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Enclave Governance: How to Circumvent the Assad Regime and Safeguard Syria's Future

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HOW TO CIRCUMVENT THE ASSAD REGIME
AND SAFEGUARD SYRIA'S FUTURE**

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Ranj Alaaldin
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amid the devastation of the past nine years, Syria faces a plethora of challenges that make it difficult to establish peace and security at this time. The country is not only grappling with ongoing conflict, but also with the brutality of Bashar Assad’s regime, extremist groups, and warlords. At best, Syria could experience intermittent periods of stability and lulls in violence due to local and international pressures. However, the country will, in all likelihood, continue to be engulfed in violent instability, its population mired in misery and destitution, while the conflict enables local and international terrorism and aggrandizes American rivals like Russia and Iran.

This analysis paper argues for the embrace of enclave governance in non-regime-held areas in the Northeastern and, eventually, Northwestern parts of the country in order to limit further humanitarian crises, protect civilians, and address threats to the United States and its allies. The United States and its allies should embrace Syria’s non-regime-held areas and prevent the Assad regime from regaining control of these areas by keeping their troops in place and supporting local governance structures as part of a long-term strategy focused on circumventing the Assad regime and turning these areas into bastions of peace and stability. This course of action, which will henceforth be referred to as “enclave governance,” is the best way to prevent further regime atrocities, secure a durable peace, and provide reprieve from conflict. Drawing on the example of northern Iraq in the 1990s, this paper shows how harnessing enclave governance can secure a durable peace in non-regime-held areas and protect at least some segments of the Syrian population, while ensuring that any post-conflict settlement does not provide legal or political cover for further regime abuses.

Instead of calling for the restoration of regime rule over rebel-held areas, international actors should take measures to make existing self-governance arrangements more effective and more conducive to achieving peace and sustainable governance. This should also involve relying on the use of force in self-defense to deter regime atrocities and encroachment in non-regime-held areas. Fundamentally, U.S. policies in Syria will be far more sustainable and credible to friend and foe if they are underpinned by an enclave strategy that provides a set of guiding

principles for U.S. involvement. Such principles will bring much needed political stability to a volatile environment that is plagued by uncertainty surrounding the future of U.S. forces in the country.

This paper outlines the shape and parameters of these guiding principles. It addresses the possibility that certain groups may exploit such enclaves with detrimental implications for local stability and accepts that non-regime-held areas have their own challenges, including inter-rebel and intra-community conflict. Moreover, local and international humanitarian organizations in non-regime-held areas have their own shortcomings, as do local governance structures dominated or controlled by Kurdish authorities, Arab tribes, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition.

That said, it is vital to engage Syria in a way that reflects the country's realities after nine years of war, rather than impose alternative designs. Syria's rebel-held enclaves are already self-governing, with decentralized and localized administrative structures having emerged from and crystalized during the conflict. Enshrining enclave governance into a long-term strategy will strengthen the resiliency of these structures, mitigate the challenges posed by the conflict, and re-establish peace and security by promoting closer cooperation with local actors, injecting political certainty into the enclaves in the process, and establishing the stepping stones for long-term political and economic order. This will help constrain the second- and third-order effects of conflict, while better preparing non-regime-held areas for unforeseen crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and improving their capacity to detain foreign jihadi fighters captured in the anti-Islamic State (IS) campaign. This analysis paper dismisses the post-conflict transitional proposals put forward by both the United Nations-led and Russian-led peace talks as being unlikely to provide inclusive post-conflict outcomes. It also challenges power-sharing and decentralized governance as part of a post-conflict settlement since these require a level of coordination with the regime (or submission to it) yet to be achieved. These alternatives will either hasten regime consolidation, provide a smokescreen for continued regime atrocities, or fail to accommodate the intricacies of Syria's political and security landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Syria's nine-year conflict started as a civic uprising but transitioned into a full-blown civil war that has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, the displacement of millions, and the widespread destruction of towns and cities.¹ The conflict has produced an array of jihadi terrorist groups, like the Islamic State (IS); a plethora of sectarian, local, and transnational armed non-state actors; a landscape for proxy conflict and regional competition; and a brutal, resilient regime in Damascus.

The international community, including the United States and the European Union (EU), has conceded that a political solution is the only viable end to the conflict.² The regime of President Bashar Assad, meanwhile, believes it is winning the war and refuses political compromise. Assad's regime has retaken all areas aside from Idlib and northern Aleppo, which are controlled by rebel groups operating under a Turkish sphere of influence, and northeastern Syria, which is controlled by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by U.S. troops.³

Northern Syria has undergone a significant transformation over the past twelve months. Previously, territories east of the Euphrates like Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain were dominated by approximately 2,000 U.S. troops and the SDF, which administered these areas under the auspices of the U.S.-led campaign to defeat IS.⁴ But this changed when, in October 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that he would withdraw U.S. troops in their entirety, after which a dramatic Turkish intervention followed, which was tacitly green-lighted by the United States. Turkey initiated Operation Peace Spring and took control of Kurdish-controlled territory between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, building on its 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield, which pushed IS out of the area between Jarablus and al-Bab and prevented the SDF from advancing, as well as its 2018 Operation Olive Branch, which captured SDF-controlled Afrin.⁵ Operation Peace Spring set out to clear the People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters from a strip 30 to 32 kilometers wide and 440 kilometers long in northeastern Syria. However, it was followed by a U.S.-brokered ceasefire between Turkey and the SDF, which was then followed by, and superseded by, a Russian-Turkish ceasefire

that the YPG and Damascus accepted.⁶ The terms of this ceasefire stipulate that Russian military police and Syrian regime border guards are entrusted with monitoring a zone extending 30 kilometers south from the Turkish-Syrian border. The ceasefire authorized joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the entire border, to a depth of 10 kilometers inside Syria, with the exception of the border city and de facto Syrian Kurdish capital Qamishli. However, Turkey can only patrol the border area when accompanied by Russian personnel.⁷

Beyond the 30-kilometer border strip, the United States has left a residual force, including in the oil-rich governorates of Al-Hasakah and Deir el-Zour, to protect the oil fields seized by the SDF and provide security to the SDF and local populations in return for these areas' support of the anti-IS, U.S.-SDF partnership.⁸ At the time of writing, there were still at least 500 U.S. troops left in the country.⁹ The SDF continues to retain a significant security role in the Northeast away from the Tal Abyad/Ras al-Ain border zone. Together with the SDF, the United States controls a stretch of territory from the oil fields in Deir al-Zour to those in Al-Hasakah up to the Semalka border crossing with Iraq. This is particularly critical since it establishes a strategic land supply route through the Semalka/Faysh Khabur border crossing with northern Iraq.

In February 2020, Turkey launched a military campaign in Idlib to dispel a joint Syrian-Russian attempt to take control of the province and to protect Turkish observation posts from a Syrian military offensive (as well as to create a safe zone for displaced persons in Idlib). Turkey additionally wanted to stop a new wave of refugees from Syria crossing into its borders.

