

A close-up photograph of a woman wearing a light-colored headscarf with a subtle pattern. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. In the lower right corner, a young child is visible, looking towards the camera and holding a blue pacifier with a pink bear-shaped top. The child is wearing a yellow garment. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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Course Correction: Preventing State Collapse in Syria

by Steven Simon



QUINCY INSTITUTE
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STATECRAFT

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I. Executive Summary

U.S. policy toward Syria deepens the suffering of ordinary Syrians while increasing the potential for a clash between Iran and Israel in Syria and possibly beyond. The U.S. cannot dislodge President Bashar al-Assad, but its policy will increase his reliance on Russia and Iran, whose influence in Syria the U.S. seeks to roll back. If kept in place unaltered, extensive U.S. sanctions on Syria, as well as on states and humanitarian groups seeking to assist its population, will tip the country toward collapse. Assad will still preside over a large swath of Syrian territory, but the rest of the country will be divided among local warlords or foreign countries heedless of the pain inflicted on Syrians under their control. This space will provide new and expanded opportunities to predators, such as ISIS, while radiating violence outside Syrian borders and setting in motion successive waves of refugees Syria's neighbors are ill-equipped to manage. None of this serves any conceivable U.S. interest.

America's true interests in Syria are best addressed through pragmatic diplomatic contact with Damascus and its allies. While this strategy has not heretofore received serious consideration, this paper argues that a reverse course of this kind is best calculated to preserve U.S. interest in avoiding the chaotic ramifications of state failure and alleviating suffering engendered by severe sanctions that underpin the U.S. policy of "maximum pressure."

Whether a sanctions policy can be judged successful hinges on its objective. If sanctions are intended to produce regime change, then in the case of Syria the policy is failing and unlikely ever to succeed. If the objective is to crush Syrian society and turn Syria into a country only barely ruled by a government in Damascus unalterably convinced that surrender entails annihilation, it might well succeed. But success will come at the cost of regional stability and the awful fate of Syrians pulverized by sanctions against a government they are currently unable to influence. Assad will remain, and the U.S. will be under pressure to contain the centrifugal forces that societal collapse will unleash across the region.

Thus, if regime change remains the main U.S. objective, and creating a "quagmire" for Russia persists as a collateral aim, the U.S. will have succeeded in leaving all parties worse off. This is not generally held to be the standard for a successful foreign policy.

This assessment dictates the need for an alternative policy approach, the fundamental course correction proposed in this paper. If the Trump administration's Syria strategy is geared toward unattainable and counterproductive objectives, what should a reconsidered U.S. policy aim to achieve? This study argues that the U.S. should have two interrelated objectives:

Avoid a failed state in Syria. If the Syrian state were to fail, migration and internal displacement would grow exponentially and repatriation would come to a halt. Apart from the humanitarian consequences for the affected population, neighboring countries would bear the brunt of the refugee surge. Although the U.S. seeks to prevent the resurgence of ISIS in Syria, the anarchic conditions accompanying state failure would turn parts of Syria into a game preserve for militants.

Avoid escalation between Israel and Iran. Neither Iran nor Israel is looking for a war. But in the tit-for-tat of attack and counterattack, perceptions of the stakes involved could change rapidly, especially in a situation wherein there are no rules of the road or mutually acknowledged red lines. It is essential to stanch this dynamic before it gets out of control.

To achieve these objectives, the U.S. will need the cooperation of the Syrian government and especially Russia. The U.S. will want concessions on three specific initiatives:

- *Syrian facilitation of humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.* Reconstruction and stabilization programs work best when they are implemented through local governments. In this case, Damascus would have to cooperate in the work of NGOs on the ground, allow unfettered movement of goods and services, and refrain from diverting funds and materiel to unrelated purposes and impeding the operations of NGOs on Syrian soil.
- *Syrian constraints on Iranian or Iranian proxy movements in Syrian territory.* The alternative to Israel's whack-a-mole strategy is a regulated framework for Iranian activities in Syria. The government best able to negotiate and enforce such constraints is the Syrian regime itself. The U.S. would wish to see the government reach a verifiable agreement with Tehran to block destabilizing activities.
- *Release of arbitrary detainees, including American citizens, and agreement on International Red Cross access to detention facilities.*

To secure these objectives, the U.S. will have to make its own concessions:

- *Suspend sanctions.* Sanctions relief is essential to reconstruction and stabilization operations in Syria and to funding for essential services. Reverting control of oilfields to the government would be a vital element of this arrangement. It is also a necessary quid pro quo for Syrian cooperation.
- *Open a channel to the government.* Although these measures could be negotiated through intermediaries, as some may have to be, a direct channel to the government would be more efficient while offering greater situational awareness.
- *Collaborate with Russia as well as Arab partners.* Russian cooperation, along with the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, neither of which wishes to see state failure or unconfined Iranian penetration of Syria, would be vital.

After nine years of brutal warfare, responsible statecraft demands that the United States abandon a policy that is disconnected from realities on the ground and its own strategic interest.

II. About the Author

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III. Acknowledgements

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Cover image: An internally displaced Syrian woman and her children sit in a tent in an IDP camp located near Idlib, Syria February 27, 2020. REUTERS/Umit Bektas.

IV. Introduction

The current United States policy in Syria is futile. There is an unbridgeable gap between the goals of policy and the commitments they imply on the one hand, and on the other the capabilities and resources available to achieve them. The Trump administration has no realistic plan for closing this gap. Compounding the disconnect between the means and ends of U.S. policy is the often incoherent and contradictory nature of the Trump administration's rhetoric and actions, which at various times suggest that the U.S. seeks to disengage from its military commitment and, at other times, that Washington is committed to maximalist objectives of ridding Syria of Assad, trapping the Russians in a quagmire, and significantly rolling back Iranian influence in the region.

