, in part because of its desire to rekindle its historic influence in the region in addition to its paranoia toward the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) fighters supported by the United States. As for the Sunni Arab states and Israel, they either support regime opposition or actively confront those that threaten their interests. Overlaid on the traditional state alignments are deep sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia Arabs, to include states walking the tightrope somewhere in between, like Iraq and Lebanon.

The successful Russian intervention in Syria has solidified the Assad regime's grip on power and greatly limited U.S. options. On one hand, the U.S. wants to hold the Assad regime accountable for its vicious butchery of the Syrian people. On the other hand, the U.S. needs to engage Russia in regard to shared activities such as maintaining pressure on IS or deconfliction of military actions. Additionally, Syria has become a proxy battlefield between Israel and Iran. For its part, Israel will not tolerate the buildup of missiles on its borders.¹ However, Iran has continued to amass weapons and fund, train, and equip proxy forces which undermine stability in the region. From the U.S. perspective, managing policy priorities between state competition and other interests is key. The region needs internal stability of its regimes to prevent further refugee migration crises and to stabilize the export of oil to the world market.

THE RETURN OF RUSSIA

To understand Russian calculus for intervention in Syria in 2015, it is helpful to view global competition from Moscow's perspective. Russia clearly saw NATO expansion in the aftermath of the

Cold War as a threat and the 2014 Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine proved to be the last straw. Russians feared the United States would attempt regime change in Syria as it had in Iraq and Libya. Furthermore, Moscow was keenly aware of the domestic terrorism threat from fighters who were attracted to join and fight with IS in Syria and might return battle-hardened to conduct attacks on Russian soil. Therefore, they effectively intervened before the regime collapsed, enabling Russia to protect its traditional interests in the country and position itself as a leader in the region.

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In essence, Russia's intervention in Syria effectively prevented the collapse of the Assad regime and was meant to ensure a permanent geopolitical foothold in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean that will benefit it diplomatically, economically, and militarily. Russian President Vladimir Putin desires to be seen as the indispensable leader in the region by drawing contrasts to the failings of Western leadership and regime change operations that have left instability in their wake. But like the West, Russia is equally threatened by IS and perhaps more so because of nearly 10,000 Russian-speaking foreign fighters from the North Caucasus and other areas of Russia and the former Soviet Union.² The intervention also served to bolster Putin's image at home and galvanize nationalist sentiment. By carefully managing its relationship with Turkey, Russia is also driving a wedge between NATO allies. Economically, protecting the Assad regime benefits Russia with access to local ports and markets. Additionally, Russian military involvement in the Syrian war enables it to promote the sale of its weapon systems worldwide. It has used nearly 200 new weapon systems and even made infomercials

to successfully peddle its military hardware to partners and allies.³ Militarily, Russian naval and air bases in Syria enable Russia to flank NATO's southern borders and project power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ultimately, Russia positioned itself as a key power broker in the Middle East.

THE IRANIAN FACTOR

To achieve its geopolitical goals, Russia had to work closely with another major player in the Syrian conflict: Iran. Coincidentally, both nations have revisionist agendas that vehemently oppose U.S. power in the Middle East while seeking to expand their own influence. Unlike Russia, Iran considers Israel and the Sunni Arab Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, as major threats to its ambitions. Tehran perceives itself as the victim of historical American aggression and interference in its internal affairs, dating back from the CIA-sponsored coup in 1953 that toppled democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, to the Trump administration's debilitating sanctions and aggressive policies that perceivably seek to encircle and isolate it in the world.⁴ Iran may justify its goals as defensive in nature, but in reality, it seeks to establish itself as the dominant regional power in the Middle East. Consequently, Iran's strategic goals are to undermine and weaken the State of Israel and the U.S.-friendly Sunni Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf. To do so, Iran seeks to upend the American diplomatic, economic, and military presence in the region and threaten Israel and the Arab Gulf countries through asymmetric tactics by propping up powerful proxy militias and employing pervasive information and disinformation operations.

Unfortunately for Iran, U.S. sanctions have severely crippled its economy and greatly limited its diplomatic influence and conventional military capabilities.⁵ Hence, Tehran's military weakness has led it to employ a paramilitary hybrid warfare strategy that exports its revolutionary ideas via Shia proxy militias in the region, from Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force (which translates to "Jerusalem Force") has been Iran's main military extraterritorial lever for conducting low-intensity warfare in the region, working closely with Iranian-backed proxy militias such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq, among others. To support these groups, Tehran has built an extensive logistical architecture across these countries that leverages traditional smuggling routes and predatory activities to maintain the flow of arms and ammunition to its proxies.

The onset of the civil war in Syria in 2011 threatened to deprive Iran of its main ally and its ability to project regional influence against its adversaries. Thus, Iran had to intervene to rescue its Syrian ally and maintain its overland connection to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Interestingly enough, Hezbollah became one of Iran's main military tools to combat and defeat both the Syrian insurgency and IS.

