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Trump Policy in the Middle East: Syria

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This month, the Syrian Civil War will have lasted seven years. It is a conflict of sometimes bewildering complexity. What began in 2011 as mass demonstrations against the repressive government of Syrian president Bashar Assad has become a struggle among rival factions split along religious, ethnic, and ideological lines. Moreover, the civil war has become thoroughly internationalized, with a host of foreign actors intervening in the conflict, either directly or through proxies. These actors include Russia, the United States, Iran, Gulf Arab states, Hezbollah, and Turkey. Today, the Assad government is clearly in the ascendant, though significant areas of the country remain beyond its control. And while the threat of the Islamic State (ISIS) seems reduced, the Syrian Civil War, with all of its challenges, continues—at very high cost and risk.

Since the beginning of the civil war, the United States—first under President Barack Obama and now under President Donald Trump—has struggled to develop a coherent strategy that balances U.S. interests in the conflict with the resources—military, financial, and diplomatic—necessary to pursue them. Moreover, the debate on Syrian policy has been shaped, for better or for worse, by other U.S. interventions in the region, notably its costly and counterproductive invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the months ahead, U.S. policymakers face a series of difficult choices that will affect not only Syria, but the Middle East's geopolitics for years to come.

U.S. INTERESTS AND ACTIONS

Since the beginning of the conflict, the United States has not had a clear strategy to address the war's many facets: terrorism, violence, instability, human displacement, and geopolitical friction. U.S. interests in Syria are debated, and potential actions have never been clear-cut or attractive, as they often work at the expense of other policies, options, or allies (see the U.S.–Kurd–Turkey dilemma below). Domestically, American voters are weary of prolonged foreign wars with unclear objectives or end dates.

While the United States has many interests related to the war in Syria, a consensus seems to have developed within the foreign policy community (and in the American public writ large) that the primary U.S. objective in Syria is the prevention of terrorist attacks on Americans and U.S. allies. Other goals include the maintenance of international norms on weapons of mass destruction, minimizing the potential long-term effects of increased influence for actors hostile to the United States (Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, among others), limiting regional destabilization or spillover to neighboring states, and addressing the humanitarian and refugee crises.

The Obama administration's handling of Syria is contested, but among many mainstream foreign policy observers, opinion is generally negative—that Obama's Syria policy was muddled to a degree that possibly prolonged the conflict. While demanding the Assad regime meet



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international norms for warfare and governance—and eventually seeking Assad's overthrow through vacillating support for Syrian opposition groups—the Obama administration was hesitant to become too involved, lest the United States be drawn into another long-term commitment reminiscent of Iraq or Afghanistan. By the end of the Obama administration, this had created a disconnect between U.S. rhetoric on Assad and actual actions against his regime. The ambiguity of U.S. policy toward Syria also (arguably) created further challenges for U.S. regional policy, including Iran's new direct and indirect roles in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; Russia's role in Syria and beyond; and the proliferation of militias and nonstate actors of diverse ideologies. In Syria and across the region, the political landscape is perhaps more complex than at any other time in modern history.

The last two years of the Obama administration saw U.S. policy shift from the civil war itself (training and arming local actors to counter the Assad regime) to a more focused counterterrorism strategy to degrade and destroy ISIS. In its first year, the Trump administration furthered this aim, and international efforts to defeat the group have been mostly successful. ISIS has lost most of its territory and is now concentrated in shrinking patches of Deir al-Zour and Hama, where it remains under siege by the regime and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are also fighting each other.

But after the fall of the Islamic State, the war in Syria will linger on, demonstrating the ways in which the Middle East is changing. The power vacuums created over the past seven years have opened the door for new players, policies, and tools. Events in Syria represent rivalries and grievances that will affect regional maneuvering and stability for the foreseeable future. For example, the effects of Iran's growing influence are still unknown, as is how the Iran-Saudi conflict will develop; how Russia's role in the region will evolve; how a war-hardened Hezbollah will affect Israel's security; or how Kurdish or Shia proxy groups, nonstate actors, and nationalism will affect regional stability. All of these issues relate closely to Syria, but also have important cross-regional impacts.