The remaining non-regime-held areas are not without their problems but do have functioning governance structures and areas like the Northeast remain the most stable part of the country—areas where local communities have enjoyed some reprieve from conflict during the course of the nine-year war. Ceding them to the regime and restoring its sovereignty over these areas will bring more problems than solutions. To build on this and to avert further humanitarian crises, protect civilians, and address an array of threats, the United States and its allies should embrace Syria's non-regime-held areas and prevent the Assad regime from regaining control of these areas by keeping their troops in place and supporting local governance structures. This course of action, which will henceforth be referred to as “enclave governance,” is the best way to prevent further regime atrocities, secure a durable peace, and provide reprieve from conflict, at least for some segments of the Syrian population.

Re-establishing peace and security in Syria and rebuilding the country will be challenging. Politically, American and European strategies toward Syria are gen-

erally based on a constitutional settlement and free and fair elections.¹⁰ The EU has also demanded accountability for war crimes with a view to facilitating a national reconciliation process and transitional justice.¹¹ While the regime did hold parliamentary elections in July 2020, these were plagued by corruption, fraud, and the ascendancy of regime allies, including powerful warlords and militia heads. Unsurprisingly, both the winners and losers were staunch supporters of President Assad. Under Syria's electoral rules, candidates must be vetted by the security agencies, guaranteeing a loyal and compliant legislature.¹² Thus, it is inconceivable that free and fair elections could be held in the near future.

Moreover, the West lacks sufficient inducement and enforcement mechanisms to foster an environment that is conducive to peacebuilding in Syria. The prospect of securing billions of dollars in reconstruction funds might seem like it could tempt the regime into making substantial concessions; however, it will not do so at the expense of its own survival or power. The sanctions that were imposed against Syria on June 17, 2020, through the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, have heightened the regime's economic vulnerability and curtailed local and cross-border economic activity. That said, such sanctions can be circumvented and do not constitute a sufficient existential threat to make the regime change its behavior.

It is highly likely, for instance, that the Syrian regime already has access to undeclared and illicit financial resources that will allow it to cushion the impact of such sanctions on its supporters. Indeed, history has proven that the resilience of autocratic regimes in this respect should not be underestimated, as markedly portrayed by Iraq's Baath regime in the 1990s, the ongoing maximum pressure campaign against Iran, and the decades-long sanctions on Cuba. Sanctions on their own will also fail to yield a desirable outcome if Iran and Russia either do not see the need to force a transition of power or do not appreciate the urgency of securing genuine power-sharing arrangements and inclusive governance. Russia has condemned the sanctions and, on September 7, 2020, sent its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, to Damascus to strengthen trade and economic ties with Syria.¹³ Russia is determined to help the Assad regime circumvent the sanctions and mitigate their fallout. Iran, for its part, considers Syria to be a critical sphere of influence that is central to its deterrence capabilities in the region and therefore cannot be yielded to its rivals.

Ultimately, ceding rebel-held enclaves to the regime and restoring its sovereignty over these areas will bring more problems than solutions. Indeed, this has been the case in other previously rebel-held areas of the country that have reverted back to regime control. Those organizations that previously supported the restoration of regime authority in the territories it had lost later came to

regret this support. Leading conflict resolution organization the International Crisis Group (ICG), for example, initially called for the Assad regime to reassert its control in the Southwest; however, six months after the regime took control, the ICG acknowledged the fact that Damascus had re-established authoritarian rule and allowed Iran-aligned militias to establish a presence near the armistice line with Israel.¹⁴

Instead of calling for the restoration of regime rule over rebel-held areas, international actors should engage with the conflict as it is and take measures to make existing self-governance arrangements more effective and more conducive to achieving peace and security. Consequently, this analysis paper proposes a framework that embraces enclave governance and seeks to engage existing governance structures as they stand, effectively circumventing the Assad regime. It argues for a continued reliance on the use of force to ensure a degree of leverage that safeguards local communities but is harnessed to exercise the right to self-defense and maintain the Northeast as the non-encroachment zone it currently is. The United States and its allies do not necessarily have to make a choice between an expansive military campaign or a severely reduced military deployment. There is a sensible and moderate middle ground that can be highly effective and actually mitigate the fallout from ongoing conflict.

Drawing on the example of northern Iraq in the 1990s, this analysis paper shows how harnessing enclave governance can secure a durable peace in non-regime-held areas. It remains the case that U.S.-influenced areas are the most stable parts of Syria and have provided local populations with some reprieve from conflict; it is also logical that policy proposals for the United States and its allies should naturally focus on the areas where they have substantial influence and leverage. Although the focus of this paper is on the areas administered by the United States and the SDF, rather than on those areas, like Idlib, where the United States and its allies have nominal influence, it does maintain that enclave governance in the Northeast can be harnessed to engage, influence, and guide other non-regime-held areas, like Idlib, toward outcomes that bring stability and prevent the regime from gaining further footholds.

Enclave governance is fraught with challenges. Local and international humanitarian organizations in non-regime-held areas have their own shortcomings, as do local governance structures dominated or controlled by Kurdish authorities, Arab tribes, and the SDF coalition. However, alternative proposals either hasten regime consolidation or fail to accommodate the intricacies of Syria's political and security landscape. It is vital to engage Syria in a way that reflects the country's realities after nine years of war. Syria's rebel-held enclaves are already self-governing, with decentralized and localized administrative structures having

emerged from and crystalized during the conflict. Enshrining enclave governance into a long-term strategy will mitigate the challenges posed by the conflict and re-establish peace and security in those regions by promoting closer cooperation with local actors, injecting political certainty into the enclaves, strengthening the resiliency of governing structures, and establishing the stepping stones for long-term political and economic order. Indeed, from the perspective of both American and European officials, sustainability is a key issue that underscores the provisioning of resources intended to alleviate suffering: in regime-held areas, resources will empower the regime and become expropriated; in non-regime-held areas, the West at least has the influence and discretion to shape the contours of governance and peacebuilding by directing the aid and resources it provides to these areas, ensuring that these resources are expended on houses, schools, or hospitals that would benefit local populations.¹⁵

CURRENT CHALLENGES TO STABILITY AND PEACEBUILDING

There are two overarching challenges facing the international community as it attempts to devise a framework for long-term peace, stability, and reconstruction efforts in Syria: 1) the potential for conflict relapse; and 2) the regime's misuse of reconstruction resources to consolidate its power. There is little to suggest opposition groups will not attempt to revitalize their efforts to topple the regime in the coming years. This could, in the future, create the conditions for another round of fully-fledged civil war. Indeed, studies show that more than half of the countries affected by civil war since 1945 experienced a relapse into violent conflict—in some cases more than once—after peace had been established.¹⁶ More recent conflicts in the region, like the ongoing tumult and violent instability in Iraq, show how the second order effects of conflict, together with continued socio-economic degradation, social unrest, and ethnic or religious tensions, as well as external meddling and humanitarian atrocities, will most likely continue to linger for the foreseeable future and provide the conditions for ongoing armed confrontations.