The United States' single most important interest in Syria—preventing state failure and the attendant instability and upheaval it would create in the region—is ill-served by the administration's campaign of "maximum pressure."¹ The current U.S. approach to Syria is counterproductive and will merely accelerate state collapse without achieving the administration's declared objectives, as outlined below. To put U.S. policy on a trajectory that would advance America's core interest, Washington will need to engage directly with the Assad government and rely on incentives



Syrian families who came from Kobani district living in refugee tents in Suruc district, 25 October 2015, Turkey, Sanliurfa. Orlok / Shutterstock.com.

as well as punitive measures. This approach runs directly counter to current policy, which underestimates the risks to U.S. interests of a collapsed Syrian state. Currently available policy alternatives regarding Syria reflect either an inclination to regime change or a preference for more limited aims.

Regime changers in the administration are led by Secretary of State Pompeo, James Jeffrey, the U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement, and Joel Rayburn, the Special Envoy for Syria. They believe that Assad's government is incapable of reform and that starving the Syrian government of revenue will result in Assad's removal. The assumption here is that the U.S. has the resolve to push the Syrian economy to the breaking point. The regime changers' expectation is that once Assad has left the scene, there is at least the potential for Syria to become a more open and pluralistic country and Iran's presence can be reduced. They have consistently blocked any positive approaches to Damascus in favor of policy that offers only punishment and no incentives to elicit more cooperative behavior from Assad. From time to time, President Trump seems to endorse a less radical approach, but Pompeo and others often wait for his attention to focus elsewhere, which it invariably does, and then proceed to undermine his apparent intentions.

A second school of thought argues for a less geopolitically ambitious and more realistic set of objectives for Syria, based on the assumption that Assad will neither surrender power nor be forced out by his patrons or domestic opponents. From this perspective, current U.S. policy will have the perverse effect of accelerating Syria's descent into failure, thereby putting at risk the stability of neighboring states, efforts to contain Islamic extremism, and the urgent need to reduce the refugee burden on Europe and vulnerable regional countries. The argument here is that U.S. interests are better served by stabilizing the Syrian state than by undermining it.

'U.S. interests are better served by stabilizing the Syrian state than by undermining it.'

This paper makes the case for an approach that rejects regime change, endorses cautious, carefully structured interaction with the Syrian government, aims to prevent state failure, with all of its collateral effects, and reduces the possibility of an Israeli–Iranian clash in Syria, with all of its own dangers to the fate of the Syrian people. The first section sets out and prioritizes U.S. core interests in Syria and describes the current situation in Syria and how it affects those interests. It is followed by a discussion of U.S. policy in Syria and an assessment of the sources of its failure, a prescription for what should be done to protect U.S. core interests, and how this alternative approach should be implemented. The concluding section sets out guidelines for the delivery of assistance that seek to reconcile the objectives assistance is intended to serve with the constraints it will face.

U.S. Interests and the State of Play in Syria

The U.S. has one overriding interest in Syria to which all other interests should be subordinated: to prevent the collapse of the Syrian state, so averting the further immiseration of the Syrian population, the adverse spillover effects a collapse would create, and pressure within the United States to increase America's military presence in the region at a time when U.S. security is best served by reducing this footprint.

Over the past nine years, the Syrian people and U.S. friends, partners, and allies in the region and in Europe have suffered the calamitous consequences of anarchic conditions in Syria. The exodus of refugees to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey placed enormous economic and social strains on all three countries, undermining the stability of the weak and triggering intervention by the strong. There are, for example, 750,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and they have already been hit hard by the unraveling of the Lebanese economy. The 2015–16 flood of Syrian migrants into Europe fueled a nativist backlash that has stoked antidemocratic movements and generated fissures within the European Union. The evolution of anti-Assad demonstrations and guerilla activity into a countrywide civil war and the emergence of a Salafi-jihadist opposition to the Assad government allowed ISIS to dominate a large swath

of Syrian territory from which the Syrian army had withdrawn. Turkey, a treaty ally, was confronted with an armed Kurdish presence. Israel, in the wake of at least two attempted drone strikes, felt increasingly exposed to attack by Iran and responded with airstrikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria.

There are multiple causes of Syria's present fragility: the destruction, dislocation, and deaths caused by nine years of war; the cumulative effects of the preceding decade of economic mismanagement and corruption; severe drought, and destabilizing interventions by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and others. Syria's downward spiral will thus be difficult to arrest and reverse, but the effort to do so is increasingly urgent.

V. Internal Disintegration

Nine years of violence—much of it perpetrated against civilians by the Assad government and its Russian and Iranian enablers—have inflicted terrible human suffering. Close to 90 percent of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line. Roughly 6.2 million people, including 2.5 million children, are displaced within Syria. Upward of six million Syrians have fled the country and are struggling to survive in refugee camps or under otherwise miserable conditions. Five million children need some kind of assistance, as do 500,000 elderly Syrians. At least six million adults are trapped in similarly dire circumstances.

Medical assistance is unavailable to all but a small fraction of the population. The educational system has been severely damaged. Some 180,000 teachers are out of work; 40 percent of schools have been destroyed or repurposed as shelters; 2.1 million children are out of school and fewer than 5% make it to the secondary education level. An entire generation of Syrian youth will be deprived of essential skills, malnourished, and psychologically scarred. Food insecurity is rife: One-third of the population is uncertain where the next meal will come from. A little more than six million Syrians lack access to clean water.

The scale of destruction is awe-inspiring. Fully half of Syria's social infrastructure has been wrecked, with housing and the energy grid bearing the brunt of the damage. According to World Bank estimates, the bill for new or repaired housing, repair of the energy grid, rebuilding of water infrastructure, reconstitution of transport services, and restoration of the health sector will total \$8 billion to \$10 billion. In the meantime, food prices have shot up 209 percent just in the past year. As a result, 82,000 Syrian children from newborns to the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition. Syria's economy spun further out of control in late spring, seemingly triggered by the economic collapse



Syrian refugees arrive in Lesbos, Greece from Turkey on an overloaded dinghy on October 29, 2015. By Nicolas Economou.

and bankruptcy of Lebanon, where many Syrians put their savings. The combined effects of the long war, crushing U.S. sanctions, Lebanon's plummeting economy, and the coronavirus have sent the Syrian pound spiraling out of control: It was valued at 47 to the dollar prior to 2011 and is now at roughly 3,500 to the dollar. The unpredictable course of the Covid-19 pandemic and the onset of harsh winter weather later this year will exacerbate these conditions.

