



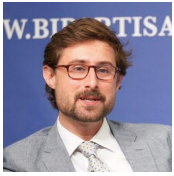
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Lessons of the Syrian Conflict

Toward a Better Intervention Debate

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	Executive Summary
02	Background
04	Toward a Better Intervention Debate
10	The Way Forward in Syria
14	Conclusion

Executive Summary

In October 2019, *The New York Times* published a feature story describing how “Russia, Turkey and Bashar al-Assad carved up northern Syria as the Americans retreated.”¹ It is hard to think of a more telling, and damning, one-sentence encapsulation of both the failure of American policy in Syria and the skewed political discourse compounding it. Somehow the United States was retreating from a place it never wanted to occupy—and the Syrian regime’s success in partially clawing back control of a country it once ruled with an iron fist was prime evidence of American decline.

This paper begins from the premise that Washington will increasingly be confronted with conflicts where it can neither determine the outcome nor stay out entirely, and the country needs better strategies for charting a middle course. Given the scale of the tragedy that has befallen Syria, and the damaging repercussions it continues to have for U.S. interests in the region, few would argue that Washington’s handling of the Syrian civil war represents a success. Yet there remains no consensus on the nature of Washington’s failure. In a highly charged debate, many critics are adamant that faster and more forceful military intervention could have secured a more favorable outcome. Others, by contrast, are equally insistent that Washington should have done even less.

It is possible that the ideal form of intervention advocated by interventionists or the ideal form of nonintervention advocated by noninterventionists would have created a better outcome in Syria. Instead, Washington pursued a sometimes-inconsistent intermediate approach that achieved the worst of both worlds. The United States engaged in the conflict in a way that put its credibility at stake without positively affecting the outcome. By examining how this happened, this paper seeks to ensure that Washington can avoid similar failures in the future.

In recent years, think tanks and analysts have argued that, as the United States confronts an increasingly multipolar world during a period of domestic stress, it must craft a foreign policy that more effectively matches ends to means.² Syria represents a clear mismatch in this regard. A more forceful intervention would have

required the application of greater means than many Americans were prepared to commit—and still may not have produced a better outcome. Yet the ends that Washington desired—maintaining stability in the Middle East, preventing mass atrocities, and containing Iranian and Russian influence—remain important ones. This paper suggests four broad lessons for how Washington can pursue its interests without overcommitting when faced with foreign conflicts in the future.

1. *Other Actors Have Agency.* Both advocates and opponents of intervention have often relied on unproven assumptions about the behavior of other state and non-state actors to bolster their case. For example, some interventionists now insist that more U.S. support for the opposition earlier in the war would have preempted Russian and Iranian escalation rather than provoked it. Opponents of escalation, by contrast, assume that without U.S. encouragement, the rebellion simply would have died away. Both assumptions fail to account for the way other actors were likely to use their agency. As a result, neither strategy was likely to work as well as its advocates imagined.
2. *Positive Thinking Can Be Perilous.* Rather than confront the mismatch between what America wanted (Bashar al-Assad gone) and what America was willing to do to make that happen (not much), many policymakers were too quick to assume that the Syrian president was likely to fall anyway. This was not a foolish assumption, but policymakers should have been quicker to question it precisely because it offered too easy a path to their desired end state.
3. *Caveats Do Not Count.* To reconcile modest means with ambitious goals, Washington also sought to publicly articulate limited objectives. For example, in the same breath that President Barack Obama said Assad must go, he announced that America “cannot and will not impose this transition.”³ Yet this clearly stated caveat got him no credit and did little to dampen expectations in Washington or abroad. Recognizing this, leaders must speak with a greater awareness that people will inevitably interpret their words as they want.

This paper begins from the premise that Washington will increasingly be confronted with conflicts where it can neither determine the outcome nor stay out entirely, and the country needs better strategies for charting a middle course.

4. *The United States Does Not Always Need to Do Something.* Many policymaking discussions remain framed by the implicit assumption that America can and should do something in every crisis. Yet the desire to “do something” has often led Washington to respond to crises with a series of half measures that hurt more than they help. In the case of Syria, the importance of doing something was stressed by well-meaning politicians and pundits who hoped they could pressure America to do more. But advocates of this approach should also anticipate the risks when it fails. Likewise, politicians hoping to pursue noninterventionist strategies should also plan for the fact that America’s desire to do something will almost certainly persist.

The United States cannot change its decisions over the last 10 years. But it can learn from them to pursue more pragmatic and measured policies today. To help mitigate the ongoing harm Syria’s civil war is causing to both U.S. interests and the people of Syria, the Biden administration should:

1. *Support negotiations toward preserving partial autonomy in Idlib and northeast Syria.* Only two significant parts of Syria remain outside of Assad’s control, and in both cases this ability to resist Assad is linked to the presence of foreign troops. Rather than assume this military leverage will enable the status quo to go on indefinitely, Washington should use it to negotiate a sustainable arrangement with the regime that allows these regions to maintain as much autonomy as possible.
2. *Engage with Russia only where leverage exists.* A decade of U.S. attempts to negotiate with Russia showed that Moscow was not interested in a diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war so long as it could obtain better results on the battlefield. But rather than see this as an argument for increased military involvement, Washington should pursue diplomacy more realistically by taking advantage of other forms of leverage and facts on the ground that favor a political settlement.
3. *Link sanctions relief to achievable goals.* Current sanctions seek to either significantly reshape the regime’s capabilities and behavior or precipitate its collapse. There is no clear evidence they will have this effect. The administration should be willing to bargain limited sanctions relief for concrete concessions from the regime, specifically greater humanitarian access throughout Syria and the consolidation of cease-fires in northwest and northeast Syria.

Background

It is impossible to neatly summarize the stages of the Syrian civil war or America’s shifting policy response. But reviewing how both developed over the past decade provides important background for discussing the imperfect choices Washington faced.

Pre-Conflict Protests, 2011

Domestic protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad began in March 2011. Assad’s security forces responded with violence, and during the summer events escalated rapidly. In the context of the Arab Spring, and the 2011 ouster of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, many in Syria and the West were optimistic that Assad would reform or resign. In this period Washington stressed the need to avoid violence and supported dialogue between the regime and opposition figures. In July, the U.S. ambassador signaled support for the protests by visiting the city of Hama, a symbolic focal point for the anti-Assad opposition.⁴ In early August, the Turkish foreign minister, who had been urging Assad to reform, visited Damascus to declare that Ankara had “run out of patience.”⁵ Then, on August 18, amid escalating fighting on the ground, President Barack Obama declared that “Assad must go.”⁶

The Conflict Begins, 2011–2013

The transformation from protest to civil war occurred quickly during the summer of 2011. In June, defections from the Syrian military led to the uncoordinated creation of the Free Syrian Army. The emergence of more explicitly Islamist groups followed, including Ahrar al-Sham in late 2011 and Jabhat al-Nusra in early 2012. At the political level, the Syrian National Council developed from a diverse group of exiles in October 2011. By the summer of 2012, rebel gains, along with the assassination of the Syrian defense minister, prompted Iran and Hezbollah to escalate on Assad’s behalf.