THE MYTH OF 'POST-CONFLICT': EXISTING POST-CONFLICT PROPOSALS EMPOWER THE ASSAD REGIME

While reconciliation is generally considered to be one of the key pillars of post-conflict transition, in Syria, it would either mean regime subjugation of opposition groups or, for those who dared to fight back, repression and systematic human rights abuses.¹⁷ The regime has already used conflict management, reconstruction, and peacebuilding initiatives as coercive tools to reassert its dominance and retake control of the country, working with its partners to initiate a formal process of predation, extortion, punishment, and co-option. The Syrian regime has made a mockery of international assistance, diverting funds to projects that reinforce its standing, rather than to communities in need of humanitarian aid.¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, for example, has documented how the regime co-opts humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance in order to entrench its repressive policies.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Syria's Law 10, introduced in April 2017, provides the legal framework for massive regime-led development projects that involve the demolition of neighborhoods. Law 10 stipulates that Syrians have 30 days to register their properties with the government before facing confiscation. The law was officially designed to encourage registration of previously unregistered property, but the majority of the country's 13 million internally and externally displaced people are unable to access regime-held areas.²⁰ The law has been criticized by human rights groups for its potential to dispossess millions of Syrians.²¹ Additionally, the regime is intensifying the displacement of the population by naturalizing foreign Shiite militia fighters who have fought alongside it.²² The permanent dispossession of millions of Syrians and their forced displacement has resulted in demographic changes, which allow the regime to replace and restore neighborhoods and communities with its own supporters, particularly through its control and influence over the large scale development projects that are underway. European officials have referred to this as an "exclusivist" reconstruction policy.²³

WESTERN ENGAGEMENT LACKS POLITICAL VISION

Major Western capitals have declared that they will not aid Syria's reconstruction with hundreds of billions of dollars worth of resources until the regime accepts a transitional process that sees Assad relinquish power through free and fair elections.²⁴ The West's current engagement with Syria, however, is still devoid of a coherent strategy that can remedy its limited leverage over the Assad regime and mitigate the conflict landscape more broadly. The lack of strategy also makes it highly likely that the regime will exploit the reconstruction process. Reconstruction, if it were to take place, could reinforce conflict dynamics, perpetuate the violence that has plagued the country, entrench local divisions, and reinforce the regime's consolidation efforts.²⁵ The United States and its European allies would have limited capabilities to actually influence this process if it were to take place with international support.²⁶

Throughout the conflict, the West has often engaged in indecisive policymaking, with the exception of its policy not to engage the regime until a credible transition process was under way. After 2014, engagement with Syria became increasingly focused on defeating IS and, as Frances Brown argues, stabilization programs foundered. This occurred because of confusion over whether local council initiatives were advancing a policy that prioritized the defeat of Assad or "a regime restructuring outcome, in which the Assad regime would devolve power to local councils."²⁷

The challenges facing the West have become all the more important in light of the fact that the balance of power in Syria is overwhelmingly in favor of the Assad regime and its backers, Russia and Iran. Furthermore, the task of reconstruction is not helped by Syria's endemic "warlordism" and the entrenchment of a war economy, in which powerful local actors profit from a continued state of lawlessness and risk losing lucrative business were the country to be stabilized. The conflict also includes a multitude of local and transnational armed groups that consist of tens of thousands of disparate actors who yield substantial influence and command sizeable forces.

THE PROBLEM WITH EXISTING PROPOSALS

This paper dismisses the post-conflict transitional proposals put forward by both the United Nations-led and Russian-led peace talks—including the drafting of a constitution, power-sharing, and elections—as being unlikely to provide inclusive post-conflict outcomes, at least until there is certainty that these will not reinforce the Assad regime. The notion of power-sharing and inclusive governance is anathema to Assad and Syria’s security agencies, for whom the short- and medium-term objective is to consolidate power. It is inconceivable that the regime would allow non-regime-aligned groups to shape the contours of the state and the governing structures that will decide the fate of the country. Power-sharing and inclusive governance would also require opposition groups and large swathes of the population to coordinate with or submit to the regime, for which there is no appetite.

Some have suggested decentralization as a means of enabling a viable post-conflict transition. This proposal envisions Syria’s local councils moving forward within the confines of the Syrian state (which will effectively be defined, shaped, and imposed by the regime) with a degree of autonomy that enables a transition toward stability.²⁸ The problem with this plan is that there is no sufficient level of consensus between regime and non-regime actors that could enable a viable, peaceful transition to a decentralized framework. Whether it is political decentralization (which would give Syrians or their elected representatives more power in public decisionmaking, including over policies and legislation), fiscal decentralization (which gives substantial revenue and expenditure autonomy to local governments), administrative decentralization (which would place planning and implementation responsibilities in the hands of local civil servants and these local civil servants under the jurisdiction of elected local governments), or federalism (which would institutionalize and constitutionalize the autonomy of regional units), the mode of governance proposed is multi-tiered—it requires co-operation on different levels of governance and at its essence is premised on a co-existence that is underscored by shared values and common goals. This means that there must be genuine, credible, and legitimate elements of shared-rule and regional self-rule that would have to be legally or constitutionally mandated for

it to ever genuinely come to fruition. As things currently stand, there is limited prospect of a constitutional settlement to which all conflict parties will agree and adhere, not least since neither the U.N.-led or Russian-led peace talks have yielded encouraging results. Most importantly, analysts are unable to plausibly argue why the Assad regime would suddenly emerge as an honest negotiator of peace and abide by the terms of a post-conflict political and constitutional settlement in the absence of enforcement mechanisms that are imposed by either domestic or external actors.

Similarly, a transition agreement, brokered with the full participation and consent of the Assad regime, could see the regime devolve some authority to the local level, but that authority would likely be devolved to regime loyalists. In any case, this would not be (and should not be) interpreted as reflecting the regime's willingness to commit to decentralization, but rather as a strategic measure reflecting its limited capacity and resources to rule the country wholly at the central level. While the devolution of authority could see pre-existing, non-regime-aligned local council members and other authorities maintain their roles in areas recaptured by the regime, meaningful authority will not pass on to actors other than the regime's loyalists or the warlords and militias who have fought alongside it.

It has also been suggested that the search for a resolution to the conflict and the establishment of a meaningful peace should focus on the power dynamics between Damascus and the various localities, "as manifested in local networks of respected family members, wealthy businessmen, prominent religious figures, and other influential people."²⁹ However, such proposals do not envisage how such a process could unfold, where it could begin, how it could accommodate the plethora of local networks and related non-state actors, or how these localities could be incentivized into abiding by the terms of a resolution. They also disregard and underestimate the Assad regime's capacity to totalize power.

ENCLAVE GOVERNANCE: LESSONS FROM IRAQ IN THE 1990S

The Assad regime should be prevented from fulfilling its June 2016 pledge to reconquer “every inch” of Syria.³⁰ Syria’s remaining enclaves are the best hope for ensuring the regime does not have carte blanche over the fate of the Syrian people. Enclaves can protect local communities, serve as models for self-governance, and be harnessed as launchpads for humanitarian efforts in other parts of the country.