VI. Outside Intervention

Syria is divided by outside powers pursuing individual interests. Turkey has seized a large area in Syria's northern province of Aleppo and the northwestern province of Idlib. Most of the inhabitants of Idlib are civilians, but the Turks have, as a practical matter, created a safe haven for local jihadists and from other parts of Syria, primarily al-Qaeda affiliates. An uneasy truce prevails there, punctuated by violent exchanges involving jihadists and Turkish forces on one side and Syrian and Russian forces on the other. Internecine fighting among jihadist groups within the Turkish zone flares up frequently.

Turkey has also seized a long, narrow strip of Syrian territory along its border. Ankara's objectives for its smash-and-grab operations were to push U.S.-armed Kurdish forces southward and, in collaboration with pro-Turkish militias, terrorize Kurdish civilians and chip away at Kurdish operational capabilities and the larger political aspirations they support. To the northeast and southeast, small U.S. military contingents, working closely with the Kurdish-led Syrian Defense Forces, the SDF, have seized Syrian oilfields. American-supported forces also sit astride the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing of al-Tanf, with the objectives of blocking trade between Iraq and Syria and ensuring that Iran does not bring weapons into Syria by land.

Excluding the Turkish zone, the Syrian government largely controls the western part of Syria, the most populous, urbanized, and economically developed part of the country. Although levels of violence are significantly lower than at any time in the past few years, pitched battles continue to harm noncombatants. Along with this persistent mayhem, Iran's intervention on Assad's behalf to reduce Tehran's regional isolation, preserve links to Lebanon, and suppress ISIS and other Sunni extremists has also created an opportunity for Iran to open a second front against Israel in southern Syria, fueling a countervailing Israeli air campaign against targets on Syrian territory. Although neither Iran nor Israel is eager for war, the situation is fragile and could escalate.

'By targeting the construction and oil sectors, which are essential to getting Syria back on its feet, sanctions mandated by last year's new law were carefully designed to push the country over the brink by making reconstruction impossible.'

Economic Sanctions

For years, foreign sanctions against Syria have prioritized government insiders and individuals and companies with a role in or connections to the military as well as Syrian financial institutions. Recently, however, the Trump administration and the E.U. have broadened the scope of sanctions. President Trump signed the "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019" on December 20, 2019. According to the U.S. State Department, "Our sanctions under the Caesar Act and Executive Order 13894 are not intended to harm the Syrian people, but rather to promote accountability for the Assad government's violence and destruction..."² This standard refrain, meant to reassure the actual victims of sanctions that the U.S. means them no harm and is acting on their behalf, has frequently been deployed, by Republican and Democratic administrations alike, when economic sanctions are levied against their countries.³ In the case of Syria, the latest sanctions add to many others, some dating to 1979, while extraterritorializing them to replicate the effectiveness of multilateral sanctions without the consent of the international community.

Hence, these sanctions target non-U.S. aid organizations, as well as U.S. ones, preventing them from delivering reconstruction aid. Humanitarian exemptions specified by the law are deliberately vague, as are the requirements the Syrian government would have to meet to obtain sanctions relief. This uncertainty means that none of the players can locate the constantly moving goalposts of legality under the Caesar Act. This, in turn, impels overcompliance by



The city of Homs in Syria.

NGOs and firms that wish to participate in reconstruction efforts but are deterred by fear that they might unwittingly violate provisions of the Caesar Act and thus face the prospect of U.S. retribution that could put them out of business.

By targeting the construction and oil sectors, which are essential to getting Syria back on its feet, sanctions mandated by last year's law were carefully designed to push the country over the brink by making reconstruction impossible. These sanctions provisions prevent any effort, by any firm of any nationality subject to U.S. sanctions, from investing in Syria's crumbling oil infrastructure. As a result, sanctions not only deprive the government of a source of revenue; they also prevent the repair of oil leaks in Syria's decaying pipelines in the northeast. These leaks thus continue to drain into the Khabur and Euphrates rivers. Although the U.S. says it is "protecting" Syria's oilfields in the northeast, it has not repaired the pipelines and won't give the Syrian government access to make repairs.⁴ Thus, U.S. sanctions punish people, who receive only an hour or two of electricity a day, while also poisoning their environment.

These circumstances implicate U.S. interests in two ways. First, the Balkanization of Syria, combined with the socioeconomic, infrastructural, and demographic effects of a long destructive war, will eventually precipitate Syria's collapse. This will generate greater migration and open physical space in Syria to warlords, terrorist groups, and forces subsidized or deployed by outside powers with perceived interests in controlling Syrian territory or influencing events within its borders. A failed state, as recent developments have demonstrated, will radiate violence and endanger neighboring countries in which the U.S. has a direct interest, such as Iraq, Jordan, and potentially Israel, or an indirect interest, such as Lebanon. Second, an escalation of the tit-for-tat battles between Israel and Iran being fought in Syria could pull the U.S. into a conflict it does not seek and which would not serve its interests. For the U.S., it is self-defeating, to say the least, that rather than trying to prevent the collapse of the Syrian state, current policy increases the risk of this outcome.

U.S. Policy Toward Syria: Magical Thinking

It is possible to discern three U.S. policy objectives regarding Syria:

- Even if its rhetoric avoids an explicit call for regime change, the Trump administration, or at least parts of it, hopes to strangle the regime economically and eventually bring it down, either through internal collapse or a political process that would lead to a new political order.
- The campaign of “maximum pressure” is intended to diminish Iranian influence in Syria and in the broader region by making the cost of staying in Syria prohibitive for Iran and its proxies.
- More hawkish members of the Trump administration, led by Secretary Pompeo and Special Representative Jeffrey, want to turn Syria into a quagmire for Putin.⁵ This seems to be opportunistically punitive in intent—and an endeavor to show Moscow that the U.S. will not tolerate Russia’s reentry into the Middle East.