During this stage of the conflict, Washington’s regional partners took the lead in arming the opposition, with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar providing weapons to their preferred rebel groups. Washington, in turn, grew worried about the increasing fragmentation and radicalization of the rebels. In mid-2012, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and CIA Director David Petraeus proposed a plan to arm the opposition in a more systematic manner through the CIA. Obama rejected the plan but sought increased CIA vetting of the arms provided by U.S. partners.

The Conflict Deepens, 2013–2015

Between 2013 and 2015, both the regime and the opposition saw their battlefield fortunes rise and fall. But even at his weakest points Assad remained sufficiently confident in victory to reject a negotiated solution. Meanwhile, the war took an increasing toll on the civilian population. In Washington, growing enthusiasm for arming the opposition was offset by growing fears about its radicalism. In the spring of 2013, Obama reluctantly allowed the CIA to begin directly providing arms to select rebel groups. By June, the International Crisis Group predicted that, in place of a clear victory or diplomatic settlement, the most likely outcome was one “in which allies give both sides enough [support] to survive but not prevail,” and thereby “perpetuate a proxy war with Syrians as primary victims.”⁷

In August 2013, the U.S. intervention debate was upended but ultimately unchanged when Assad used sarin gas to kill over a thousand civilians in an opposition-controlled suburb of Damascus.⁸ The Obama administration prepared to launch a punitive strike against the regime, creating widespread hope among rebels that, as in Libya, this would evolve into a campaign to topple Assad. Obama, however, declined to follow through with the strike, instead accepting a Russian proposal to remove Assad’s chemical stockpiles. Obama’s refusal to intervene dampened, but by no means silenced, the expectations of those who hoped that the United States would eventually act to secure an opposition victory. Though debate continued, a number of developments, including Russia’s intervention and the rise of the Islamic State group (ISIS), soon focused Washington on more limited goals.

Regime Consolidation, 2015–2017

In the summer of 2014, the rapid expansion of ISIS across northern Syria and Iraq transformed America’s involvement in Syria into a counterterror mission. By fall, U.S. planes were striking ISIS targets in Syria and airdropping weapons to besieged Kurdish fighters in the city of Kobani. Officials in Washington acknowledged in the abstract that a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian civil war was the best and most lasting way to eliminate the conditions that gave rise to ISIS. But with the group beheading Americans and launching terror attacks in Europe, American voters demanded their government find a more short-term solution. From this point on, the campaign to defeat ISIS came to dominate U.S. policy toward Syria. When the United States finally deployed boots on the ground, starting with a small

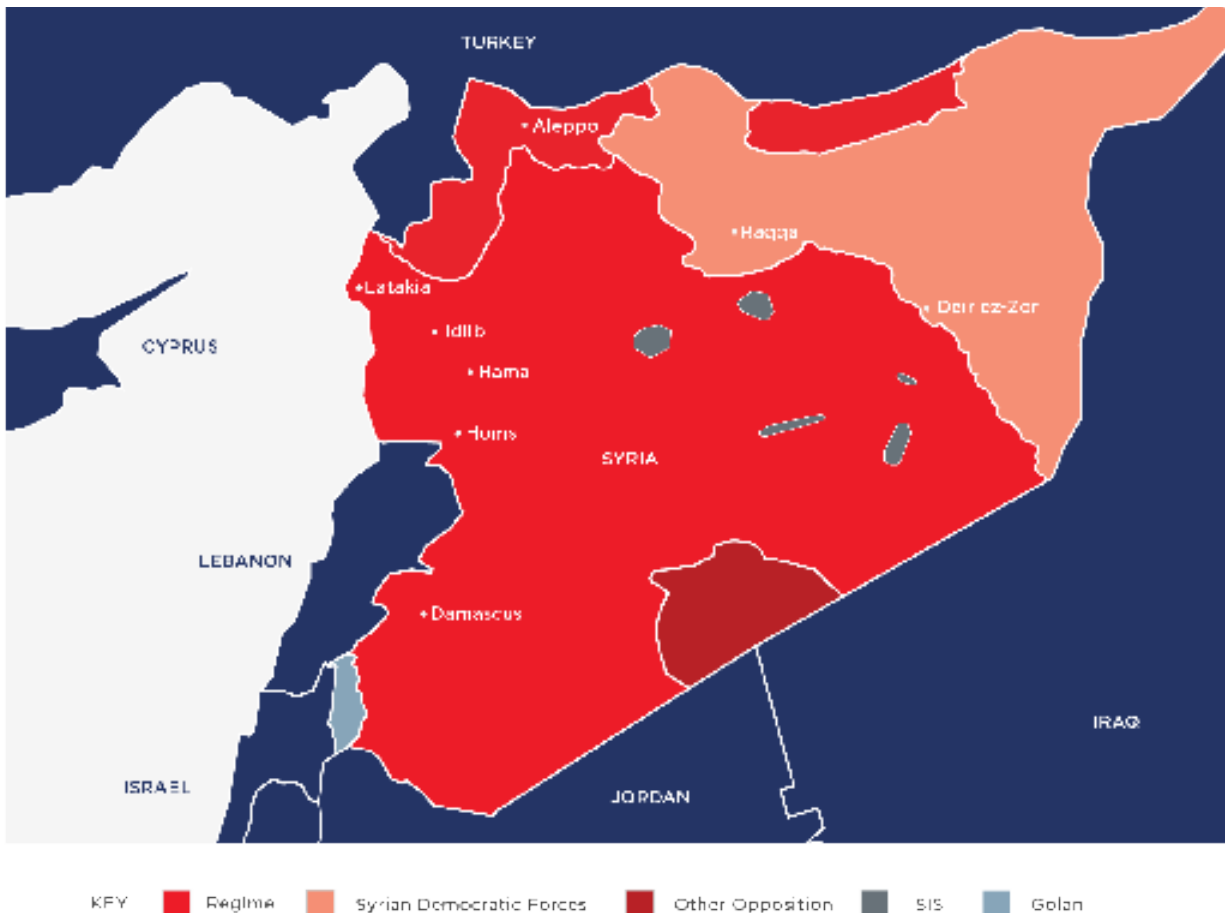
number of special operations forces in 2015, there was little interest left in confronting Assad.

America’s shift toward fighting ISIS did not immediately improve Assad’s fortunes, however. By mid-2015, the accumulated strains of global sanctions and military attrition had weakened the regime, leading to mounting concern on the part of its foreign backers. Russia grew so alarmed that it deployed airplanes, military advisors, and mercenaries to assist Assad. While Russia presented its intervention in counterterror terms, Russian airstrikes instead targeted more moderate forces, not to mention civilian hospitals.⁹ By 2016, particularly after the fall of Aleppo to Assad and his allies, Obama accepted that Russian intervention had ensured the survival of the regime. But he also suggested that Russia would soon find itself in a quagmire and hoped Moscow might eventually help bring its client in Damascus to the negotiating table.¹⁰ To date, neither has happened.

