

Syria Study Group

Syria Study Group

May 1, 2019

Co-Chair

Michael Singh

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Co-Chair

Dana Stroul

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Members

Charles Cleveland

Melissa Dalton

Frederic Hof

Kimberly Kagan

Mara Karlin

Mark Kirk

Anne Patterson

Dafna Rand

Vance Serchuk

Chris Tuttle

Dear Senate Majority Leader and Madam Speaker:

As co-chairs of the Syria Study Group (SSG), we would like to thank you for your support and to take the opportunity to update you on the SSG's work to date.

The SSG embarked on its work on February 28, 2019. Over the past several weeks, we have held seven plenary sessions featuring briefings from current and former senior U.S. policy makers, military officers, and intelligence analysts; foreign government officials; NGO officials; and other experts to gain full insight into the complex situation on the ground and current U.S. policy. We have also met with Syrian and other key stakeholders to deepen our understanding of the challenges ahead and options for U.S. policy going forward.

We are pleased to send you the SSG's Interim Assessment and Recommendations, which reflect the Group's initial consensus findings regarding the current situation inside Syria as well as a series of policy recommendations. The Group will continue its work with additional meetings as well as travel to the region and Europe over the coming two months. We anticipate completing our final report in September 2019.

We are available to brief you or your staff on the Interim Assessment and Recommendations as well as our plans going forward should you have any questions or need for additional information. Thank you for your leadership on this vital national security issue.

Sincerely,



Dana Stroul
Co-Chair



Michael Singh
Co-Chair

*The Honorable Chuck Schumer, Senate Minority Leader
The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, House Minority Leader
The Honorable James Inhofe, Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee
The Honorable Jack Reed, Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee
The Honorable Adam Smith, Chairman, House Armed Services Committee
The Honorable Mac Thornberry, Ranking Member, House Armed Services Committee
The Honorable James Risch, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
The Honorable Robert Menendez, Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
The Honorable Eliot Engel, Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee
The Honorable Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee*

ATTACHMENT

Syria Study Group Interim Assessment and Recommendations: Executive Summary

May 2019

The premature withdrawal of U.S. forces risks enabling ISIS' resurgence. Territorial defeat is not enduring defeat, and ISIS is already reconstituting in Iraq and Syria. Thousands of fighters along with their families are being held in temporary detention facilities across Syria, laying the groundwork for violence and radicalization if left unaddressed.

Iran has inserted troops, sophisticated weaponry, and proxy forces into Syria. Israeli air strikes and U.S. sanctions have contained, but not deterred, Iranian actions. Current operations will not force all Iranian-backed forces out of Syria.

Assad is unwilling to compromise and intends to retake all of Syria. The UN diplomatic process is stalled, and some governments are re-establishing ties to Damascus. Syria's eight-year-long war has created a humanitarian crisis, destroying much of the country and destabilizing key U.S. partners. Reconstruction will take decades.

Syrian IDPs and refugees throughout the region and Europe are unlikely to return voluntarily, posing a long-term challenge with significant security and economic implications. A major Assad regime offensive into Idlib will exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, as Turkey is unlikely to open its borders to refugees fleeing violence.

U.S.-Turkey tensions, including but not limited to Syria, risk eroding the NATO alliance. Russia's intervention in Syria has enhanced Russia's prestige and has emboldened Russia to seek to undermine U.S. influence in other parts of the region.

Key Recommendations:

- Stop the drawdown of U.S. forces; retain sufficient force levels for the following missions:
 - Train, advise, and assist local partners in countering ISIS
 - Conduct counterterrorism operations
 - Enable civilian-led stabilization efforts
 - Support the Syrian Democratic Forces to secure and process ISIS detainees
 - Serve as the enabling platform for D-ISIS Coalition partners
- Return and expand START Forward, restart U.S. stabilization funding, obligate unspent funds in the Relief and Recovery Fund
- Add a new line of effort for addressing ISIS detainees to the D-ISIS Coalition
- Continue to isolate the Assad regime through sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and denial of reconstruction aid
- Pass and sign into law the Caesar Civilian Support Act
- Prioritize security assistance and civilian recovery efforts in Iraq
- Support refugee-hosting Syrian neighbors by establishing pooled funding mechanisms for medium-term assistance

Syria Study Group
Interim Assessment and Recommendations
May 2019

KEY FINDINGS

Finding #1: Territorial defeat of ISIS is not enduring defeat. Premature withdrawal of U.S. forces risks enabling ISIS' resurgence.