Russian President Vladimir Putin in Athens, Greece, May 27, 2016. The stakes for the United States in Assad’s ouster are not as high as Russia’s stake in his survival. By Ververidis Vasilis.

All three of these objectives share a common feature: They are unattainable because the U.S. lacks the will, skill, resources, and capacity to achieve them. In pursuing these goals with the inadequate tools at hand, the Trump administration will not only fail to eliminate the Assad government but also accelerate Syria’s disintegration.

The animus toward Russia’s presence in Syria has transformed the American role into that of a spoiler, a part typically played by weaker states. Washington’s purpose is to stymie a geopolitical rival, even if doing so does not leave the U.S. better off, while leaving the Syrian population significantly worse off. Superimposed on the plan to bleed Russia in Syria as though it were Afghanistan in the 1980s is a declared goal of forcing Russia into complying with a political process at the U.N. that will yield a free and fair presidential election to replace Assad.

The U.S. is relying on three lines of effort to achieve these goals. First, of course, are the draconian economic sanctions. Second, American forces remain deployed in northeast Syria and support Syrian Kurdish forces to deny the Assad government control of oil resources and roughly a third of Syrian territory—much of it the best agricultural land in the country—primarily for leverage to achieve its broader geopolitical aims in Syria. Third, Israel has been given a green light to attack Iranian and Iranian-backed assets in Syria to reduce any potential threat from Iran and Hezbollah.

Advocates of regime change underestimate just how difficult this would be to achieve. To be sure, there is growing unhappiness with Assad in some areas (e.g., among the Druze), but this discontent does not pose an existential threat to the government. Moreover, from Assad’s perspective, political reform as envisaged by the U.S. would be tantamount to annihilation. This perception is shared by the Sunni business elite and Christian communities as well as the dominant Alawite minority. The Assad government fought against a U.S.-supported insurgency with its back to the wall and did not crack even after it lost Idlib, half of Aleppo, and other parts of the country. During the period that the government was under the greatest military pressure and heavily sanctioned by the West, it managed to scrape together \$8 billion to \$10 billion per year to sustain its forces in the field, pay civil service salaries even in rebel-held areas, and maintain its pension obligations.

The Russians Are in for the Long Haul

The expectation that President Putin will throw Assad under a bus as the costs of stabilization and reconstruction escalate is also misplaced. The survival of the Assad government—no matter how frustrated Putin is with Assad’s intransigence and fecklessness—is a vital national interest for Russia, and in the end the Kremlin will not force Assad out. Russian leaders have never been able to convince themselves that there is a better alternative to Assad. At home, Putin has billed Assad’s victory as the greatest Russian foreign policy accomplishment of the last two decades. Preventing U.S.–engineered regime change is central to realizing Putin’s conception of a more multipolar, less U.S.–centric global order and to demonstrating that Russia, unlike the United States, is a reliable ally—a perception that has helped Russia improve its stature in the Middle East.

The U.S. may want to create a quagmire for Russia in Syria, but with a GDP of roughly \$1.7 trillion (and purchasing power parity three times that sum), a federal budget of approximately \$300 billion, and foreign reserves totaling close to a half a trillion dollars, Russia has the means, if necessary, to prop up a minimally functioning government in Damascus, even if it can’t foot much of the bill for longer-term stabilization and reconstruction, especially if oil prices do not recover.⁶ But as the scope of Russian military operations winds down, Moscow has the option of redirecting these expenditures to provide budgetary support for the government; it can also transfer revenue to the government from phosphate mines it operates in Syria.

In short, the Russian mission in Syria isn’t that expensive relative to Russia’s means, and therefore it is sustainable. The stakes for the U.S. in Assad’s ouster are not as high as Russia’s stake in his survival, and therefore the price Washington is prepared to pay to show the Syrian ruler the door is much lower than the cost the Kremlin is prepared to absorb to see him stay. The United States, in sum, does not have the slightest chance of sinking the Russian Federation in an imaginary Syrian quagmire.

Iran is Also Playing the Long Game

Iran is reeling under the pressure of sanctions, Covid-19, the decline in the price of oil, and the clerical government’s massive mismanagement of the economy. But its ties to Hezbollah—and Iran’s presence in Syria, which is that relationship’s center of gravity—is a vital Iranian interest. It allows Iran to project influence throughout the region and is central to its strategy of deterring potential Israeli strikes. An Iranian retreat from Syria under pressure from the U.S. would deal a significant blow to its interests, image, and influence. Moreover, policy toward Syria is effectively under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has its own financial and manpower resources independent of the elected Iranian government of Hassan Rouhani. The IRGC’s investment in Syria is absolutely central to its institutional interests, not just to Iran’s strategic interests in the region. Tehran, like Moscow, will use all the assets and the allies it has on the ground, which are formidable, to protect its equities. Iran supplies Syria with oil and will continue to do so unless the U.S. decides to sink the tankers that deliver it, which could spur retaliation leading to a war.

‘The protection of the United States’ single most important interest in Syria -- preventing state failure and the attendant instability and upheaval it would create in Syria and the region -- is ill-served by the administration’s campaign of maximum pressure.’

The China Connection

China appears ready to invest significant sums in Syria for infrastructural development, particularly in coastal installations, including deepwater ports and electrical generation and transmission networks. Beijing's exploration of investment opportunities in Iran is clearly not unrelated. A substantial number of Chinese firms are interested in establishing or expanding operations in Syria and seem prepared to weather or avoid the impact of U.S. secondary sanctions. Chinese entry into Syria is consistent with its larger Belt and Road Initiative as well as its national security strategy, which emphasizes the importance of unrestricted access to open ocean and development of coastal infrastructure worldwide.⁷ China's new strategic partnership with Iran as recently disclosed in outline, if it comes to pass, will almost certainly involve significant purchases of Iranian oil, which will help Tehran to sustain its operations in Syria.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

The UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus in late 2018 and has sought to restore the amicable relations with Syria that had prevailed before the civil war. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is similarly inclined but has hesitated for fear of offending President Trump, who is his strongest supporter in the Western world. Both nations would likely participate in a reconstruction program.