Sanctions and Stalemate, 2017–Today

President Donald Trump’s hawkish rhetoric about Iran, coupled with his frequently stated desire to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, created considerable confusion about his administration’s policy. In 2017 and 2018, Trump launched limited missile strikes in response to the regime’s use of chemical weapons.¹¹ But he showed little interest in further intervention. After U.S.-backed Kurdish forces had largely defeated ISIS in December 2018, Trump created a domestic political crisis by announcing he would withdraw U.S. forces completely.¹² His advisors convinced him to reverse his decision, only for the crisis to repeat itself less than a year later. In October 2019, Trump approved a Turkish incursion that left the U.S. presence in northeast Syria increasingly tenuous. Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress passed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, a stringent set of sanctions that dealt a further blow to Syria’s already devastated economy.

The Syrian civil war is by no means over. The future of northeast Syria is in doubt, while Turkish and regime forces continue to confront each other in Idlib. The regime is still bombing rebel-held territory and struggling to rebuild in the face of crippling poverty and international isolation. Yet barring dramatic and unexpected developments, the regime appears to have reconsolidated its control over the shattered remains of much of the country. If the international community’s options were profoundly imperfect at the outset of this conflict, they are even worse today.



Toward a Better Intervention Debate

Drawing a workable lesson from the last decade of Syria policy requires constructive reflection on the debate over what went wrong. The intensity of this debate has often obfuscated whether it was Washington’s ambitions or its timidity that was at fault. As a result, the failure has provided fodder for those who see U.S. foreign policy as too interventionist and those who see it as too restrained.¹³

Charting a realistic course requires people on both poles of the debate to recognize that coherence and consistency must be goals in themselves. It also requires policymakers to split the difference between opposing impulses in a clear and constructive way. That means prioritizing U.S. interests and making, rather than dodging, difficult decisions about the country’s international commitments. More broadly, it means recognizing both the value and limits of American power—and articulating more clearly when and how to harness it.¹⁴

This section identifies four lessons that can help policymakers think more constructively about intervention in the future: (1) anticipate the agency of foreign actors, (2) question positive thinking, (3) prepare for caveats to be ignored, and (4) resist the pressure to do something just for the sake of doing something.

Other Actors Have Agency

It is striking that some of the most popular and enduring arguments in the U.S. intervention debate relied on subsequently discredited assumptions about how foreign actors would behave. This tendency was most apparent in calls for intervention that discounted the likelihood of Russian or Iranian escalation. But it can also be found in ongoing claims from those on the other side of the argument who insist that without U.S. support the rebellion would have ended sooner and with less bloodshed. Though it is not, in the abstract, novel to suggest that foreign countries have a say in foreign policy outcomes, facets of the Syria debate reveal how difficult the role of foreign actors can be to anticipate, or even, at times, to recognize in retrospect.

The public debate over U.S. military intervention in Syria began in earnest in late 2011 as it became clear that popular protests against the Assad regime were metastasizing into a military conflict. Even at this early stage, some policy analysts were quick to call for a robust intervention intended to bring down the Assad regime quickly and decisively.¹⁵ But it soon became clear that neither the U.S. public nor the Obama administration was eager to launch such a decisive intervention. In this context, much of the debate between 2011 and 2015 inevitably focused on what degree of force would be necessary to

achieve positive outcomes on the ground. But many of these discussions failed to fully account for the possible response of foreign actors.¹⁶

Obama himself ultimately came to view military intervention as an all or nothing prospect. This was most evident in his decision not to retaliate for Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013. In a September 10, 2013, speech to the nation, Obama argued that the strikes he was contemplating were narrowly focused on punishing the regime, not toppling it.¹⁷ In response to the concern that retaliatory strikes could put America on the "slippery slope to war," Obama promised that "I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria."¹⁸ Yet he seems to have quickly decided that the limited approach he was promising would prove unsustainable: Among other reasons he subsequently gave for refusing to strike, Obama explained that the "most important" was "our assessment that while we could inflict some damage on Assad ... What I would then face was the prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States ... and that that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it."¹⁹ The risk, in other words, was that any intervention that left Assad standing would simply open an escalatory cycle that America could only truly dominate by eventually overthrowing him.

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In response to this logic, many advocates of intervention decried what they saw as a false choice between doing nothing and toppling Assad. From 2012 through 2014, administration talking points were pitted against talking points from critics insisting that intervention was not an all or nothing proposition. In early 2014, *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin called on Obama to "quit characterizing every situation as a choice between war and doing nothing."²⁰ Then, U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power declared, in what was widely interpreted as an indirect criticism of the president she served, that "to those who would argue that a Head of State or government has to choose only between doing nothing and sending in the military — I maintain

that is a constructed and false choice, an accompaniment only to disengagement and passivity."²¹ Ambassador Robert Ford, who had recently resigned over frustration with the administration's inaction, wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* calling for Washington to arm the opposition. "We must ramp up sharply the training and material aid provided to the moderates in the armed opposition," he argued. But "We don't need American airstrikes in Syria, and we certainly don't need American troops there."²²

As these examples show, in order to secure an audience in the face of a resistant administration and a skeptical public, advocates of greater U.S. intervention emphasized the potential benefits of more modest measures, such as arming the opposition. When Russia subsequently intervened directly in 2015, many of these advocates concluded that the window for such measures to work had closed, and an opportunity had been missed. But this counterfactual discounts the likelihood that an incremental approach would have simply prompted Russian or Iranian counterescalation even sooner.²³

The best evidence of this is that at various stages in the Syrian civil war, when foreign support for the rebels proved sufficiently effective to threaten the survival of the Assad regime, Assad's foreign backers decisively increased their support for him as well. Most dramatically, in 2015, Russia intervened directly in Syria to prevent the fall of the Assad regime in the face of increasing rebel gains. While some Washington commentators were eager to present Russia's intervention as an opportunistic response to U.S. inaction, many Russian-focused analysts argued that the Kremlin had been motivated by the growing threat to Assad coupled, if anything, with the perception of American success.²⁴ That is to say, precisely because Syria, a longtime Russian client, appeared to be on the verge of a Western-sponsored regime change, Moscow felt compelled to take action.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of Russia's intervention, Russia expert Dimitar Bechev argued that Russia was motivated by a desire to demonstrate its "resolve" in defending its allies in the face of "(alleged) Western meddling."²⁵ According to Bechev, Russian President Vladimir Putin "claims that his country was tricked" by the U.N. resolution authorizing the use of force in Libya, and "to avoid such a scenario in Syria, the Kremlin sided with Assad." Likewise, in explaining Moscow's intervention, analyst Aron Lund writes that "Russia reacted with alarm to Assad's military and economic reversals."²⁶ The perception, as stated by one Russian commentator, was that with its intervention,

“Russia has managed to break the American scenario of a ‘colour’ revolution in Syria.”²⁷

Perhaps America could have preempted or deterred Russia’s intervention. An overwhelming and immediate intervention by the United States might well have toppled the regime before Russia had the opportunity to respond.²⁸ But Russia’s eventual intervention suggests that the scenario wherein a gradual or partial U.S. intervention tipped the balance in the rebels’ favor was always less plausible than advocates suggested at the time.