Far from seeking to impose external self-governance designs, this paper calls for embracing Syria’s current enclave landscape as it is. Syria’s enclaves have naturally emerged from the conflict over the course of the past nine years, as a direct result of the fragmented nature of the uprising. The country’s localities established civic councils to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of their communities, depending on a combination of outside political and stabilization support, often in either direct partnership or coordination with rebel groups. Local actors have been engaged in service and security provision throughout the conflict, in spite of the looming threat of a full-scale conflict with the regime and inter-rebel divisions, and have established autonomous governing structures that provide them with the capacity to self-rule.³¹ In Idlib, welfare services are provided by civilian-run city and town councils, in addition to emergency relief and municipal services, such as waste removal and water supply.³² Similarly, in Kurdish-controlled areas, there are functioning legislative, judicial, and executive councils that govern territories inhabited by at least three million people.³³

Post-1991 Iraq offers some important lessons for Syria. Like the Assad regime, the Baath regime in Iraq was guilty of mass atrocities and war crimes, including genocide, the use of chemical weapons, and the displacement of communities. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein recaptured territories he had previously lost to rebel groups in the Shiite-dominated South, and when this happened, the areas were subjected to violent repression, destitution, and economic dislocation.³⁴ Also, like the Assad regime, Iraq’s Baath regime weaponized humanitarian assistance and the resources of international aid agencies to consolidate its legitimacy and sustain its rule.

As in Syria today, international organizations and governments—like the United States, France and the United Kingdom (U.K.)—found themselves grappling with a situation in Iraq where their efforts to alleviate humanitarian suffering had

to be balanced against the existence of a nefarious regime in Baghdad that retained and enjoyed the benefits conferred by state sovereignty. In response, they launched Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), which established a safe haven in the Northern Kurdish provinces of Iraq through a no-fly zone that protected the local population from Saddam's tanks and gunships.³⁵ In response, Baghdad withdrew its administration and imposed a blockade on Iraqi Kurdistan. The blockade was intended to saddle the Kurdish leadership with the responsibility to conduct the business of governance and administration, which the regime mistakenly believed would lead to Iraqi Kurdistan's implosion. However, the move instead resulted in the Kurds embracing self-governance with encouraging results. Outside actors took pains not to undermine the Iraqi state's sovereignty because of the unintended consequences that might unfold and the implications it could have for regional geopolitics, particularly for Turkey, which was apprehensive about the repercussions that an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq could have for its own restive Kurdish population.

The resulting safe haven in Iraq's North shows how enclaves can result in effective self-governance without undermining the territorial integrity of a state. The success of enclave governance requires more than just ad hoc or reactive measures, or engagements with non-regime-held areas through policies that have an uncertain future and are not rooted in a long-term strategy. In the case of Syria, continuing to engage such areas as the West has done for the better part of the conflict may bring some reprieve and alleviate suffering in the short-term but it does not bode well for long-term stability. A long-term commitment that is underscored with political will and a comprehensive strategy that sets out to engage, embrace, and harness existing self-governing structures to foster stability and humanitarian reprieve is essential. More importantly, in the Syrian context, enclaves can offer safe havens that provide conflict reprieve and breathing space for the United States and its allies to determine and shape their policies in the years ahead. In other words, enclaves can buy time.

This paper is not suggesting an exact replica of the Iraqi Kurdish model, given that northern Iraq received much greater, high-level U.S. strategic commitment, as well as comprehensive support for the no-fly zone from the French and the British. Instead, it calls for a re-fashioned model that is adapted to the complexities and constraints of Syria. Significant components of the Iraqi Kurdish model have already been applied to Syria in recent years and are in motion, including: the use of force to deter regime, Russian, and Iranian encroachments into U.S.-controlled areas; support for self-governing actors; and stabilization and humanitarian assistance. This paper proposes transforming these measures into key pillars of an enclave governance strategy, while fostering an environment that

is not conducive to the ascendancy of terrorist groups like IS or Iranian proxy groups looking to gain influence over Syria's non-regime-held areas as part of their expansionist ambitions in the country and region at large.

CIRCUMVENTING THE REGIME AND WORKING WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Throughout the 1990s, the international community provided humanitarian assistance to Iraq, including support related to housing, water systems, primary schools, healthcare centers, and roads.³⁶ In 1996, the U.N. established the controversial Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq, which compromised the organization's reputation and led to one of the biggest scandals in its history. Established as a means of providing humanitarian aid to Iraqis, the program was subverted and manipulated by the Baath regime to help prop up its repressive rule. As a result, the U.N. was accused of complicity in the regime's embezzlement of billions of dollars.³⁷ But the picture was a different one in the North because of the authority and autonomy granted to local political actors by the United States and its allies. Iraqi Kurdistan lived under the same international sanctions as the rest of the country, as well as a blockade imposed by Baghdad. The key difference was that local Kurdish authorities did not have complete freedom over how to use the funds. Authorities spent funds generated by the sale of oil on U.N.-approved projects, including new schools, medical clinics, and infrastructure, whereas in the rest of Iraq it was exploited and embezzled to prop up the Baath regime.³⁸

The Oil-for-Food Programme allowed Iraqi Kurdistan to thrive. It was not so much the Programme itself that generated pathways for stability and good governance but the overall approach and decision to circumvent Baghdad. A program that failed in the rest of the country enabled an environment that was conducive to sustainable governance and conflict reprieve in the North. The regime was circumvented but international actors were also careful to ensure they did not give local authorities in the North *carte blanche*. Aid was provided directly to the donor community and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as opposed to the Kurdish authorities, a move that was in large part driven by concerns centered on whether circumventing the regime could lead to Iraq's territorial disintegration.³⁹ Providing direct support to local communities alleviated such concerns and removed the constraints that development support and humanitarian aid would have otherwise faced. While the rest of Iraq suffered under sanctions, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), operating under a double blockade (imposed on Iraq by the U.N. and imposed on Iraqi Kurdistan by Baghdad), developed institutionally, embraced international norms, and adopted good governance

practices. It budgeted Oil-for-Food income to benefit the population and used available discretionary tax revenues for development and services.⁴⁰ Unlike the rest of Iraq, the North did not suffer from the same severe food shortages. It led to the reduction of child mortality and a major rehabilitation of the houses and infrastructure that were destroyed by the Baath regime. The efficient distribution of international resources paved the way for an economic revival that enabled businesses to emerge and flourish.⁴¹

Syria's enclaves may not be able to generate income in the same manner, but that does not mean the guiding principles that underscored the Iraqi-Kurdish case study in the 1990s cannot be replicated. In Syria's case, there is an abundance of internal and external resources that can be mobilized toward similar objectives. As Steve Heydemann points out, this can take the form of transparent "cross-border funding channels that are beyond the regime's control, and working with Syrian partners selected through independent vetting processes, including local NGOs, local councils, and internationally-supported agencies such as the Syria Recovery Trust Fund."⁴² Furthermore, enclave governance in Syria can be underpinned by efforts to enable trade with the rest of the region, mobilizing external support for territories that would otherwise be deprived of much needed assistance and resources. Essentially, a stronger long-term commitment to enclave governance from the United States and its European allies will allay regional and international concerns over the uncertainty of these areas and the security and legal implications of increased engagement, and in the process enable greater regional approval of, and compliance with, the objectives outlined in this paper. This could open up further opportunities for donor assistance and effectively transform U.S. areas of influence into areas for mutual co-existence and economic co-operation, even creating an environment that encourages foreign investment to turn non-regime-held areas into important trade hubs and theaters for economic growth.