Even for a president with a keen strategic sense, foreign policy is usually a series of immediate responses to evolving events rather than an unfolding of a grand strategy. In the months ahead, the Trump administration will be faced with a number of choices related to Syria and will be bedeviled by the same problems that confronted its predecessor. The civil war in Syria is, in many ways, the worst of all possible situations for U.S. policymakers. The United States has important interests in Syria. But—with the exception of terrorism—those interests are not so vital as to compel U.S. action, as would a major threat to Israel's survival or an Iranian attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz, for instance. Moreover, action and inaction alike bear substantial risks. Nonetheless, the situation in Syria is such that the directions the administration chooses could potentially shape the region and U.S. policy in important ways for years to come.

CHOICES

In early 2018, the Assad regime—heavily bolstered by Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia—has regained much of Syria's populated territory. The Islamic State, the United States' primary interest in Syria, has mostly been dispersed, and its threat has become mostly manageable.

Given these facts, the United States is left to make a number of choices and set priorities among its other interests: Can Washington accept that Assad seems unlikely to be removed, with what that may mean for the empowered presence of Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah in the Levant? What is to become of the relationship with the strongest American allies in Syria—the SDF and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—especially given the importance of the U.S.-Turkish relationship? Where do the SDF and the Kurds fit in an Assad-run Syria, and can an Assad-run Syria ever really be stable? Alternatively, if Assad ever were to be removed, under what circumstances would Syria be stable?

Assad and Stability

Since early on in the war, U.S. policy (to varying degrees of ambiguity) has been that Assad must be removed from power. This demand is shared by U.S. allies and others in the international community who consider Assad a war criminal and an obstacle to a negotiated settlement. It has also, however, deepened Iranian and Russian commitment to their Syrian ally and complicated attempts at negotiation (see the ongoing initiatives in Geneva, Switzerland; Astana, Kazakhstan; and Sochi, Russia).

Barring some unforeseen change, Assad and his forces seem likely to remain in control of most major urban areas in the near term. The Syrian government, however, is limited in its capacity to secure and hold the entirety of Syria. It seems that Assad will not be defeated, but he also cannot win outright. The strong—if savagely autocratic—Syrian state that existed before 2011 is a thing of the past.

Over the past year, the Trump administration's position on Assad has been fairly consistent but lacking in strategic action. Like his predecessor, President Trump and his senior foreign policy team have called for Assad's exit. But like Obama, Trump's call has not been matched by decisive action against the Assad government. The U.S. attack last year on a Syrian airbase after the Assad government's use of chemical weapons appears to have been a specific response to a specific action; in early 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged patience on Assad's departure. The Trump administration's suggestion in January that the United States maintain a semi-permanent (if modest) military presence in northeastern Syria marks a clear break with Obama's policy. The object, however, appears more related to limiting Iranian influence than to bringing down the Assad government, and it also stands to further ruffle Turkish feathers. How U.S. policy addresses Assad, "red lines" the U.S. may draw (such as harboring terrorists), and the trade-offs involved, will be key over the next year.

In addressing this issue, an important related question is whether Assad may ever be able to claim the full territory of Syria and hold legitimacy in the eyes of Syrians. Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and other opponents of the regime are unlikely to drop their grievances or their weapons. As such, violence and instability (though perhaps reduced) may continue to be the norm in Syria—a country in the very heart of the region and in which many neighbors have a stake. Assad's place will also affect any reconstruction effort (important to the refugee crisis), as the most important donors and investors may refuse to work with the Assad regime or in a slow-burning war zone.

Emboldened Antagonists

The increased strength of actors who seek to undermine U.S. interests is particularly concerning to the Trump administration and U.S. allies.