Many post-2015 debates over intervention retroactively presume the United States would have intervened in a way to render the possibility of Russian escalation moot. But while some pre-2015 advocates of a more forward policy contemplated and calculated for this possibility, many were happy to downplay it to emphasize the ease with which more modest measures could topple the regime or force it into negotiations. Writing in 2014, for example, the Brookings Institution’s Shadi Hamid argued that “no one, to my knowledge, was proposing a full-on ground invasion of Syria. Instead, what was being suggested was an escalatory ladder of varying military options. An escalation would be contingent on how the Syrian regime (and the rebels) responded.”²⁹ Political necessity required advocates to suggest an escalatory ladder while downplaying the possibility that the regime or Russia might ever want to climb it. As political scientist Marc Lynch pointed out in 2016, many proposals for intervention “would have done little more than move the war more quickly up the escalatory ladder. ... Earlier limited military action would likely have brought Russian or Iranian forces more quickly into the war, not forced Assad’s capitulation.”³⁰ Only in retrospect, when the regime and Russia had both shown their willingness to escalate, did some interventionists begin to argue that a more dramatic intervention than was politically possible at the time would have headed off escalation entirely.

In retrospect, it is difficult to imagine anyone making the case for intervention by pointing to the risk of Russian escalation and arguing that only by acting quickly could the United States preempt it. This may in fact have been the best argument, but it would also have been the most politically unpalatable. Instead, many made the more politically compelling case for a modest intervention without addressing the question of foreign agency.

Looking back in 2016, Obama vigorously defended his earlier policy choices on Syria: “The notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true.”³¹ In fact, U.S. support for the rebels ultimately did begin to change the equation. But never

enough. The problem was that Russia and Iran were also factors in that equation and took their own steps to shift the balance back. The question of how easily the United States could have written Russia and Iran out of the equation before they had the chance to act remains unknowable. But the U.S. policy conversation would have been more constructive if people had asked it at the time.

Political necessity required advocates to suggest an escalatory ladder while downplaying the possibility that the regime or Russia might ever want to climb it.

Some arguments from the other side of the intervention debate also continue to downplay the agency of foreign actors, specifically the claim that less U.S. involvement would have significantly reduced the war’s violence. As many people have pointed out, the Obama administration did in fact intervene in Syria by providing encouragement, training, and weapons to specific rebel factions.³² For some anti-interventionist critics, American support for the rebels simply helped inflame or prolong the conflict, which otherwise would have been concluded with less destruction and destabilization.³³ But this argument minimizes both the incentives and resources that regional actors had to support anti-Assad rebels. If anything, the evolution of the conflict should cast doubt on the idea that U.S. policy was ever the decisive factor in propelling the Syrian uprising on its bloody and protracted course. There were a number of countries that had their own reasons for wanting to replace the Assad regime with a more politically aligned alternative. These included governments in the Persian Gulf that wanted to weaken Iran, and the Erdoğan government in Ankara that wanted to expand its influence by bringing Islamists to power next door.

Ankara quickly showed that it was willing to support Syrian rebels single-handedly even when this became a strong point of contention with the United States.³⁴ In 2013, Washington grew increasingly worried about the radicalism of many foreign fighters and put pressure on Turkey to cut off aid for the al Qaeda–linked Nusra Front. Turkey at first resisted and continued to supply Nusra secretly. Soon enough, this issue was eclipsed by growing international alarm over Turkey’s tacit support for the Islamic State group. Turkey defied considerable pressure to join the growing coalition against ISIS and maintained its permissive attitude toward the group so long as it felt this was in its own national interest.

In retrospect, even if Washington had been more meticulous in refusing to do or say anything that might have encouraged the rebellion against Assad, the rebellion still would have taken place. The more appropriate counterfactual might be one in which Washington intervened diplomatically to prevent any of its regional partners from supporting the rebellion. But even this, as Turkey's post-2013 behavior shows, may not have made much of a difference.

Positive Thinking Can Be Perilous

Too often, policymakers failed to question optimistic assessments that appeared to offer the perfect rationale for their preferred policy choices. In a January 2012 piece titled "It's Time to Think Seriously About Intervening in Syria," Steven Cook wrote that "there is an assumption in Washington that it is only a matter of time before the Syrian regime falls." He went on, "It is largely a self-serving hunch that does not necessarily conform to what is actually happening in Syria, but nevertheless provides cover for doing nothing."³⁵

It is striking to see how prominently this assumption figures in accounts of key administration officials reflecting on Syria policy after 2016. These memoirs emphasize not only that this view was widespread within the administration, but also that it was shared by the U.S. analytical community and many people in the Middle East as well. Moreover, it reflected observers' widespread surprise over the speed with which the Arab Spring had toppled other autocratic regimes. Ben Rhodes, for example, explained in his memoir that while "U.S. government assessments had downplayed the potential for Mubarak to step down before February 2011," they "veered in the other direction, anticipating Assad's ouster."³⁶ As a result, "Most analysts seemed to think his days were numbered, and so did I."³⁷ Bill Burns, in turn, quoted his colleague Fred Hof as saying that Assad was "a dead man walking."³⁸ Crucially, Burns notes that "The U.S. intelligence community didn't push back against that assessment," and "many assumed mistakenly that the popular momentum that had swept away [former Tunisian leader Zine el-Abidine] Ben Ali and Mubarak so quickly was bound to make short work of Assad."³⁹ More pointedly, Phil Gordon acknowledged the convenience of this assumption for policymakers: "Administration officials also knew that the United States still did not have a plan to force Assad from power, but they thought the problem might be mitigated by the fact that Assad's days seemed to be numbered in any case."⁴⁰

In hindsight, making a politically plausible case for intervention required articulating a middle ground between the early optimism of those who thought

Assad's fall was inevitable and the deeper pessimism of those who insisted it would require a full-fledged invasion. Initially, it was advocates of intervention that emphasized Assad's staying power while skeptics continued to hope he would fall on his own. In time, the arguments shifted. As seen in the previous section, by 2014, advocates of intervention were trying to downplay the degree of force that would be needed to bring about significant change on the ground, while their opponents were more inclined to highlight it. In other words, not only did all sides in the debate embrace politically convenient assumptions, but the assumptions that proved politically convenient changed over time.

Making matters more complicated, in a rapidly evolving situation, none of these assumptions was self-evidently false. To the extent that initial optimism about Assad's fall clearly proved wrong, this optimism itself reflected an overly hasty revision of the excessive pessimism that had prevailed before the Arab Spring.