The U.S. decision to grant Delta Crescent a license to work in the Northeast to develop and harness crude oil production embodies the economic transformation non-regime-held areas could potentially undertake in a more expansive fashion. The license was granted to help local authorities increase production and modernize oil fields under the control of the SDF and the United States. Doing so despite the objections of the Assad regime, Russia, and Turkey suggests that there is already some appetite for enabling economic independence for local authorities. While it is still early days, such agreements could provide the economic incentives to create a stable political order and viable governing structures, premised on co-operation and mutually beneficial relationships among disparate groups. Indeed, the deal itself is predicated on cross-border co-operation be-

tween the United States, local authorities in the Northeast, and Iraq's Kurdistan region, where the KRG could be a potential customer or conduit through which to sell the oil to global markets.⁴³

If the U.N. and other Western agencies manage reconstruction in Syria as they have traditionally done and continue to cede authority to the regime, they risk the same accusations of complicity that they faced with the Oil-for-Food Programme.⁴⁴ By continuing to execute its relief efforts through the contours of the regime, the U.N. has allowed the regime to hijack its relief efforts and use U.N. resources to fill its coffers, sustain its rule, and perpetrate human rights abuses, as notably portrayed by reports and investigations.⁴⁵ In 2012, it is estimated that \$1.2 billion of U.N. aid went entirely to the regime. In 2014, of the total \$1.2 billion in U.N. aid, only \$6.5 million went to international agencies operating cross-border operations from Turkey. It is estimated that only two to 18 percent of U.N. aid actually reaches needy Syrians.⁴⁶

EMBRACING ENCLAVE GOVERNANCE WITHOUT UNDERMINING TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

The Iraqi experience showed that it is possible to harness enclave governance without undermining the territorial boundaries of the Syrian state, even making sure the international community does not formally recognize the domestic sovereignty of the actors that control or manage self-governing structures in non-regime areas. Through its direct and interventionist approach, the international community set terms and conditions for both local authorities and the regime in Baghdad, alleviating crises while protecting the territorial boundaries of the Iraqi state.

Certainly, there are differences. Iraq's Kurdish North had won recognition from Baghdad as an autonomous region before the uprising in 1990, by way of an agreement signed in 1970. Although the autonomy never came to fruition per the terms of this agreement, it did mean that the notion of Kurdish autonomy was a pre-existing conception enshrined within Iraq's political culture and entertained on some level within Baghdad's political structures. In addition, much to the detriment of the local population in Iraqi Kurdistan, after the KRG gained autonomy the United States and U.K. did not want sanctions on Iraqi Kurdistan to be lifted, in case this acknowledged a separate status for the KRG or facilitated leakage of resources to government-controlled areas. In other words, there are highly contentious and suppressive political, legal, and practical considerations that make it near impossible for self-governance to translate into anything that would come remotely close to eroding the territorial boundaries of a state.

Syria is in a far better position to maintain its territorial integrity than Iraq was in the 1990s. There is no legal or constitutional framework that could catalyze formal autonomy for non-regime-held areas in Syria. Furthermore, Syrian Kurdish autonomy is a recent phenomenon that depends on U.S. support, while Idlib relies on Turkish support, meaning that it is up to these outside powers to decide what degree of sovereignty or autonomy to afford local actors. Having said this, the issue is essentially moot, since the Assad regime arguably has no sovereignty: its rivals are in the country without its approval and have been there since the onset of the conflict. It can also be argued that governments should not be able to weaponize the principle of sovereignty—that is, to exploit and abuse the right to non-interference to inflict mass atrocities on their own populations, enshrined within international law. Sovereignty is not unconditional and comes with obligations if a state is to enjoy the benefits it confers.

The Syrian regime, its allies, and its rivals, are all on the same page when it comes to the question of territorial integrity: no single actor wants or aspires to have Syria's borders re-configured and some have already fiercely contested any such designs in other regional contexts, most notably in Iraqi Kurdistan after the KRG held an independence referendum in 2017. As such, enclave governance is not intended to precipitate the permanent modification of Syria's territorial boundaries. That being said, there should be a distinction made between the violation of sovereignty and the undermining of Syria's territorial integrity. While there is no prospect of the latter, in relation to the former, the Assad regime and its allies should not be allowed to weaponize sovereignty to prevent humanitarian agencies from delivering aid.

The Assad regime has tried to invoke its right to sovereignty to prevent humanitarian aid from reaching beleaguered populations. Where diplomatic negotiations fail to secure authorization for the provision of aid, as in the dispute at the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) over cross-border aid from Turkey, donors should provide aid directly, as they have done in the past.⁴⁷ International humanitarian law, as stipulated within the Geneva Conventions, asserts that Damascus' consent is not a strict requirement to cross-border humanitarian assistance; civilian humanitarian relief personnel must be granted freedom of movement by all parties to the conflict. The regime and its allies may continue to try to rely on narrow definitions of sovereignty to achieve their aims, but these have been superseded by the U.N. in cases like Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and, of course, Iraqi Kurdistan. In these cases, no consent was given for humanitarian interventions. Customary international law now enunciates that consent for humanitarian assistance is not necessarily required.⁴⁸

1990s Iraq is also instructive in this respect. Baghdad had a significant say in setting the terms of U.N. assistance, invoking its sovereignty and exploiting the absence of enforcement mechanisms that would compel Saddam to give free reign to aid organizations. However, when U.N. agencies became constrained or impeded, other local and international humanitarian organizations filled the gaps.⁴⁹ For instance, in northern Iraq in the 1990s, NGOs took it upon themselves to resettle and rehabilitate communities and infrastructure in areas where U.N. agencies were unable to do so.⁵⁰ Critically, the involvement of NGOs in delivering humanitarian aid, providing stabilization support, and establishing modalities for good governance can set the stage for future economic revival, while planting the seeds of political reform and reinforcing bottom-up actors, such as civil society organizations.

Enclave governance should also include internationally monitored local council elections to establish legitimate governing structures. The U.N. has numerous limitations but it is more strongly placed than any other international organization to certify the credibility of elections, help ensure they are conducted in a free and fair manner, and encourage the promotion of democratic norms in the process. It can establish the parameters for how local actors should conduct themselves, and the rules they must abide by in the run-up to and after the elections. Elections do not in and of themselves produce functioning democracies but the process that enables elections and shapes the contours of the political structures that follow them can help open up opportunities to strengthen civic institutions, encourage a culture of compromise, and afford representation to the most vulnerable. Elected bodies and institutions should be diplomatically recognized, which would embolden their political and social legitimacy and create the incentive structures for adopting democratic norms. This process is not designed to encourage disintegration from the rest of Syria but rather to create the legal frameworks that govern non-regime-held areas, and to strengthen the resiliency of governing structures. Integrating these areas with other parts of the country should eventually take place in conditions that are conducive to conflict reprieve. As such, to the extent possible, legal frameworks that govern the territories should be aligned with existing Syrian laws, except where these contravene international norms or do not promote inclusiveness and pluralism.