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Iran justifies its intervention in the region by portraying itself as the voice and defender of the oppressed Shia communities in Sunni-majority Arab countries and the guardian of sacred Shia shrines from Sunni Salafi extremist groups such as IS. Additionally, the Syrian conflict gives Iran a path to reduce its political and economic isolation resulting from the crippling U.S. sanctions, while indirectly sustaining a constant military threat bordering the State of Israel. Iran's successful defense of its Syrian ally has considerably strengthened its leverage on Damascus and emboldened its proxies, especially Hezbollah, to maintain a hardline approach toward Israel and the West.

CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

While not the primary reason Russia intervened, the one factor uniting most of the actors in Syria was the defeat of IS. This posed a unique problem for the Syrian regime, which needed to suppress both the anti-regime forces and IS. When the prognosis for the regime looked bleak in the summer of 2015, the former leader of the Iranian Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, began a series of high-level engagements between the Syrians and Russian.⁶

What developed over time was a remarkable combination of regime forces that did heavy clearing operations focused against anti-regime insurgents of the Syrian opposition backed up with Russian advice, enabling capabilities, and firepower, while the U.S.-led global coalition conducted successful operations against IS in coordination with local SDF fighters. Syrian regime forces were supported by irregulars like Hezbollah and Russian special operations forces and private military corporations on the ground, which held territory once it was cleared.⁷ In essence, Iran generated a mix of over 110,000 men composed of Shia militia groups, Quds Force advisors, and Hezbollah fighters.⁸

Russia's military involvement in Syria, like that of the United States, remains limited. The U.S. has an interest in counterterrorism and preventing escalation, while Russia wants to maintain influence vis-à-vis the current regime. Both countries are attempting to achieve their policy aims with minimal investments. Most of Moscow's participation has been to provide command and control expertise, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and air support to their disparate partner forces on the ground. Besides using the Tiger Forces, a Syrian government-affiliated militia,⁹ for the most difficult clearing missions in largely urban areas, Moscow has relied on Iranian-supported proxies like Hezbollah to maintain presence across the country.

Interestingly enough, Russia has been remarkably restrained by not escalating its involvement further to avoid widening the conflict. For example, Russia did little in response to the U.S. airstrikes which killed 200 Wagner Group mercenaries and pro-Assad forces in Deir el-Zour. Additionally, Israel continues to bomb Iranian targets in Syria and significant divisions exist between Russia and Turkey concerning Idlib province.¹⁰ However, this restraint is more strategic than tactical, enabling it to slowly chip away at U.S. resolve in the long run, while recognizing that escalating its response would mainly draw a sharp reaction from the U.S. in the short term. In fact, when sticky situations arose — for example, Israel’s ongoing campaign against Iranian military targets and infrastructure inside Syria or the standoff with Turkey over Idlib province and the northern city of Manbij — the Russians have been reluctant to go to the mat.

CHALLENGES AND FRICTIONS

An end state and acceptable level of influence looks different for each actor. Syria is a fractured country with large-scale infrastructure destruction and little or no control of territory in parts of the north, east, and south. The Syrian regime’s best hope is to be propped up through the support of Russia and Iran. For Russia, this level of stability may be just enough. Independent analyst Anton Lavrov argued that Russia’s goal is to create a Syrian security force that can maintain internal stability without outside help.¹¹ Even this will be difficult because Syrian command and control will be weakened once Russian forces depart.¹² On the other hand, Iran would be happy to maintain levels of instability at a level to require its support — and continued access to build weapons stockpiles on Israel’s borders via a land bridge.

Because there is meddling from outside powers from every direction on Syria’s borders, there is no hope to return to the status quo. The country’s sovereignty is diminished, and the size of territory governed from Damascus may never be the same. Whether one looks at the insurgent enclave in

Idlib, the Turkish incursion in the north, the SDF’s controlling stake in northeast Syria, or the U.S.-controlled piece of real estate around the Al Tanf garrison in southern Syria,¹³ one conclusion is clear: Syria is a long way away from its former self.

A path forward is beset on all sides with challenges. Russian diplomats are leading de-confliction negotiations through the Astana process with the hope that results would feed an eventual peace deal. Every major player in the region — including U.S. allies and partners Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the SDF — are working with Russia in order to secure their own interests. For the United States, the Syrian problem cannot be solved without clear policy choices in terms of an acceptable end-state that accounts for Israel’s security, the containment of Iran, and stability of the region. The U.S. must also address the disposition of Al Tanf garrison and its associated forces. Furthermore, who will lead and fund an international coalition willing to take on the remaining challenges such as the humanitarian catastrophe and tens of thousands of suspected IS detainees? Currently, there is no one fully committed to addressing the tragedy in Syria.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INCOMING ADMINISTRATION

Reassess U.S. military commitments in Syria.