Making a politically plausible case for intervention required articulating a middle ground between the optimism of those who thought Assad's fall was inevitable and the pessimism of those who insisted it would require a full-fledged invasion.

In an ironic contrast with the debate in Washington, the Turkish government's rush to intervene in Syria was driven, in part, by Ankara's conviction that Assad was destined to fall. Ankara had been slow to support the international effort to topple Moammar Gadhafi in Libya, but after watching the Arab Spring pick up speed and bring Islamists to power in Egypt, Turkish decisionmakers belatedly began to worry that they would be left on the wrong side of history in Syria.⁴¹ In this case they embraced the same assumptions as intervention-resistant American policymakers, but used them to justify the opposite conclusion.

Perhaps the clearest lesson from this history is that officials should always be most vigorous in questioning their assumptions when those assumptions are most convenient for them. For people trying to influence public debates, whether inside or outside of government, there is also a lesson about the dangers of mixing analysis and advocacy. The assumptions that are the most politically useful in advocating for a particular course of action at any point in time are not necessarily those that make that approach the correct one.

Caveats Do Not Count

Throughout the course of the Syrian conflict, U.S. officials repeatedly discovered that even when they explicitly told people not to interpret their words or actions in a particular way, people did anyway. In August 2011, Obama declared: “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.” In the next breath, he went on to say, “The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement.”⁴² For the ensuing decade, debate has raged about whether this statement, despite explicitly forswearing intervention, nonetheless created the expectation that America would intervene. Asked about his words and their impact in 2016, Obama sounded exasperated: “And the notion is that if you weren’t going to overthrow the regime, you shouldn’t have said anything. That’s a weird argument to me, the notion that if we use our moral authority to say ‘This is a brutal regime, and this is not how a leader should treat his people,’ once you do that, you are obliged to invade the country and install a government you prefer.”⁴³

There is indeed something deeply weird about the argument, more so given the clear caveat Obama included when calling for Assad to go. Even weirder, though, is that in the realm of rhetoric, it may be an argument that becomes true simply by virtue of people making it. If enough people insist on interpreting, however opportunistically, a presidential statement about what should happen as a promise to make it happen, it limits what a president can say. Ideally, of course, the president could use his moral authority to say “This is a brutal regime” without then being “obliged to invade the country.”⁴⁴ But the experience of the past decade shows that whether a president is obliged to or not, he or she will be expected to.

In seeking to assert “Assad must go” as a statement of principle rather than a policy prescription, Obama overlooked the geopolitical context in which his words would inevitably be interpreted. Most notably, in a March 2011 speech, Obama told Libya’s Gadhafi to “Step down from power and leave.”⁴⁵ Over the coming months, an American-led air campaign helped bring down Gadhafi’s regime, ultimately culminating in the Libyan leader’s death. Less dramatically, in early 2011, Obama also told Egypt’s Mubarak that “an orderly transition ... must begin now” and, shortly afterward,

pointedly urged him to make “the right decision.”⁴⁶ Less than a week later, Mubarak resigned. It is likely that the caveats in Obama’s call for Assad to step down would have been unconvincing in any context. But immediately following these two precedents, it was almost certain that the caveats would be ignored.

A similar phenomenon occurred after 2014 when the United States began supporting the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) as its main partner in the effort to defeat ISIS. In part to allay the concerns of the Turkish government, Washington was eager to downplay its relationship with the YPG. As a result, U.S. officials repeatedly described the U.S. relationship with the group as “temporary, transactional, and tactical.”⁴⁷ Yet no matter how many times this mantra was repeated, it did nothing to minimize the outrage in October 2019 when Trump revealed just how temporary and transactional the relationship was. As reckless as Trump’s decision to greenlight a Turkish attack against the YPG was, it fit squarely with the message that Washington had been delivering all along. Perhaps the YPG’s leaders were less surprised than they let on publicly, as much on account of America’s previous history with the Kurds as any verbal caveat.⁴⁸ Certainly, YPG supporters in Washington were happy to help amplify the outrage in the hope of reversing or modifying administration policy. Nonetheless, the feeling of betrayal was real and the sense of shock widespread.

Throughout the course of the Syrian conflict, U.S. officials repeatedly discovered that even when they explicitly told people not to interpret their words or actions in a particular way, people did anyway.

In the end, Washington’s efforts to characterize its relationship with the YPG in terms that differed from the perception created by its actions did little to mollify Turkey and little to curb the YPG’s hopes. If anything, this rhetoric appeared to be aimed at helping policymakers convince themselves that they could somehow talk their way out of the contradictions in the policy they were pursuing.⁴⁹ Recognizing the limits of these caveats would, ideally, force policymakers to confront such contradictions more clearly.

The United States Does Not Always Need to Do Something

In reflecting on his Syria policy, Obama repeatedly expressed his frustration with the expectation that Washington always needs to do something. He was particularly articulate in recognizing the process by which this pressure leads policymakers to take incremental steps that commit U.S. credibility to a conflict and subsequently create even more pressure to do more. It was in this context that Obama famously expressed his frustration with the “Washington playbook,” as well as his pride in breaking with it by refusing to launch missile strikes against Assad in 2013.⁵⁰

Perhaps the power and pernicious influence of this expectation is most apparent in the fact that, despite his protestations, Obama himself proved incapable of escaping it. Indeed, faced with constant calls to act, the Obama administration did, in fact, do a number of things. From the chemical weapons red line to the train-and-equip program, Obama could never quite resist taking the initial steps that he then resisted doubling down on. Even some commentators who agreed with his decision not to strike Assad in 2013 have criticized him for drawing a rhetorical red line in the first place.⁵¹ Conversely, even some who supported a more robust military intervention have acknowledged that if the administration was not prepared to do more, its limited efforts to train and arm rebels were counterproductive.⁵²

In future crises, it is all too easy to imagine how similar debates over intervention could lead to half measures that both sides would agree represented a less-than-ideal outcome. This is an opportunity for all participants to think about how they could contribute to a debate that would be likely to produce better results.

For advocates of intervention, deploying the rhetoric of American credibility and prestige has historically been an effective way of pushing Washington to act, particularly when it inspires presidential statements or policies that intensify America’s investment in a conflict. Bosnia provides the most clear-cut case of this strategy working as intended. Though President Bill Clinton was deeply hesitant to intervene, public pressure gradually forced him to invest in a number of diplomatic measures aimed at preventing Serbian war crimes. But while these measures failed in their stated aim, the failure

itself helped motivate a more effective intervention. By repeatedly violating cease-fires, attacking safe zones, and attacking U.N. peacekeeping forces, Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević appeared to be thumbing his nose at both Clinton and America. As recounted by David Halberstam, Milošević’s actions “revealed the President of the United States as either passive or politically impotent.”⁵³ And this, more than a sense of humanitarian concern, finally prompted decisive U.S. action. Clinton was “infuriated by images of U.S. helplessness” and resented the fact that America looked like it was “weak” and had been “played” by the Serbs. “Bosnia was doing immense damage,” Clinton concluded, and “killing the U.S. position of strength in the world.”⁵⁴

The risk, of course, is that a strategy that relies on intensifying the reputational stakes for the United States can also backfire badly if the president does not bite. The impression that the outcome of the Syrian civil war represented a loss of American prestige has, in part, been

driven by the rhetoric of those who were hoping to prod Washington to act.