The interactions between regime and non-regime-held areas are complex and multi-layered. Throughout the Syrian conflict, rival groups and enemies have established relationships of inter-dependence that have been undergirded by their control of strategically important towns and cities.⁵¹ These should not be disrupted (and are difficult to disrupt in any case) to ensure beleaguered communities continue to receive vital aid. This is not too dissimilar from the case of

northern Iraq, in which, out of necessity, local authorities traded with the Baath regime, along with countries such as Turkey and Iran, in defiance of international sanctions and U.S. disapproval. There is still a relationship of inter-dependence: For example, the Assad regime is the prime buyer of oil from the Northeast and it is right that the United States has so far deemed these transactions as not being “significant” enough to become the targets of sanctions. This policy should continue, until at least the United States and its allies are in a position to offer SDF-administered areas alternative sources of revenue that are critical to its provisioning of services to local communities. Moreover, the systemic challenges faced by the Assad regime in the areas it controls are exacerbated by its constrained access to the resources under U.S. and SDF control. That provides the United States with a source of leverage to influence the behavior of the regime and its backers, which it can more effectively utilize through an enclave governance strategy.

ENCLAVE GOVERNANCE AS DETERRENCE, INDUCEMENT, AND LEVERAGE

There will be no incentive for Assad to alleviate humanitarian suffering and become an honest partner if there are no credible inducement and deterrence mechanisms put in place. Indeed, it may be the case that Assad can never be incentivized but only constrained and deterred. There are two ways of addressing this policy deficit. The first way revolves around reliance on the use of force. This does not necessarily mean having an extensive U.S. troop deployment on the ground. However, it does call for revising the current approach to the conflict to prevent further atrocities in non-regime-held areas and push for progress on the political front. The second way involves encouraging a stronger Turkish-Kurdish relationship, underpinned by a mutual desire to prevent the regime from controlling the country and prevent the ascendancy of extremist terrorist groups like IS. The more the United States and its allies invest in a Turkish-Kurdish strategy, the greater the chances of preventing Kurdish-held areas from becoming a statelet dominated by the YPG, and ensuring non-regime-held areas in the Northeast can be harnessed to prevent the resurgence of IS, Iranian expansionism, and the Syrian state's consolidation of power.

THE U.S. ROLE AND THE USE OF FORCE: LESSONS FROM IRAQ IN THE 1990s

There was no substantial U.S. presence in northern Iraq in the 1990s. The no-fly zone was not officially designed to protect the Kurds from Saddam's ground forces and did not provide 24-hour coverage. Aircraft were mandated to protect American military and aid personnel. There were flaws in the policy and it did not prevent hostilities. This was reflected in the U.S. response to a 1991 conflict between Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi troops, which resulted in 500 casualties. Speaking after allied forces stationed in Turkey did not intervene in the clash as part of the no-fly zone policy, President George H.W. Bush referred to the Baath regime's genocide and use of chemical weapons and alluded to the underlying purpose of the no-fly zone. He asserted that "Saddam Hussein, having learned his lesson once, will hopefully not embark on the kind of carnage that sent al-

lied soldiers into northern Iraq in the first place.”⁵² In other words, the no-fly zone was not a perfect policy since it failed to prevent all instances of violence and military clashes but, for more than a decade, it deterred Saddam from testing America’s resolve by committing mass atrocities. It also enabled the Kurdish authorities to manage the situation on the ground, which they did effectively.

This model can be repackaged and implemented in Syria. The United States does not have to establish a highly contentious no-fly zone and does not have to constantly patrol Syria’s skies, risking a clash with the Russians in the process. Instead, it can establish a sustained and credible deterrence mechanism that relies on the use of force using a combination of U.S. and European special forces, U.S. air power, and SDF fighters. Although the international community is reluctant to deploy the use of force out of fear of provoking Russia, Turkey’s intervention on March 20, 2020 prevented both the Syrian regime and Russia from re-capturing Idlib, thereby establishing a red line that has, so far, prevented Idlib’s fall while strengthening Turkey’s negotiating stance in its bilateral interactions with Russia.⁵³

The United States could withdraw from Syria entirely, which this paper cautions against.⁵⁴ However, even if the incoming administration led by President-elect Joe Biden were to go ahead with a decision to withdraw troops, this would not necessarily mean the end of deterrence capacity. Despite maintaining a limited U.S. footprint since 2014, the Northeast has become a de facto U.S.-backed protectorate and a buffer against the rest of the country, where other external actors have deployed or mobilized forces in the tens of thousands. As such, the U.S. deployment has proven to be an effective deterrent against regime-aligned forces who have long coveted the territories currently under U.S. protection.

America’s presence is amplified by the sizeable, unrivalled, and uncontested military infrastructure it enjoys in the region, which reinforces its military footprint in countries like Syria and Iraq. Regime-aligned forces learned this the hard way in February 2018, when they were met with the overwhelming power and superiority of U.S. military forces after attempting to attack them.⁵⁵ In other words, America’s military prowess in Syria is not just about the troops it has on the ground, but rather about its overall presence in the Middle East. This allows it to impose rules and limitations for warfare, as it has done already in the areas it controls in Syria.

Regardless of whether U.S. troops withdraw or are reduced in size, Washington should establish a no-fly zone “minus-one” policy over the Northeast, one that maintains it as the non-encroachment zone it has been throughout the anti-IS campaign. To put this into practice, the United States can militarily disrupt the regime’s use of air power and its operational model for conducting brutal sieges

against beleaguered communities that refuse to submit to its rule.⁵⁶ This is different to an actual no-fly zone strategy, since it constitutes a red line declaring these operations unacceptable and enforces this post facto. This approach requires a consistent application of force over time, in response to regime aggression, while maintaining non-encroachment zones. This would create enforcement measures that deter regime forces from mobilizing and attempting to eliminate America's allies.⁵⁷ The United States would not be alone in using force as part of a stabilization strategy, and neither would it be the first time a foreign power has used force during a stabilization effort or to create diplomatic leverage, as Turkey's March intervention indicated.⁵⁸

While a no-fly zone "minus-one" policy might aggrieve Russia, this policy would only be a repackaged version of America's current engagement in Syria, which Russia has already accepted as part of the status quo. In other words, U.S. forces are already protecting non-regime-held areas under their influence or control and have already deployed military force against the Syrian regime, as well as Russia- and Iran-aligned groups, without much criticism over scope or legality.⁵⁹ Russia and Iran may have won the war as far as regime-held areas are concerned but they should not have it both ways where the regime is left intact and at the same time has free reign to continue its atrocities in the territories it is yet to capture. Moreover, the policy would not proactively set out to militarily combat regime forces. It would be up to the Syrian regime and its allies to decide whether to deploy their forces into U.S.-controlled areas, thereby committing transgressions that trigger the right of U.S. personnel to exercise self-defense.