There is growing consensus¹⁴ that America should scale back its ambitions, reduce military commitments, and de-prioritize the Middle East. After all, the threat from terrorism has been greatly reduced. Christopher Miller, then the director of the National Counterterrorism Center (and now acting secretary of defense), told Congress in September, “We’ve significantly degraded our terrorist adversaries and made the United States a considerably harder target for them to reach...”¹⁵ A reassessment of the terrorist threat is long overdue given the rise of China and internal social, economic, and political discord that currently plagues the United States. According to recent polling, only 27% of Americans believe “military

interventions in other countries [to solve conflicts] make the United States safer.”¹⁶ While the threat of terrorism and resurgence of IS are real, these have been considerably mitigated recently. Furthermore, given the decreasing importance of oil,¹⁷ the U.S. would be well served over the long term to bring its commitments into balance in the region.

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Work with Russia to stabilize areas it controls and reduce Iranian proxy threat in Syria. Great powers cooperate where they can and compete when they must. As such, U.S. interests in Syria come into sharper focus through a great power competition lens. Although Russia continues to frustrate U.S. policy in the region, it does not represent the main threat to U.S. interests in Syria at this time, and neither does a vastly diminished IS. The main threat is the continued Iranian effort to threaten the security of Israel and undermine stability in the region. One example of undermining stability is Iran’s continued efforts to supply arms, specifically rockets, to Hezbollah. There is an increased risk for the U.S. to get dragged into an escalatory spiral between Israel and Iranian-backed forces such as Hezbollah. As such, the U.S. should consider whether it is better to work with Russia than an unknown alternative in order to eliminate or reduce the Iranian proxy threat in Syria. U.S. policy in Syria should focus on containing threats and instability to Syria itself in order to reduce Iranian proxy militia presence and weapon build-ups near Israel’s borders, prevent the resurgence of IS, and avert the reoccurrence of another refugee migration crisis. Doing so will require diplomacy and deliberate engagement with those who share common interests, including Russia.

CONCLUSION

With regard to Syria, the sad truth is that U.S. leverage in that country has diminished considerably in the past few years. The Obama administration’s initial impulse was to respond to the use of chemical weapons against civilians, but inaction to self-imposed red lines resulted in diminished U.S. credibility and deterrence. This presaged a muddled foreign policy with the follow-on Trump administration that further accelerated the decline of American influence. The United States is at risk of overcommitting resources at the expense of other priorities around the world.

U.S. policy choices for Syria are bleak because the U.S. has little diplomatic leverage. This is why the Syrian Study Group, which was established by the U.S. Congress to examine and make recommendations on the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria, recommends we do not withdraw forces from Syria so that Washington has a card to play during an unknown time in the future.¹⁸ The global community has an interest in dealing with detained suspected militants and displaced Syrians, but unfortunately there has been little appetite for implementing meaningful solutions to either problem. Another important issue is ensuring viable protection for the Kurds in a future solution. But as bad as the situation is in Syria, the United States and the West cannot impose a lasting solution there. The path to a potential compromise to the Syrian dilemma runs through Moscow rather than Damascus. Taking a fresh approach at the time of a presidential transition may create an opening for a constructive relationship with Russia. Given where we are after a decade of civil war in Syria, why not try?

It is time the U.S. takes action to prioritize global competition over narrow counterterrorism interests. Even though Russia is an adversary and competitor, the cornerstone of a Syrian policy should be to recognize the necessity of a pragmatic relationship. Whether it wants it or not, Russia intervened on behalf of the Syrian government and

now has ownership of the problem. The U.S. should encourage the Russians to take responsibility for solving the Syrian quagmire and incentivize a compromise that secures core U.S. interests. Recognizing and accepting Russian influence and dominance in Syria will be anathema to many. But Russia should and must play a constructive role in the following areas: stabilizing the areas it controls; constraining Iranian aggression by pressuring proxies and limiting weapons build-ups; cooperating on certain counterterrorism and

deconfliction operations; and re-engaging in the political reconciliation process.¹⁹ For its part, the U.S. and its allies should keep pressure on IS in northeast Syria and Iraq, contain harmful Iranian actions, continue to fund limited humanitarian relief, and bring Arab states along to negotiate a lasting political settlement.²⁰ Taking these actions are better than maintaining the status quo and expecting a new result. The irony of the Syrian civil war is that mitigating bad outcomes from becoming worse is the best we can do.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lieutenant Colonel Daniel L. Magruder Jr. is a federal executive fellow at the Brookings Institution. Lieutenant Colonel Magruder received his commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 2003. As a special tactics officer, he has led special operations forces during Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, Willing Spirit, Freedom's Sentinel, and Inherent Resolve. During his most recent deployment, he served as commander of Special Operations Command and Control Element – Northwest and Southern Syria. Prior to assuming his current assignment, Lieutenant Colonel Magruder was the lead speechwriter for the chief of staff of the Air Force.

Colonel Rodrick H. McHaty is the Marine Corps federal executive fellow at the Brookings Institution. His operational assignments include deployments to the Western Pacific region and four tours in Iraq from 2003 to 2007 as a foreign area officer, military transition training team advisor, and infantry battalion intelligence officer. He commanded the Marine Corps Detachment at the Presidio of Monterey. Prior to assuming his current assignment, Colonel McHaty was the current operations director at the Marine Corps Capabilities Development Directorate.

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