On the other side of the debate, noninterventionist rhetoric deployed with the best of intentions has also shown its capacity to perpetuate the pressure to do something. The trajectory of the Syrian civil war hints at the

risks of anti-interventionist rhetoric that exaggerates the ease of mitigating humanitarian catastrophes through non-military means. In foreign policy debate, it is notoriously difficult to sell any approach as representing a lesser evil rather than being a solution itself. There were many voices arguing that U.S. military intervention in Syria would make a bad situation worse or simply leave Washington responsible for a situation that could not be improved. But alongside this commentary was a more optimistic series of assessments suggesting that, with the right approach, Washington could achieve the same reduction in violence promised by intervention advocates through less costly means.

This rhetoric risks inadvertently reinforcing the idea that a positive outcome is possible and, by extension, maintains pressure on policymakers to deliver one. It sells nonintervention to the public on the premise that Washington can avoid direct involvement in foreign conflicts without having to feel guilty about any ensuing human tragedy. For example, in an article devoted to condemning Samantha Power for her interventionist

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impulses, the Quincy Institute’s Daniel Bessner suggested she had neglected an opportunity to build diplomatically on the 2013 chemical weapons deal.⁵⁵ In his words, “U.S.-Russian collaboration provided an opportunity to build the trust necessary to reach a political resolution of the conflict.”⁵⁶ And yet the Obama administration’s subsequent efforts to reach a political resolution through negotiating with Russia proved that the problems went far beyond a lack of trust. The administration erred in thinking Russia was actually interested in a political solution so long as dynamics on the ground were moving in its preferred direction. As with the belief that Assad would fall on his own, the assumption that Russia was interested in collaborating seemed particularly well suited to sustaining the hope that Washington could achieve its interests without deploying commensurate resources.

Promoting this satisfying illusion may seem like a small price to pay for keeping America out of costly and counterproductive conflicts. But, as can already be seen in the case of Syria, it risks ceding the terms of the debate to advocates of military intervention. The argument that nonintervention represents the lesser evil in the face of any given humanitarian tragedy is, if nothing else, remarkably difficult to disprove. By contrast, if certain crises are indeed intractable, the argument that any set of noninterventionist policies will resolve them can quickly appear dangerously naïve.

The challenge for advocates of doing something is to acknowledge that doing nothing can often prove better than doing not enough. And, at the same time, the challenge for advocates of doing nothing is to acknowledge that, even when it is a better option than doing something, it is still unlikely to do much good.

The Way Forward in Syria

In discussing the Washington policy debate about the Syrian civil war, it is far too easy to slip into the past tense. But the conflict continues, as does Washington’s involvement in it. Over 1,000 U.S. forces are still deployed in northeast Syria, the United States is still a party to the Geneva Process, and U.S. sanctions continue to dramatically impact the Syrian economy.⁵⁷ Moreover, the conflict itself continues, with civilians dying as Assad fights to reassert control over the entire country. The Biden administration should take three principal steps in response: (1) support negotiations toward a realistic end state in Idlib and northeast Syria, (2) engage with Russia only where leverage exists, and (3) link sanctions relief to achievable goals.

Reviewing the past decade of intervention debates demonstrates the importance of pursuing a more realistic path forward. Finding this path begins with the recognition that there are no good options. Trying to simply maintain the status quo, for example, may appear tempting to policymakers. But this discounts the agency and range of options that regional actors have at their disposal to disrupt it—a problem that has long plagued U.S. policymaking toward the conflict. Most notably, Russia and the Assad regime will eventually seek to expand their control over northern Syria, as they have repeatedly done in the past. At the same time, Washington’s partners may exercise their own agency in ways that disrupt the status quo, for example by gradually seeking to restore economic and diplomatic ties with Assad. Policymakers should divest themselves of overly convenient assumptions—about the sustainability of U.S. deployments in northeast Syria, about the likelihood of Russian cooperation, and about the leverage provided by current sanctions. At the same time, the U.S. administration cannot rhetorically disavow any American responsibility for the situation in Syria. Whatever caveats Biden may offer, the United States is a part of the current conflict and will play a role in its eventual outcome. This does not mean Washington must do something for the sake of doing something. Rather, the administration must make a clear-eyed assessment of how much leverage it has and use that to achieve real but modest results.

Support negotiations toward preserving partial autonomy in Idlib and northeast Syria. After 10 years of fighting, the only significant regions in Syria that remain outside of Damascus’s control are defended, in part, by foreign troops. In northeast Syria, the presence of U.S. forces has enabled the predominantly Kurdish administration of northeast Syria to maintain its precarious autonomy. In northwestern Syria, as many as 10,000 Turkish troops are supporting rebel forces in Idlib, maintaining the shaky cease-fire that has prevailed since March 2020.

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Rather than exaggerate the degree of leverage that this foreign troop presence provides, Washington should work to convert it into more modest but more durable gains. To do so, the Biden administration should back

the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in negotiations with Russia and the regime while they still have as much leverage as possible. Though Ankara is likely to chart its own course, Washington should also, if possible, provide diplomatic support for Turkish efforts to establish a lasting cease-fire. In Idlib, this could help preserve a strip of territory along the border that remains under Turkish control. In northeast Syria, it could help the SDF hold onto a limited measure of local administrative autonomy.

In the abstract, Washington and Ankara have a clear strategic and humanitarian interest in working together to ensure that both northeast Syria and Idlib remain free from regime control. In practice, however, such cooperation is impossible. Ankara regards America's partner in northeast Syria, the YPG, as a strategic threat because of the group's close ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Washington, in turn, is alarmed by the radicalism of Turkey's partners in Idlib, particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, and formerly al-Nusra). While HTS has repeatedly advertised its efforts to distance itself from al Qaeda, it has never succeeded in overcoming the concerns of the international community. Similarly, various efforts to rebrand and reorganize the SDF administration, as well as proposals for the YPG to distance itself from the PKK, have failed to reassure Ankara.

As a result, Washington and Ankara continue to work at cross purposes in northern Syria. Russia and the Assad regime have exploited this to their advantage. Moscow secured repeated concessions from Turkey by pressuring Ankara to cut its support for rebel groups in return for giving tacit support to Turkish cross-border operations against the YPG. Then, in 2019, Moscow forced the YPG to make concessions to Damascus in return for stopping Turkey's incursion into the northeast. As a result, regime forces were able to secure gains against rebels around Aleppo and nominally return to a long strip of YPG-held territory where they now help secure the border against Turkey.