Sanctions Don't Overthrow Regimes

Sanctions against individuals occasionally achieve limited objectives, as they did in eliciting Libya's eventual transfer of the Pan Am 103 bombers to U.N. custody, and they are politically attractive because they are perceived as a middle ground between turning a blind eye to bad behavior and going to war. But the punitive sanctions the U.S. has imposed on Syria are intended by the State Department (and many in Congress) to change the regime, not just its behavior. As such, they are misapplied as an instrument of policy and will have counterproductive effects. The hopes and expectations of Assad's critics notwithstanding, turning the U.S. sanctions screw will not force Assad from power.

The destruction and dislocation caused by the civil war have created a humanitarian catastrophe for the Syrian population. Sanctions, combined with the government's egregious behavior, are making the plight of the Syrian people only more harrowing. Moreover, as is often the case with sanctions applied to autocratic regimes in nonmarket-based countries, the ruling elites have used the rationing that attends the imposition of sanctions to enrich themselves through graft and corruption, to reward allies, and to punish opponents of the government.⁵ In other words, Syria has a political economy in which sanctions won't hurt the elite but will stifle economic recovery by strangling legitimate trade, investment, and commercial transactions while encouraging smuggling and other illicit activities.

The Assad government can—and will—transfer the pain of sanctions to a beleaguered population. It is a regrettable fact that those with guns eat first. Even the more draconian sanctions in the Caesar Act are likely to fail in achieving U.S. objectives in Syria for the same reason they have fallen short elsewhere in changing state behavior and policies the United States opposes: In contrast to the 2015 accord governing Iran's nuclear programs, which was the result of both onerous sanctions and credible diplomacy, the Syrian sanctions are tethered to an ineffective engagement strategy and a negotiating posture lashed to maximalist and unattainable goals. In fact, there is little evidence that economic sanctions ever achieve transformational objectives and ample evidence that they are counterproductive. Despite the decades-long quest for so-called "smart sanctions," the smartest sanctions—commonly marshaled justifications notwithstanding—tend to strengthen the very regimes they are designed to hurt and instead punish the very societies—powerless populations with no capacity to influence their rulers—they are supposed to protect.⁸

U.S. goals in Syria and the means used to achieve them will make it far more difficult to prevent Syria from collapsing. In fact, the current policy, rather than seeking to prevent this outcome, is intended to trigger state failure, with

almost no consideration of consequences, either intended or unintended, in the unlikely event it is successful or even if the policy fails. State failure and continued conflict will increase refugee flows—potentially sending up to an additional two million Syrians across borders—instead of reversing them, thereby weakening U.S. friends and allies and contributing to the country’s ongoing humanitarian catastrophe. The collapse of the Syrian economy and the inability of the government to extend and consolidate its control over all Syrian territory will create greater instability on Israel’s border and open up “ungoverned” space for the movement into the area of an assortment of implacable jihadist groups. A policy aimed at regime change is not just an exercise in futility; it will deepen the misery of the Syrian people while doing nothing to advance American interests in Syria.

For all these reasons, the centerpiece of U.S. policy should be to prevent state collapse: As awful as Assad has been toward his citizens, does the United States think Syrians would be better off in the chaos state collapse would entail and the opportunities it would present for outside powers to wreak further havoc on the country? We’ve seen how well Iran can implant itself in Iraq and, to a lesser degree, in Yemen during their civil wars. And now, with the apparent collapse of what passes as a state in Lebanon, it is hardly in the U.S. interest to see a much larger and more strategically significant Syria also collapse. One failed state in the Mediterranean is bad enough; two would be a disaster.

‘The price Washington is prepared to pay to show the Syrian ruler the door is much lower than the cost the Kremlin is prepared to absorb to see him stay.’

Perversely, however, current policy toward Syria leaves both the Syrians and the United States worse off. Washington should set its sights on the least-worst outcome, which would mean leaving the Syrians better off while leaving the U.S. no worse off. Reaching this state will require linking existing sanctions to more realistic goals—and that will inevitably mean the United States will have to settle for an outcome that does not include regime change. What might these concessions to reality look like?

‘Terms of Trade’

If the main threat to U.S. interests is the prospect of a failed Syrian state, then the paramount U.S. objective in Syria must be to help prevent state collapse. In parallel with efforts to avert this outcome, an attempt should be made to engineer an arrangement that would separate Israeli and Iranian forces and limit the possibility of hostilities, at least in Syria. Neither objective is achievable without Russian, Syrian, and ultimately Iranian cooperation. Syrian consent is pivotal, and Assad will not cooperate while under sanctions unless he is given positive incentives. Humanitarian, reconstruction, and stabilization assistance cannot proceed unless the U.S. waives the secondary sanctions imposed under the Caesar Act. Russia will be motivated to play a constructive role. Moscow has long sought European participation in reconstruction projects; sanctions relief would clear a path toward this end.

It is true that Assad and his cronies are thoroughly corrupt and will do their utmost to channel aid and investment into companies and projects in which they have financial interests. Given the urgency of the problem, however, donors and investors should consider this a regrettable—but-unavoidable transaction cost and, within limits, not make the elimination of entrenched corruption a condition for participation.⁹ Donors would obviously not explicitly permit corrupt behavior or diversion of funds and would put in place safeguards in accordance with best practices. But the best should not become the enemy of the good.

The U.S.—either directly or, less desirably, through Russia—would propose the following exchange with Damascus: The U.S. would offer to waive sanctions mandated by the Caesar Act and permit Syrian civilian employees to resume control and operation of oilfields, refineries, pumping stations, and pipelines now under the control of the U.S. and the SDF and reopen the al-Tanf crossing to commercial traffic. In return, Syria would release U.S. detainees, permit NGOs

limited and controlled access to Syrian territory under government control, impose constraints on Iranian and Iranian proxy operations and movement within Syrian territory, and allow the Red Cross and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, into Syrian prisons to visit prisoners and tally numbers. Damascus would also be obliged to provide more information to families on the status of prisoners, shift trials for Syrian detainees from military to civilian courts, and facilitate to the extent possible the return of Syria's three million to four million refugees. On the military side, the Syrian government would also prohibit Iran's deployment and use of missiles and drones capable of targeting Israeli territory.