Foremost, Hezbollah has been perhaps the most important ground resource for Assad over the past four years. The Lebanese Shia militia, with heavy backing from Iran, has been a long-term enemy of Israel, and at the moment is almost certainly the actor that most concerns Israeli security professionals. Hezbollah is also a critical concern to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who are alarmed by the group's influence in Yemen.

Relatedly, Iran's expanded influence in the region—particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—stands to shake up regional politics. In Syria, Iran has provided key military, financial, and political support to the Assad regime, often directly through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. This development echoes Iran's relationship to the government in Baghdad, which has received substantial support from the Iranians for the past decade and has now recognized Iranian-backed Shia militias as semi-official Iraqi military forces.

A weak point for American policymakers, particularly in Syria, is understanding the Iranian calculus—the strength of the Islamic Republic's commitment to Syria and what it may mean in negotiations. But certainly, Iran is widely viewed in Washington and in

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the region as a power in the ascendant and a source of instability. The Arab Gulf states are already building military capacity and taking action throughout the region to counter Iran. These states will almost certainly not be a part of any rebuilding effort in Syria that solidifies the Assad regime and its Iranian sponsor, adding another complication to a negotiated settlement to the conflict (we will discuss broader U.S. policy toward Iran in a later paper).

Finally, the past five years have seen Russia emerge as a more proactive regional player. In Syria, this has been mostly through military and financial support of the Assad regime, loosely in the name of counterterrorism. Russia certainly is interested in combatting terrorism, but as also seems to be the case in Europe, Putin's foreign policy seeks to undermine the American-dominated international order, weakening U.S. influence and offering new alignments and arrangements. In doing so, Russia has also (to various degrees) strengthened its ties with Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Libya, and Iraq, among others. This has been largely opportunistic. Ironically, Russia's lack of long-term strategic partners in the region (with the exception of Syria) gives Russia more short-term freedom of action than that enjoyed by the far more powerful United States. Given this opportunistic approach, the Russian position on Assad specifically may be somewhat flexible, allowing for some transition of power as long as Syria remains in the Russian orbit.

U.S. policy in the Middle East has been largely reactive over the past decade for a number of reasons. President Trump's primary focus in the Middle East, it seems, is to counter Iran. However, a nuanced and realistic understanding of Iran's positions and capabilities, and those of Russia, will be critical. The Trump administration's actions toward these actors over the next three years, related to Syria and otherwise, will shape regional and global politics.

The Kurds and Turkey

One of the murkier choices the Trump administration will face in Syria in 2018

revolves around the Syrian Kurds and the U.S.–Turkish relationship. The YPG has been among the United States' strongest allies in Syria and almost certainly the most effective component of the SDF. However, Syria's major Kurdish groups are also tied to the Turkish Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which is considered a terrorist organization by the government of Turkey, one of the United States' most important allies—albeit an ally with whom relations have cooled and, in Syria, have at times become openly hostile.

The current U.S.–Turkish antagonism in Syria is an almost unprecedented fissure in NATO's history. In January 2018, the Trump administration announced support for a 30,000-strong “Border Security Force” along Syria's northern border, which will rely heavily on Kurdish forces to close smuggling routes between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey called the action a “stab in the back” and stated that “a country we call an ally is insisting on forming a terror army on our borders... Our mission is to strangle it before it's even born.”¹ Further, tension in the Syrian city of Manbij between U.S.–Kurdish partners and Turkish forces is making international news.²

In late 2017, lines of communication, and even negotiation, were rumored to be forming between the Syrian Kurds and the Assad government. Further, on February 18, 2018, a Syrian Kurdish official announced that a deal had been made for Syrian forces to work with Kurdish fighters in countering Turkey in Afrin.³ If this becomes a trend, it is unknown how a negotiation or long-term agreement between the Kurds and the regime might work, and what it may lead to. The United States will need to decide if it has an obligation to help Syria's Kurds find a *modus vivendi* with the regime, and whether any Syrian Kurd autonomy is sustainable in the face of Turkish objections and Syrian reticence.