In crafting a policy for Idlib and northeast Syria, Washington should be realistic about the leverage it has with Russia, Turkey, and the regime, using it to the maximum extent but not pushing it to the point it is lost. The Trump administration in particular refused to accurately gauge the degree of leverage the United States had in Syria. Thus, there was a dangerous disjunction between the relatively narrow counterterrorism role that U.S. troops in Syria were officially carrying out and the grander goals that some policymakers hoped to achieve with their presence. While it never became official policy, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's 2018 speech arguing that U.S. troops were in Syria to contain Iranian influence

represented the ambitious conception of some policymakers.⁵⁸ Yet this expansive definition of U.S. aims only fueled Turkish concerns about Washington's cooperation with the YPG. More dangerously, it was completely at odds with Trump's repeatedly stated desire to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria. The discrepancy between ambition and commitment was finally resolved on the president's terms in the fall of 2019 when Trump approved a Turkish cross-border operation against the YPG. The result was a reckless, unplanned curtailment of support for Washington's Kurdish partners that hurt them and damaged America's global image.

Since then, many analysts sought to mitigate the damage from Trump's withdrawal by pushing for a continued U.S. presence in northeast Syria.⁵⁹ Advocates of this policy have argued that this is necessary to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS, maintain leverage against Assad, and honor a moral obligation to the Kurds. However true these arguments are, the policy of maintaining an open-ended presence in northeast Syria absent a more explicit policy commitment from the president risks again being counterproductive. At some point, one of the many countries that does not want U.S. forces in the region will make a more concerted effort to drive them out. If there is no strong support for the policy U.S. forces are carrying out, this moment could easily turn into a repeat of Trump's 2019 fiasco. And the risk will be amplified if the U.S. presence serves as an obstacle to negotiations between the YPG and the regime rather than facilitating negotiations on better terms.

In the long run, America's interests and local partners would be better served by a strategy that seeks to convert the current leverage of U.S. forces into some small measure of autonomy for SDF-controlled northeast Syria. This would involve Washington supporting the SDF leadership in negotiations with the Syrian regime to secure, and help enforce, a deal that preserves as much of the local status quo as possible. This would almost certainly involve a restoration of the regime's sovereignty in the region and access to its oil, but it could also preserve limited local control over the region's administration. This arrangement would be neither ideal nor easy to negotiate. To date, talks between the SDF and the regime have revealed both sides' irreconcilable expectations, with Kurdish leaders understandably insisting on preserving their full autonomy and the regime in turn demanding far more control.⁶⁰ Washington would ideally help overcome this impasse by providing its partners with both carrots and sticks to use with the regime. Washington could link the withdrawal of its forces, as well as any sanctions relief, to the regime's willingness to reach and respect a deal.

In Idlib, the eventual outcome is largely in the hands of Russia, Turkey, and the regime. Washington can play the most constructive role by acknowledging this and providing diplomatic support to Ankara in its negotiations with the other parties. U.S. policymakers need not have an exaggerated impression of Ankara's commitment to militarily confronting Russia, nor think that supporting Ankara on this front will help restore the U.S.-Turkish relationship. While Ankara has deployed a considerable force in Idlib to deter regime advances, it has also demonstrated in previous confrontations that it will repeatedly back down in the face of Russian military escalation. In March 2020, for example, when the regime pushed to seize the M5 highway, Ankara initially tried to push back militarily. Russia then bombed a Turkish convey, killing 34 Turkish soldiers.⁶¹ Ankara briefly escalated in response but then reached a renewed cease-fire with Moscow that consolidated the regime's gains. In this delicate situation, Ankara is seeking to maximize its leverage but also avoid a direct and unwinnable confrontation with Russian-backed forces. Russia, in turn, has shown its ability to force concessions from Turkey but has also sought to maintain Ankara's diplomatic cooperation, often with the pointed aim of marginalizing the United States.⁶²

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Ankara is trying to obtain the best long-term arrangement for Idlib vis-à-vis the regime with the resources at its disposal. Yet there are limits to how far Ankara will push, even if U.S. military support were forthcoming. Ankara has proved it is not willing to make a hard break with Russia for the sake of defending Idlib. It has sought greater U.S. support for this effort to improve its leverage but has not given any indication it would abandon its strategy of using this leverage to negotiate with Moscow. Quietly supporting Ankara in this effort without having unreasonable expectations for what it can achieve is the most Washington can do to secure the well-being of the civilian population of Idlib and prevent a total victory for the regime. If nothing else, this could help ensure that a

strip of territory along the Turkish border remains free from regime control as a grim home for refugees who would otherwise face an even worse fate.

Engage with Russia only where leverage exists. In seeking a sustainable end state in Syria, Washington should be clear-eyed about the role Moscow can be expected to play. Russia will not deliver Assad or pressure him to make concessions. At best, Moscow's influence can help consolidate arrangements that have already been reached based on the balance of forces on the ground.

Even before its direct intervention, Russia loomed as the inevitable interlocutor in any political settlement to the Syrian civil war. And yet Russia was always more interested in a military settlement.⁶³ As a result, diplomatic engagement with Russia has consistently failed to bring an end to the fighting.⁶⁴ In time, the Geneva Process took on a farcical quality, embodying Russia's refusal to play the role expected of it. Despite this, many analysts have argued that cooperation with Russia was possible because Moscow was not ultimately wedded to a total victory for Assad. The Kremlin wanted to ensure his survival but was not committed to winning back all of Syria for him. This meant that Moscow's broader geopolitical interest in being seen as an equal partner with the West and a great power capable of brokering peace would take precedence, and it would ultimately pressure Assad to reach a deal with the opposition. It is hard to know if this assumption will prove true, because so far Moscow has faced few tradeoffs. It has backed Assad's continuing advances at a relatively low cost, supporting its client and increasing its regional influence while remaining confident that it can still help broker an eventual settlement.

Many analysts have called attention to the failure of Washington's efforts to pursue diplomacy with Russia in the absence of sufficient military leverage. In doing so, they have often been implicitly or explicitly calling for Washington to increase its military leverage. Yet this need not be the conclusion. Rather, highlighting this mismatch can serve as an argument for a more realistic and effectively calibrated diplomatic strategy.

The strategies proposed here for Idlib and northeast Syria both hinge on taking advantage of situations where circumstances on the ground have become more conducive to successful negotiations. In both regions the goal is not to impose a cease-fire or a political solution on a rapidly changing battlefield but to consolidate the status quo where it has already begun to coalesce. These are also regions where, as noted, the presence of foreign military forces has created real, if still limited, leverage that can be brought to bear in negotiations.

At the same time, these negotiations must be incorporated into a broader dynamic regarding Syria's future in which Washington has more tools at its disposal. That means linking them to the range of sanctions that have been imposed on Damascus, as well as the regime's wider campaign for regional reintegration.