Constraints on Iranian activity in Syria would also include a halt to the transfer of precision-guided munitions to Lebanese Hezbollah, the upgrade kits for existing Hezbollah missiles, and facilities for fabrication of missiles and rockets. All sides would understand that these measures to limit Iranian military-related activity would result in a halt to Israeli attacks on Syrian territory; the U.S. would be prepared to provide private Israeli assurances to this effect.

'The Asad government can – and will – transfer the pain of sanctions to a beleaguered population. It is a regrettable fact that those with guns eat first.'

This arrangement, however, would not be negotiated between Israel and Syria or Iran; rather, between Syria and Iran. Israel is not viable as a negotiating partner. Its explicit involvement would be rejected by Syria and Iran. The objectives should be framed in terms of the exercise of Syrian government authority over its territory and the presence of foreign forces within its borders. As a practical matter, such an initiative would transform the underlying issue into an alliance-management problem for Iran. Broader Arab backing would be essential, perhaps from the Arab League, but at a minimum actively involving Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt. Exclusion of Israel from this process would also preclude Iran's likely insistence on compensatory Israeli steps, which would transform a Syrian–Iranian agreement into an extension of the broader rivalry between the two countries.

Given the complexity of these arrangements, the low level of trust among the parties—in particular, the Assad government's poor track record in adhering to obligations it has undertaken throughout the conflict—implementation would have to be carefully phased such that the reliability of the parties could be established. One potential sequencing of incentives would be: 1) E.U. reconstruction assistance, which would hinge on a waiver of U.S. secondary sanctions; 2) humanitarian sanctions exemptions; 3) partial sanctions relief; 4) removal of all sanctions, and 5) lifting Syria's State Sponsor of Terrorism designation with corresponding steps from Damascus. This process could begin with modest measures, such as providing more information on prisoners and allowing UNHCR visits to detainees; it could end with more restrictions on Iranian operations in Syria, undertakings as to the treatment of detainees and possibly a degree of counterterrorism cooperation.

Guidelines for Aid Delivery

In addition to significant and lasting sanctions relief, the Syrian government will also want assistance for stabilization and reconstruction. The U.S., Europe, the wealthy Gulf Arab states, and potentially China, all of which share an interest in rebuilding Syria, together have the means to provide aid on the scale required, given enough time. That said, there is no secret about Assad's optimal outcome: He wants sanctions relief and the aid, trade, and investment it will bring without having to make political and economic concessions that he would find unpalatable. He will, therefore, try to game negotiations to get as much and give as little as he can.

It is inevitable that tensions will arise in reconciling Assad's desire to use aid to repay and reward his allies with the need for international donors to create a monitoring regime, coordinated through Damascus, that ensures the

effectiveness of aid. In considering this tradeoff, donors should recognize that Assad will benefit in some ways from the aid but benefits for the broader population are worth the cost.

How could the United States and other donors, under the agreement described above, keep Assad's feet to the fire? Before answering this question, it is important first to understand just how difficult and complicated it will be to deliver massive assistance for stabilization, reconstruction, and humanitarian assistance. It will also be necessary to understand Assad's red lines and to probe for how much latitude he is prepared to give donors within these parameters.

It is difficult to overstate the challenge of reconstruction. A principal impediment will be the conflicting agendas and priorities of the main protagonists. For the West, there will be a strong temptation to use reconstruction and humanitarian assistance to loosen Assad's grip on power. But for Assad, the Russians, and the Iranians, reconstruction presents an opportunity to consolidate the government's victory. This gap appears unbridgeable unless the West is prepared to help rebuild the state even if it remains under the control of the Assad government. This is not to say the U.S. and other donors should refrain from making reconstruction and other forms of economic and financial aid conditional on Syrian and Russian commitments, especially to economic reforms. It does mean that Western commitments should be limited to accepting conditions that will enable the effective delivery of assistance. Washington should also consider seeking concessions from Moscow or Tehran in return for a more cooperative U.S. approach toward Syria.

The reconstruction process will be agonizingly slow, hampered by numerous factors: corruption and cronyism, capacity constraints and bureaucratic lethargy, the country's continuing political and diplomatic fractiousness, the absence of security in areas that have not been pacified, geopolitical rivalries among the states maneuvering for influence in post-conflict Syria, and the absence of any international consensus on Syria's political and constitutional future.

More important, if Assad has his way Syrian reconstruction will not be needs-based but rather driven by political considerations. The Syrian ruler will, therefore, seek to ration and prioritize resources in the service of his own survival and the survival of the Alawite community. The last thing Assad will want to do, therefore, is rebuild areas that were dominated by his opponents, who would then use economic recovery and greater local autonomy as springboards for making comebacks. Unless these problems are resolved, or at least ameliorated, the underlying battle for Syria will be fought in a proxy war over reconstruction, and it will not be feasible to sustain any multinational reconstruction effort.

The politics of humanitarian assistance will also be complicated. From Assad's perspective, the return of Syrian migrants from abroad or the resettlement of its huge internally displaced population would exacerbate the country's economic and security problems. At a minimum, Assad will want to control the scope and pace of humanitarian assistance so that it aligns with job opportunities and the delivery of essential local services. (In fact, the government has already imposed restrictions that make it more difficult for Syrian migrants to return from abroad; at the same time, many of these migrants may not want to return to Syria.) Assad and the security services understand that

'The centerpiece of U.S. policy should be to prevent state collapse: as awful as Assad has been towards his citizens, does the United States really think Syrians would be better off in the chaos a state collapse would entail and the opportunities it would present for outside powers to wreak further havoc on the country?'