Turkey's long-term approach to Syria is critical and mostly unknown for now. In 2016, Turkish forces and allies created the “Euphrates Shield” zone in northern Syria, mostly in an attempt to divide a developing Kurdish belt along Syria's northern border. Since that time, Turkish involvement and

commitment has ebbed and flowed. Most recently, in late January 2018, Turkey led a controversial offensive in Afrin to divide the SDF after the U.S. declared its support for the Syrian Democratic Forces.

For the Trump administration, there is a need for a better understanding of Turkey's objectives in Syria. Key among these is certain to be a weakened role for Syrian Kurdish groups. Would Turkey object, for instance, were peace negotiations to lead to greater regional autonomy for Syrian Kurds? The alternative might be ongoing violence along the Turkish border, but to President Erdogan, any move toward Kurdish autonomy might be worse.

IN SEARCH OF A STRATEGY

Over the next year, President Trump and his foreign policy team will be forced to decide how the United States will address Syria after ISIS. There are three decision points facing the Trump administration in Syria: reevaluating the U.S. position on Assad, navigating the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, and understanding and addressing the influence of Iran and Russia. This is not to mention the simmering challenges related to jihadist and insurgent groups now concentrating in northwest Syria or the regional maneuvering of the Gulf Arab states, which, in their cold war with Iran, have spurred discord regionally and among themselves.

In 2018, the Trump administration's Syria policies are possibly becoming clearer, if still erratic. The Obama administration's policy was a sort of muddled containment—supporting rebels just enough to combat ISIS and al-Qaida (and the regime), but not enough to reach any decisive outcomes. The Trump administration seems to be continuing some version of a containment strategy, but it is unclear how coherent such a strategy (and the tasks involved) has become.

The clearest recent indicator of the current administration's stance on Syria came in January 2018, in a set of prepared remarks given by Secretary Tillerson. He addressed the importance of Iran's presence in Syria to U.S. policy: "For many years, Syria under

Bashar Assad has been a client state of Iran. A Syrian central government that is not under the control of Assad will have new legitimacy to assert its authority over the country... The re-assertion of national sovereignty by a new government, along with de-escalation efforts and new flows of international aid, will lower violence, set better conditions for stability, and speed up the departure of foreign forces."⁴ This policy does not represent a radical shift—that Assad must leave has been U.S. policy for years. But Tillerson also urged "patience" on Assad's departure and stressed the need for serious negotiations with the parties involved.

Less clear is how the current U.S. military intervention—a couple thousand troops in northeastern Syria—is going to achieve these ambitious goals. In January, the U.S. also announced a potentially long-term role for American advisors in rebel-held territory, as well as plans to bolster its allies. And while not actively countering the Assad regime, the American strike on Syrian forces in Deir al-Zour in early February, which killed more than 100 Syrian government fighters, demonstrated a willingness to protect gains made by the SDF. At the same time, however, relations with Turkey—a key player in any solution for Syria—are at a low point, and Turkey seems increasingly linked to Iran and Russia (despite hesitation and distrust held by all three).

Perhaps more than any other event since the Arab Spring in 2011, the war in Syria has reshaped the Middle East in a dynamic, unpredictable way. The direction Syria takes over the next year is likely to affect the state system for many years to come. At the time of writing, fruitful multilateral negotiations to deescalate the conflict and address related issues seem impossible. Still, a fresh assessment of the positions and incentives of all actors—particularly those deemed hostile to U.S. interests—is warranted, given the January announcement of the United States' commitment to Syria.

Unfortunately, as events in Syria develop over the next year, two things are certain: Barring an extremely unlikely comprehensive settlement,

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Barring an extremely unlikely comprehensive settlement, the Syrian Civil War will continue.

the Syrian Civil War will continue. And the Trump administration—like the Obama administration before it—will face a series of excruciating choices as it balances competing U.S. interests, and as it attempts to match practical policies with rhetorical commitments.

ENDNOTES

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