Link sanctions relief to achievable goals. Perhaps the clearest mismatch between means and ends is reflected in U.S. sanctions policy: Few believe that Assad will ever comply with the demands embodied in current sanction legislation, and few believe that sanctions alone will bring down his regime. After a 10-year civil war with hundreds of thousands of casualties failed to oust Assad, it is risky to assume that economic pressure, no matter how severe, can accomplish this objective. As a result, the current sanctions regime risks becoming a permanent feature of U.S. policy that creates humanitarian suffering without any corresponding political benefit.

Instead of letting this situation continue indefinitely, Washington should tie sanctions relief to more modest goals, thereby making sanctions more likely to serve as an effective form of economic pressure.

Since 2011, the Assad regime has faced a growing array of legislative and executive branch sanctions, culminating in the 2020 Caesar Civilian Protection Act.⁶⁵ The Caesar Act goes beyond previous sanctions in targeting third-country actors doing business with designated Syrian entities, and as a result it can have a far more significant impact on the Syrian economy. The wording of the legislation gives the president the power to suspend these sanctions if the regime meets seven criteria, including ending its air attacks on civilians, releasing all political prisoners, fulfilling its commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention, and creating a mechanism to hold war crimes perpetrators accountable.⁶⁶ Realistically, though, few of the bill's backers expect the regime to fulfill these conditions. Instead, they hope that the sanctions will ultimately "take money away from [Assad's] war machine"⁶⁷ or push the regime to the point of "economic collapse," thereby triggering infighting within the regime or mass popular upheaval.⁶⁸

U.S. sanctions have contributed, alongside a host of other factors, to the devastation of the Syrian economy. Hunger is increasingly widespread, while essentials

ranging from fuel to medical supplies have become more difficult to obtain.⁶⁹ As a result, the sanctions debate often takes place in highly charged moral terms.⁷⁰ Sanctions advocates have correctly pointed out that a less corrupt government than Assad's would not have passed on the economic impact to ordinary citizens while hoarding resources to protect its elites from hardship and deprivation. (And, needless to say, a less evil regime than Assad's would simply meet the conditions for sanctions relief by not torturing or murdering its people.) Critics, in turn, have correctly pointed out that even if the Assad regime bears the ultimate moral responsibility, there remains a

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direct causal link between the sanctions and the current plight of millions of Syrians. While the Syrian people would be better off if they were not ruled by such a brutal regime, with the same regime and no sanctions, they would still have more food.

Lost in the moral debate about sanctions, however, is the question of their policy efficacy. So far, the sanctions have failed to alter the regime's behavior,

and there is no clear-cut evidence that they have dramatically reduced its ability to wage war or brought it to the verge of collapse.⁷¹ The question, moving forward, is what goals sanctions can realistically be expected to accomplish and how the administration can best use them to achieve these goals. Ideally, the administration would have clear answers to these questions in mind as it tailored a sanctions strategy to match its broader Syria policy. The risk, however, is that current sanctions will be maintained without a clear and workable set of goals.

Keeping sanctions in place represents the sort of half measure that fulfills the perceived need to "do something" about the situation in Syria without actually doing anything. They serve to punish Assad for his crimes against humanity and push back against the perception that the regime and its backers have won. But they do not prevent these crimes or reverse the regime's victories.

Though recent history offers few examples of sanctions bringing down hostile governments, it is possible their impact might eventually become so severe as to trigger an internal crisis within the regime, leading to its collapse. But even this relies on a set of often implicit assumptions about the behavior of other actors. It assumes both that the regime's backers will not be willing to step up their own investments as the country's economic situation gets more dire and that Assad will not

be able to find others with a vested interest in preventing Syria's descent into chaos. While neither Russia nor Iran has a great deal of money to spare, both countries have already sunk considerable resources into ensuring Assad's survival, which could create strong incentive to double down on their investment even as it becomes more costly.

The course of the war has ensured that, even if serious fissures were to develop within the regime, it is increasingly difficult to imagine a positive post-collapse scenario. Instead of a rebel victory or even a palace coup that replaced Assad with a new leader who was willing to negotiate, the more likely result would be deepened chaos and renewed violence. Even after the past decade, the war could still become messier and longer, with some regime-held regions passing into rebel hands and others staying under the control of the local militias and warlords who control it on Assad's behalf now.

Faced with this prospect, governments in the region, and even policymakers in Washington, might well begin to think twice about whether they really wanted to push Damascus over the economic precipice. The possibility that a different part of Syria's population might suddenly become refugees would generate widespread alarm among governments in both Europe and the region. And if enough actors balked, it could create pressure that would undercut sanctions right at the moment they appeared poised to succeed. The result, once again, would be the worst of both worlds, both for U.S. strategic interests and for the Syrian citizens forced to endure sanctions in the meantime.

An alternative approach would seek to use the sanctions in place now to secure more modest geopolitical and humanitarian goals. In the words of analyst Daphne McCurdy, "Rather than waiting for regime change or behavior change, the United States must start thinking through ways in which it can potentially shape dynamics in a Syria that still has an intransigent Assad at the helm."⁷² This approach would push for concrete changes that would alleviate the suffering of Assad's victims without directly challenging his hold on power. One obvious goal would be not just sustaining cross-border aid into Idlib through the existing Bab al-Hawa crossing but also, as proposed by the Biden administration in recent negotiations, opening more crossing points into the territory as well.⁷³ In regime-held territory, Washington could also tie the easing of sanctions to improved conditions for delivering aid from the U.N. and other donors. Washington could use the leverage provided by sanctions to push back against the regime's corrupt and politically motivated diversion of aid and

exert greater control over how and where aid gets delivered.

Using sanctions in negotiations over Idlib and north-east Syria will prove more difficult. Sanctions relief alone would be just as unlikely to secure compromises from the regime on these territories as it would be to secure the release of all political prisoners. But coupled with additional forms of leverage discussed above, it could serve as an added inducement. If nothing else, it represents a more plausible strategy than holding out for the complete capitulation of the regime.

Conclusion

The broader lessons from the Syrian civil war are discouraging ones. In most overseas conflicts, particularly civil wars in countries where America does not have overriding interests, Washington will be best served by identifying concrete, modest goals that can be achieved through non-military leverage. Those advocating for military intervention should be all the more careful about the relationship between means and ends and candid about the possible role of external actors. Politicians and policymakers, in turn, should be clear about which commitments they are making and which ones they are not making, while recognizing that their actions will speak louder than their words.

Much as there were no easy answers during the last 10 years of the Syrian civil war, there are no easy answers for the ongoing conflict today, and there will be no easy answers the next time America faces a similar crisis. At best, reflecting on this can help the United States debate its choices more effectively going forward. The more all sides are predisposed to insist that their proposed solution is a simple and effective one, the harder it will be to correctly weigh a series of bad options. Promoting intervention by downplaying the risk of escalation or playing on Washington's inchoate urge to do something can backfire badly, leading the country to risk its credibility on commitments it is not prepared to keep. At the same time, there is little to be gained by the false positivity of pretending that things are likely to work out well if nothing is done. Making a modest policy work requires being candid that its success will likely prove modest as well.

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