People wait for the call to prayer before they eat their Iftar meal provided by a group of volunteers, in a damaged neighborhood in Atarib, Aleppo countryside. May 7, 2020. REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi.

refugees are a potential petri dish for growing opposition to the government and that tending to their needs would be a significant drain on Syria's limited resources while diverting funds from government supporters. Moreover, the Assad government has neither the will nor the means to implement a nationwide reconstruction effort designed to improve governance and rebuild institutions that can deliver better services to the vast majority of the Syrian public, even if this is done on a decentralized and local basis.¹⁰

Under the best of circumstances, therefore, the outlook for an internationally led reconstruction effort, especially if the U.S. and Europeans are in its forefront, is highly problematic even if there is a modicum of cooperation from the Assad government. The Syrian ruler has made clear that he does not want Western support for reconstruction because of the West's previous support for the Syrian opposition and the political and human rights conditions that Western donors would attach to this assistance.

If all these obstacles could be overcome or mitigated, international donors would need to approach foreign assistance for Syria with the following considerations in mind:

- An international contact group, with Syrian participation, should be formed to provide overall guidance, planning, and execution of humanitarian relief and refugee resettlement assistance, with on-the-ground coordination of this assistance in targeted areas. The priority and sequencing of these areas should be determined by mutual agreement between the Assad government and the contact group to ensure that aid does not flow exclusively to Assad's cronies and supporters while neglecting disadvantaged populations.
- For all intents and purposes, Assad is not going anywhere and neither are the Turks, at least for the foreseeable future, regardless of whether U.S. forces stay or leave and the country; in effect, Syria has been

partitioned, those extending foreign aid should recognize this reality. Accordingly, the delivery of stabilization and reconstruction assistance, at least in areas controlled by Turkey, will have to be executed at the local level and on a decentralized basis to improve service delivery.¹¹

- Because the institutions of the state have been battered by the civil war, the central government will need a massive infusion of technical assistance for capacity building. This assistance, much of which can be provided by the World Bank, the IMF, and perhaps officials from Russia, China, and Arab countries, should begin to move into place before programmatic funding is delivered. If this sequencing is not followed, much of the aid flow will be squandered and Syria's absorptive capacity will be severely constrained.

'Exclusion of Israel from this process would also obviate Iranian insistence on compensatory Israeli steps that would transform a Syrian-Iranian agreement into an extension of the broader rivalry between the two countries.'

- The central government should be allowed access to some of the revenues from domestic oil production, provided this is done under international supervision—for example, by the World Bank or the U.N.—and Damascus commits to setting aside a specified portion of these resources to meet the needs of the Syrian people for essential services.
- Local Kurdish forces should be allowed to participate in the administration of the stabilization and reconstruction program in areas under their control and to benefit from oil revenues deriving from these areas. As the one political concession the U.S. would seek from the Assad government, Washington should insist on *de facto* Kurdish autonomy for these areas. The Kurds will likely make their peace with Assad and he will accept an accommodation with them, a point already made publicly by the Syrian government.
- All U.S. and international aid should be back-loaded to the maximum degree possible and benchmarked to Assad's fulfillment of concrete commitments within

specific timelines. If the Syrian government fails to make good on these commitments, there should be agreement among all donors on a "snap back" provision for U.S. and E.U. sanctions. But those commitments should be based on reconstruction targets, not political concessions.

- Initial funding commitments should be limited to supporting small-scale joint pilot projects to test Assad's credibility. This plan would be developed by the contact group, which would agree on the amount of aid to be delivered and the means of delivery, the source of funding to execute these projects, the timeline for project completion, the indicators of progress, and the metrics for success. If phase one is judged to be a success, the program would move to implement subsequent phases.
- Assad should also be required to show his *bona fides* by agreeing to release, over an agreed time frame, all political detainees who are not members of jihadist or extremist groups—in other words, members of the moderate anti-Assad opposition. In parallel with this process, aid donors would agree to work with the Assad government on phased and controlled repatriation of Syrian refugees and resettlement of internally displaced persons. UNHCR access inside Syria would be a key step in this process.

- The Assad government would have to agree to lift all restrictions it has placed on organizations, Syrian and non-Syrian alike, that would deliver humanitarian aid, provided that these groups accept monitoring of aid delivery, perhaps by the U.N. or a team of Arab League observers. Enthusiastic, wall-to-wall Syrian compliance with this requirement could scarcely be expected; rather, there would be an ongoing and probably unavoidable process of pushing and shoving among the parties regarding each individual case.
- Any U.S. participation in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction operations would have to be carried out with the approval or acquiescence of the Assad government and, at a minimum, the tacit consent of the Russian and Iranian governments and the forces they control inside Syria. Since it is unlikely the Assad government would permit the U.S. to deliver aid through international (and especially American) or Syrian nongovernmental organizations, such assistance would have to be funneled through the Syrian government, raising serious questions about monitoring, accountability, graft, and whether the aid was reaching its intended recipients. It will be critically important, therefore, to establish an effective system of safeguards to monitor and account for this aid with rigorous oversight and reporting requirements. One possibility would be to establish an international commission to report on waste, fraud, and mismanagement of aid programs; this group would include technocrats from the Syrian government and international financial institutions and donors.

VII. Conclusion

Syria is where good policy options and outcomes for the United States go to die. As is so often the case with the most complex and intractable foreign policy challenges, American statecraft is stuck with trying to achieve the least-bad outcome given realities on the ground that, while unpalatable, are also unchangeable in view of the limits on U.S. influence and the costs and risks Washington is willing to bear.

