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## Ending the Syria war, getting US troops out, and lifting sanctions

*The status quo is doing more harm than good. Let's admit failure before more people are hurt and put in harm's way.*

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is behind in the polls, causing him to again look to Syria for “a splendid little war” to win votes. A new invasion could put U.S. personnel at risk and the threat has triggered an angry response in Washington. Ankara's threats are unjustified, but America's presence is unwarranted.

The civil war in Syria continues sporadically after nearly a dozen years, with the U.S. still occupying a corner of the country with 900 troops. Meanwhile, Washington has a death grip on Syria's economy, consigning the Syrian population to poverty through sanctions (Caesar Act). Several other country's armed forces, including Turkey's, are active across Syria, creating a risk of broader conflict.

As with other adversaries, Washington believed that maximum pressure would somehow create a friendly government in Damascus. Instead, Western efforts to forge a democratic transition long ago stalled. So far the Biden administration has simply maintained the status quo. Observed the Atlantic Council's Abdulrahman al-Masri: “The U.S. does not know what it wants in Syria and has no coherent endgame.” That isn't likely to change, he says, “given the dramatic shift in priorities of the U.S. foreign policy agenda and acute lack of safe options for reengagement in Syria.”

However, Erdogan has proposed to meet with Syria's Bashar al-Assad and Russia's Vladimir Putin. A modus vivendi among the three could end the last vestiges of the conflict and reintegrate Syria into the region. Washington should aid this process by rolling back sanctions which target the Syrian people and encouraging its Gulf partners to reengage with Damascus.

The Syrian civil war began in early 2011 with “Arab Spring” protests against Assad's government. Violence soon erupted and the conflict drew in foreign groups and nations, including the U.S. Washington's policy was too clever by half, seeking to simultaneously oust Assad, defeat the Islamic State, promote moderate insurgents, effectively ally with Islamic radicals, indirectly support the local al-Qaida affiliate, conciliate Turkey as the latter covertly aided ISIS and later overran U.S.-backed Kurdish troops, and expel Iranian and Russian forces. Moscow and Tehran simply focused on supporting the Damascus government.

A decade later U.S. policy had failed almost completely, other than defeating ISIS, largely accomplished by others doing the fighting. Washington's opposition to Persian Gulf engagement with Damascus has left the Syrian regime largely isolated, reliant on Iran and Russia. America's continued illegal occupation has put U.S. military personnel at risk of attack.

Sources of continuing conflict include the Idlib enclave, largely ruled by jihadist and terrorist factions and protected by Turkey. Israel regularly strikes Iranian forces inside Syria. The Erdogan government uses proxy Arab militias to rule, with predictable brutality, over Syrian Kurdish areas. Ankara's military intervention continues, with Erdogan currently threatening another invasion of Syria's northeast, an autonomous zone run by Syrian Kurds and hosting several hundred American personnel. In November, Turkish air and artillery strikes came close to U.S. positions. CIA Director William Burns complaint to Ankara was without effect.

Americans' presence inevitably draws hostile fire and it could get worse. Moscow might retaliate for U.S. support for Ukraine. A revived Islamic State could seek revenge against the U.S. Most seriously, Tehran is likely to urge Iranian proxy forces to strike, as in the past. One analysis found 29 Iranian-inspired attacks on U.S. forces from October 2021 through June 2022. The Biden administration could find itself in one or more limited but troublesome shooting wars with irregular opponents.

Political reform is essential, but the United Nations-led peace process is going nowhere, despite heartfelt pleas from the UN special envoy. The assumption that Assad could be forced to quit after surviving a decade of civil war was always fantastic. And Washington's worsening relations with Russia and Iran diminish any chance of cooperation with the West.

Although sold as more humane than war, economic sanctions are known, and sometimes intended, to be even more destructive. Who can forget Madeleine Albright's cold response to the question of sanctions killing a half million Iraqi babies: "We think the price is worth it."

Multiple sanctions have been levied on Damascus. Most brutal is the 2019 Caesar Act, which essentially prevents any foreign entity dealing with American institutions from doing business in Syria. The Trump administration made the perfunctory claim that sanctions were "not intended to harm the Syrian people, but rather to promote accountability for the Assad regime's violence and destruction." However, this was demonstrably false.

Wrote Natalie Armbruster of Defense Priorities: "the U.S. sanctions strategy in Syria does not punish Assad—it punishes Syrians, whether they support the regime or not. Currently, nine in 10 Syrians live in poverty, and more than six in 10 face the risk of going hungry."

This was, in fact, the perverse intent of its supporters, including special representative James Jeffrey, who misled President Trump about America's troop presence in order to manipulate him into keeping U.S. forces in Syria. Despite this disservice to the American people, Jeffrey played a lead role in implementing sanctions. After passage of the Caesar Act, he explained: U.S. policy was "to compel the government of Assad to halt its murderous attacks on the Syrian people and to support a transition to a government in Syria that respects the rule of law, human rights, and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors."

Jeffrey also suggested another objective, for which the Syrian people were just another means to a different end: "My job is to make it a quagmire for the Russians." That is, Washington hurt

Syrians to punish Russians. So far the Putin government has shown no inclination to abandon Assad.

Jeffrey is not alone in perversely exulting in the hardship caused the Syrian people. A former Special Envoy for Syria, Joel Rayburn, celebrated by tweet just this month: “Assad’s economy & state are collapsing: – No fuel. – No electricity. – No commerce. – Streets empty. – Assad just prints money to pay salaries/bills. Result: inflation making basic needs unaffordable. – Pound crashed to 5,900 per \$, making imports impossible.”

Even Jeffrey finally appears to have some doubts about his handiwork. He recently admitted that the U.S. government owes “its own citizens, whose soldiers are often under fire in Syria—an answer to the question ‘How does this all end?’ for Syria as a whole.”

The latest Erdogan initiative holds the possibility of doing so. The Turkish leader once was close to Assad but then worked to oust him. Erdogan’s willingness to re-engage with Syria suggests a Russian-backed deal by which Ankara withdraws and allows Damascus to retake control of its border with Turkey. That would provide security to Ankara and end Turkish occupation of Syrian Kurdish lands.

Combined with an American withdrawal, this process also would give Damascus control over the rest of its border with Iraq. With the support of Russia and Turkey, Syria could reduce Iranian involvement in its territory, lowering tensions with Israel. This step would also encourage the Gulf states and other Arab governments to reestablish ties with Damascus. Washington could end its economic war on the Syrian people while retaining targeted sanctions on Assad’s military and internal security agencies. Then Syria’s neighbors could offer reconstruction aid, with political conditions.

Much obviously could go wrong with such a strategy, starting with Turkey. Moreover, in Washington there would be much caterwauling about “rewarding” and “appeasing” the ostentatiously odious Assad regime. However, the U.S. has lost both the war and peace in Syria.

Successive administrations have failed to overthrow the Assad government. Washington is left punishing Syria’s victims rather than oppressors. U.S. policymakers should admit their failure and try a new strategy. Seeking peace rather than fostering conflict would better suit the interests of America and the Syrian people.

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