It is important to stress that U.S. military engagement could take different forms. It could involve a substantial and expansive campaign that eliminates the entirety of the regime's air capabilities. It could merely involve proportionate responses to regime, Russian, or Iranian aggressions. Ultimately, it puts the ball in the court of the Syrian regime and its allies: the measure is only triggered and its scope and scale are defined by the nature of the transgression committed by the regime and its allies. This stands in stark contrast to a no-fly zone, which is, by design, an expansive and hugely pre-emptive operation that is centered on around-the-clock protection. Overall, the strategy effectively achieves a form of coercive diplomacy that is focused on the threat of the use of force, just as Turkey has done in relation to Idlib. It is designed to force the regime and its backers to make a cost-benefit calculation. Rather than being premised on a willingness to engage in a full-scale conflict, the strategy is intended to demonstrate resolution and "to give credibility to the threat that greater force will be used if necessary."⁶⁰

While it may be argued that the U.S. mandate in Syria is focused on combatting IS, the anti-IS mandate is an enforcement mechanism that does not have to be

read solely within the confines of defeating the group territorially. IS is an actor that presents multi-faceted challenges and whose emergence can be attributed to the breakdown of order and governance in Syria, the repressive policies of the Assad regime, and to the civil war more generally. It is perfectly legitimate for the United States to devise a deterrence policy against the Syrian regime that is predicated upon the lasting defeat of IS, on the basis that regime encroachment into non-regime-held areas provides the conditions for IS to mount a resurgence. It is implausible and counter-intuitive to isolate the anti-IS military campaign from the overall conflict landscape because of the connection between the civil war and the jihadi group's emergence.

Indeed, past military operations have almost always spurred debate and questions of legality. The no-fly zone in northern Iraq was justified as necessary to protect the civilian population and to “restore international peace and security in the area,” pursuant to the terms of UNSC Resolution 678.⁶¹ However, both justifications were loose interpretations of what was permissible under international law and were not underpinned by an explicit approval for the use of force. Similarly, after human rights atrocities in Kosovo, the United States, along with NATO, implemented a no-fly zone without official UNSC authorization.

OTHER ACTORS: THE IMPORTANCE OF A TURKISH-KURDISH STRATEGY

The United States will not be alone in setting out to achieve sustainable governance and protect the areas under its influence, and should capitalize on European commitment to staying the course, as well as the continued commitment of the SDF.⁶² The Europeans are still steadfast in their commitment to securing the enduring defeat of IS and will not necessarily be averse to affording diplomatic support that will help shore up the deterrence pillar of the enclave governance strategy. Meanwhile, the United States can call on increased European support to counter IS and other terrorist groups, which would free up its resources to reinforce deterrence capabilities against the regime and its allies. U.S. military prowess and the no-fly zone “minus-one” policy will be most effective in areas where the country has established a troop presence and co-exists with the SDF. In non-regime-held areas such as Idlib, where the United States has limited influence, it is better off reinforcing Turkish efforts against the Assad regime and Russia, and building on its relationship with Turkey to secure concessions in relation to Kurdish autonomy and ongoing U.S.-SDF co-operation.

Fundamentally, U.S. policies in Syria will be far more sustainable and credible to friend and foe if they are underpinned by an enclave strategy that provides a

set of guiding principles for U.S. involvement. Such principles will bring much needed political certainty to a volatile political environment that is plagued by concerns surrounding the future of U.S. forces in the country. For this reason, the United States should pursue a comprehensive political strategy designed to find a compromise with Turkey over the future of the SDF and the reforming of the YPG and SDF.

The YPG may be the most dominant authority in the Northeast region of the country because of its organization, political maturity, and battle-field superiority, but that does not mean the status quo should remain unchallenged. Ensuring resources are geared toward local Arab populations and Kurds on an equitable basis will increase Western leverage and enable credible and legitimate governing structures. The YPG, for its part, will have to share power on a more equitable basis and publicly distance itself from its sister organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This may be symbolic to begin with, but it can still generate goodwill and indicate to Turkish decisionmakers that both the group and its patron, the United States, are serious about finding a compromise over the status of northeast Syria. There are a host of local political actors, tribes, and socio-political organizations through which the political effort can be channeled to establish the necessary order before investing in reconstruction and humanitarian efforts, while the extensive political participation envisioned in an enclave governance strategy will weaken the function of dominant actors like the YPG. In other words, it can dilute the group's hold on power. It is not entirely implausible for Turkey to live with the YPG across its borders.

Both Turkey and the YPG, with U.S. and European encouragement and support, will have to make some difficult choices. The United States, Turkey, and the EU should establish a committee that includes seasoned diplomats and practitioners who have a track record of engaging in complicated and volatile environments, particularly those who are well placed to oversee negotiations with local actors. The committee should function as a conduit through which to relay Turkish apprehensions and interests, and work with the key local and external stakeholders to find mutually beneficial outcomes in relation to the Northeast's self-governing structures, including its security imperatives, budget management, and the local bodies and institutions tasked with establishing sustainable governance. The committee should be mandated and entrusted with devising and executing conflict resolution mechanisms, including ceasefire and peace-monitoring mechanisms; power-sharing formulas; and revenue-sharing frameworks.

The fundamental objective to begin with should be to establish confidence-building measures between Turkey and local actors like the SDF that build the consensus needed to establish the conditions for the successful execution of an

enclave governance strategy, and the durable peace and sustainable governance it sets out to achieve. Once this consensus is in place, the United States and its European allies should reward local actors—Kurdish and Arab—by affording them recognition of the local bodies and institutions that are tasked with establishing sustainable governance (and overseeing the election of the representatives that encompass these bodies). This enhances their ability to access decisionmakers who will be critical to opening up donor assistance opportunities and their ability to facilitate trade and investment into the enclaves, while incentivizing and rewarding local actors for working toward resolving tensions with Turkey and engaging a process that is designed to reset the Northeast's relationship with Ankara.

The stable political order that could emanate from such an approach would reassure Western decisionmakers that development assistance will have positive long-term reverberations, as opposed to being merely short-term fixes. This is a perception that is currently impeding the provisioning of international aid to non-regime-held areas. For Turkey, the benefits are clear: it will be fully vested in large swathes of territories whose evolution, development, and future it may otherwise have limited influence over; it will have the chance to secure positions of influence for its Syrian partners; and, ultimately, it will have a more secure border that could otherwise be a launchpad for PKK operations in Turkey. It presents an opportunity to shape the future of Syria itself. Doing so in tandem with allies in the West may go some way toward repairing the immense reputational and diplomatic damage Turkey has suffered as a result of its military interventionism in Syria, which has not actually translated into political and geostrategic gains for Ankara. Others like the ICG have also indicated that there may be some pathway for Turkish recognition of self-governance in the Northeast (explicit or tacit).⁶³ A hospitable and tolerable environment in other non-regime-held areas could reduce the burden on Turkish-dominated Idlib and Afrin by enabling cross-border interactions between the two spheres of influence.