This paper argues that the complete collapse of the Syrian state would be the worst possible outcome for advancing U.S. interests. It is admittedly unsatisfying to accept the reality that the Assad government cannot be coerced or negotiated out of power—and to deal with a murderer who has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹² If the United States cannot get rid of Assad, it does have the capacity to help prevent Syria from falling further into the abyss and to alleviate the misery of the Syrian people. As one contemplates the justification for the Caesar Act used by one of its main proponents—“Assad is the source of the Syrians’ suffering”¹³—it’s appropriate to think in terms that an ethicist might:

If the aim of sanctions is to communicate a message or punish wrongdoing, then sanctions are on weak ethical ground because they create situations in which ‘human suffering becomes merely a device of communication’ and ‘a wrongdoer remains untouched and an innocent person is gratuitously harmed.’¹⁴

There remains the question of what happens if and when reconstruction and stabilization activity gains traction. Presumably, Syrian politics will revive. Although the opposition recognized by the West and its Arab and Turkish partners is unlikely to play a part in Syria’s future, and remaining insurgents are primarily local actors without national salience, there is a civil society and an opposition, and there are aspiring politicians and millions of Syrians who just want to live decent lives. They are now being pauperized by the West to punish Assad for his ugly victory. They have no love for the Assad government; their views range from grudging tolerance to hatred, as is readily apparent. But civil society, the business class, and average Syrians will not be able to think about change until they can breathe. During the Balkan wars, it was only after Slobodan Milošević had survived the 1999 NATO bombing and appeared secure that circumstances stabilized sufficiently for the opposition to rally against him. The policy advocated here is not intended to strengthen the government. Rather, it is to restore Syrian society to viability, so enabling Syrians to begin thinking again about how to secure their future. At this difficult juncture, reliable food security, electricity, and adequate health care are essential to the eventual renewal of a political process.

In the interim, to borrow an insight from Reinhold Niebuhr, policymakers in Washington need to accept the things they cannot change, have the courage to change the things they can, and possess the wisdom to know the difference.

VIII. Endnotes

¹ For the conception of strategic interest underpinning this analysis, see Paul Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi. “A New Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America’s Misguided Policy of Domination.” Quincy Paper No. 2. July 2020.

² Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State. “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, Fact Sheet.” June 17, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act/>

³ See, for example, Ambassador Martin Indyk’s justification for sanctions against Iraq in 1993: “it should be clear that our quarrel is not with the Iraqi people. Their plight is the responsibility solely of the dictatorship in Baghdad.” “The Clinton Administration’s Approach to the Middle East.” Sorel Symposium, Washington Institute for Near East Policy. May 1993. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east>.

⁴ In late July, the United States awarded a contract to an unspecified American oil company to operate oilfields on behalf of the SDF. Whether this leads to necessary modernization of infrastructure is unknown, but the arrangement confirms Washington’s intention to deny revenues to the majority of ordinary Syrians not residing in areas controlled by the U.S.-backed militia. See, “Syria says U.S. oil firm signed deal with Kurdish-led rebels.” Reuters. August 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-oil-usa/syria-says-u-s-oil-firm-signed-deal-with-kurdish-led-rebels-idUSKBN24YOFD>; and Matthew Petti, “Take the Oil? American Oil Company Finally Gets a Syrian Oil Deal,” National Interest July 30 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/take-oil-american-oil-company-finally-gets-syrian-oil-deal-165902>

⁵ Doran, Michael, and David Asher. “Transcript: Maximum Pressure on the Assad Regime for Its Chemical Weapons Use and Other Atrocities.” The Hudson Institute. May 15, 2020. <https://www.hudson.org/research/16032-transcript-maximum-pressure-on-the-assad-regime-for-its-chemical-weapons-use-and-other-atrocities>

⁶ Cf., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU>; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>

⁷ Dorsey, James M. “Syria is Tempting, But Will China Bite?” BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1, 648. July 17, 2020. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/syria-reconstruction-china/>

⁸ See, for example, Susan Hannah Allen and David J Lektzian. “Economic Sanctions: A Blunt Instrument?” *Journal of Peace Research*. 01/2013, Volume 50, Issue 1. <https://journals-sagepub-com.colby.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022343312456224>; See also Robert Pape’s classic essay, “Why Sanctions Don’t Work.” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall, 1997). 90–136.

⁹ The U.S. long tolerated these costs in connection with foreign arms sales, as did the U.K. and other major exporters of weapons systems to Persian Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. The beneficiaries were foreign elites and American shareholders. Insisting on unimpeachable integrity when the beneficiaries of humanitarian goods and services are ordinary Syrians would be unreasonable and unjust.

¹⁰ Syrian Legislative Decree 107, passed in August 2011, could provide the basis for at least some downward reapportionment of power if the government and the opposition can resolve differences over interpretation and implementation. Almost all opposition groups support the law because they see it as a stepping stone to more widespread decentralization; the government, on the other hand, views it more restrictively as the endpoint of decentralization.

¹¹ Brown, Frances Z. "The Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria." Carnegie Endowment Paper. October 26, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/26/dilemmas-of-stabilization-assistance-case-of-syria-pub-77574>

¹² There are many examples in the annals of American diplomacy of the United States dealing with odious and, indeed, murderous regimes. These include those of Stalin, Mao, Slobodan Milošević, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, and Pol Pot, all of whom killed, tortured, imprisoned, and committed egregious human rights violations against their own citizens.

¹³ Heydemann, Steven. "The Caesar Act and a Pathway Out of Conflict in Syria." The Brookings Institution. June 19, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/19/the-caesar-act-and-a-pathway-out-of-conflict-in-syria/>

¹⁴ Marks, Stephen P. "Economic Sanctions as Human Rights Violations: Reconciling Political and Public Health Imperatives," in Sofia Gruskin, Michael A. Grodin, George J. Annas, and Stephen P. Marks, eds. *Perspectives on Health and Human Rights*. Psychology Press. 2005. 369.

IX. About the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." — John Quincy Adams

The foreign policy of the United States has become detached from any defensible conception of U.S. interests and from a decent respect for the rights and dignity of humankind. Political leaders have increasingly deployed the military in a costly, counterproductive, and indiscriminate manner, normalizing war and treating armed dominance as an end in itself.

Moreover, much of the foreign policy community in Washington has succumbed to intellectual lethargy and dysfunction. It suppresses or avoids serious debate and fails to hold policymakers and commentators accountable for disastrous policies. It has forfeited the confidence of the American public. The result is a foreign policy that undermines American interests and tramples on American values while sacrificing the stores of influence that the United States had earned.

The Quincy Institute is an action-oriented think tank whose intent is to lay the foundation for a new foreign policy centered on diplomatic engagement and military restraint. The current, rare moment presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring together like-minded progressives and conservatives and set U.S. foreign policy on a sensible and humane footing. Our intent is to seize this opportunity while it lies before us. Our country's current circumstances demand it.



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