But there are also some difficult choices the YPG has to make. Other than the United States, the YPG has no friends in Syria or the region. Were it not for the group's importance to the anti-IS campaign, there would be no reason for the United States to support a group that is either disdained by or is a source of immense concern for a number of regional countries. In reality, any notion that the YPG might have about being able to effectively balance its relations with competing external actors is a short-sighted one. The reality is that it has one ally in the form of the United States, while Russia will prioritize its relationships with Damascus and Ankara. Aligning with Damascus may win the

YPG some short-term benefits, like staving off a Turkish intervention into the areas it controls or currying favor with Moscow, but that is not a sustainable policy and will undermine the goodwill and credibility the group has generated in the West.

Turkey is the least bad option as a potential adversary turned partner of convenience because of the Assad regime's pariah status within the international community and the imposition of sanctions on the regime and its allies. The YPG's utility as an important component of the anti-IS campaign will begin to diminish at some point, at which time it must be seen a source of stability, as opposed to polarization and instability. The YPG should not presume it can rely on strained Turkish-U.S. or Turkish-European ties in the medium- and long-term and should instead focus its attention on how it can disconnect its operational and political overlap with the PKK in Turkey and establish a marriage of convenience with Ankara, which retains the capacity to both end the YPG's autonomy in the Northeast and severely undermine its relationship with the West.

To help itself further, the group can also rein in its attacks on the KRG and its ruling party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a major U.S. and European ally that is far more critical to Western engagement in the region than the PKK, which is proscribed as a terrorist organization by the United States and Europe. The group's attacks on the KRG have alienated the United States and a number of European countries it has worked with in the anti-IS campaign.⁶⁴ The growing hostility toward the group's presence in northern Iraq's Sinjar is a source of contention that gives Turkey more reason to suppress the group and strengthens its claims that the PKK and its sister groups in Syria and elsewhere have expansionist designs and cannot be reasoned with. Withdrawing from Sinjar creates one less problem for the United States and Europe to manage, and makes it easier for them—and the KDP—to bring Turkey on board in support of an enclave governance strategy and for the idea that autonomy in the Northeast of Syria is worth tolerating and testing.

CONCLUSION

While Assad may have won the war, he is far from controlling all of Syria. The West can still enable conflict reprieve in some parts of the country and build leverage to create openings for a durable peace. Embracing enclave governance does not create new realities on the ground, but rather makes do with existing political and security configurations to create less than ideal but least worst case outcomes for civilian populations who would otherwise be subjected to the repression and atrocities of the Assad regime. Syria's remaining enclaves are the best hope of ensuring that the Assad regime does not gain *carte blanche* over its entire population. A full embrace of enclave governance can circumvent the regime and serve as a form of inducement and leverage. Ideally, the United States should remain on the ground indefinitely, but if it opts to withdraw, this paper outlines how it can still rely on air power and reduced troops to establish red lines for the Assad regime and its backers, and constrain the second order effects of war.

While the traditional approach to humanitarian and reconstruction assistance has been to coordinate and work through centralized authorities, the Assad regime will use international resources to consolidate its power and prop up its loyalists. The main lesson from Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s is that when a repressive central government is circumvented and aid is managed by international agencies and NGOs operating under the protection of U.S. or Western forces it is likely to yield more positive development outcomes. Iraqi Kurdistan lived under the same international sanctions as the rest of the country and was blockaded by the Baath regime in Baghdad. However, local Kurdish authorities, in conjunction with the U.N., spent money on U.N.-approved projects, which prioritized rebuilding education and healthcare infrastructure. The circumvention of the Baath regime in Baghdad, together with the incentive structures that were established through the provisioning of international support and the diplomatic recognition of local authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan, created the conditions that alleviated conflict and addressed the destitution of local communities. It enabled pathways for democratic institutions and encouraged the KRG to embrace democratic norms.⁶⁵

The success of enclave governance requires a long-term commitment that is underscored with political will and a comprehensive strategy that sets out to engage and harness existing self-governing structures to foster stability and humanitarian reprieve. Enclave governance in northern Iraq was successful because the Kurdish leadership effectively managed the situation on the ground while the United States managed it in the air. It also worked because Turkey was not a spoiler and, despite Ankara's initial reservations over its autonomy, the KRG later became Turkey's most important trading partner and a key component of its regional security architecture.

While the YPG has proven to be an indispensable partner in the campaign against IS, relying on the group indefinitely is not feasible because of Turkish apprehensions and the animosity that non-Kurdish communities harbor toward the group. There needs to be a stronger push by the United States, Europe, and Turkey to develop conflict resolution measures and power-sharing and revenue-sharing frameworks. These could open up opportunities for a sustainable Turkey-SDF relationship and reduce the prospects of flare-ups or major conflagrations.

The focus should be on developing power-sharing mechanisms, inclusive political and economic structures, multi-ethnic security forces, and joint patrols. It also means a shift toward bottom-up governance and citizen participation to create alternative socio-political movements that can absorb international support and resources. It is only through these measures that Turkey can truly dilute the YPG's hold on power. The YPG for its part must recognize that its fate as a key U.S. ally will at some point hinge on the extent to which it can reach a compromise with Ankara, as opposed to its utility in the anti-IS campaign. It is probable that U.S.-Turkey ties will improve in the future and so the YPG must begin the difficult but necessary process of diminishing its ties to the PKK in Turkey; withdrawing from northern Iraq in order to avoid aggravating the KRG and its international allies; and starting to engage Turkey and its Syrian partners as an honest negotiator.

Investment in local politics, reconciliation, and peacebuilding (between and within communities and groups) requires offering Kurdish forces and local Arab communities alternatives to engaging with the Assad regime, while expanding options for governance in non-regime-held areas. This is all the more important because there will continue to be anti-regime activity, as well as intra-community and intra-rebel disputes. Non-state actors and institutions (such as civil society organizations) should be used to help constrain the space for violent conflict and achieve peace. In tandem with this effort, non-regime-held areas should be assisted with the process of forging a con-

sensus that aims to reconcile and unify political, governing, and economic structures in non-regime-held areas. Territorial autonomy provides a sense of direction that can cultivate rules in relation to resource distribution, a major driver of conflict that would otherwise be determined by zero-sum, battle-for-survival politics between rebel groups and political factions.

The success of enclave governance in northeastern Syria can provide a model for other non-regime-held areas, such as Idlib. Idlib is fraught with challenges, including the prominence of extremist groups. The political element of the enclave governance strategy requires investment in inter- and intra-community reconciliation in opposition-held areas, as well as a concerted effort with local and external allies to rid areas of extremist groups. Fundamentally, U.S. policies in Syria will be far more sustainable and credible if they are underpinned by an enclave strategy that provides a set of guiding principles for U.S. involvement, and that makes clear the resolute determination of the United States and its allies to prevent non-regime-held areas from falling to the Assad regime until there is some degree of confidence that local populations will not be subjected to repression.

ENDNOTES

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