- ISIS is already reconstituting in Iraq and Syria. This directly threatens the U.S. if ISIS rebuilds its external attack capabilities.
- U.S. forces provide essential assistance to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), security for civilian stabilization efforts, and act as a critical platform for intelligence collection against ISIS. All of these efforts are necessary for the enduring defeat of ISIS and will be undermined by an accelerated U.S. troop withdrawal.
- Challenges posed by the ISIS detainee population in Syria – both fighters and their families – will set the conditions for ISIS' resurgence if left unaddressed. The SDF lacks the capacity to hold ISIS detainees indefinitely without considerable external assistance.
- The enduring defeat of ISIS depends on inclusive, responsive, and legitimate governance in the areas it once controlled.
- ISIS is not the only terrorist threat emanating from Syria. Al-Qaeda is in effective control of Idlib and retains the capacity to conduct external attacks.

Finding #2: Iran remains undeterred in its strategy of entrenching itself in Syria. Israeli strikes and U.S. sanctions have constrained Iranian actions, but are not sufficient for the removal of Iran's military infrastructure from Syria.

- Iran is integrating some of its forces into the Syrian Arab Army and cultivating Syrian and foreign militias beholden to Tehran. Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups are also present, supporting the Assad regime.
- Iran continues to transfer sophisticated weapons to Syrian territory, with the objective of enhancing its regional power projection capabilities and threatening Israel.
- Israeli operations have slowed Iranian military entrenchment in Syria while avoiding actions that could spark a direct Israel-Iran military confrontation. A wider Israel-Iran confrontation, however, either intentional or due to miscalculation, remains a possibility.

Finding #3: The conflict in Syria is not over, but it is entering a new phase.

- While battle lines across Syria appear frozen, various actors are testing those lines. Key flash points include Idlib, al-Tanf, Turkey's border with northeast Syria, and the Euphrates River de-confliction line.
- If the U.S.-Turkish negotiations over a "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian border in northeast Syria do not succeed this could prompt a Turkish incursion in that area, whether or not U.S. forces remain.

- Idlib is essentially controlled by al-Qaeda and other Salafist groups. The Turkish-Russian compromise over Idlib is holding, but the widely shared view is that the regime will move to retake the area, with severe humanitarian and counterterrorism implications.
- While the Assad regime has regained nominal control over much of western and southern Syria, its control is tenuous. There are signs of anti-regime sentiment and economic discontent in certain areas where Assad has regained control, such as in parts of the Dera'a governorate.

Finding #4: Progress toward a political settlement through the Geneva process (UN Security Council Resolution 2254) has stalled. Assad has not decisively “won the conflict,” but he demonstrates no willingness to accept any political compromises.

- The Assad regime shows no interest in changing its behavior or in accommodating its political opposition, even symbolically. Regime elites are unlikely to turn against Assad, despite reports of their dissatisfaction with him.
- Syria's 2021 presidential elections will not be a viable milestone for hastening Assad's exit from Syria. No external actor can oversee credible elections inside Syria as well as within the Syrian diaspora and refugee population. The Assad regime and its backers will use the 2021 elections to bolster Assad's claim to legitimacy.
- The U.S.-led “small group” seeks to galvanize the political track under the auspices of UNSCR 2254, but there is no process to bring its members together with influential actors such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Finding #5: The current state of the Syrian conflict has negative implications for U.S. interests in the region and the broader strategic context of great power competition. These factors must be more strongly accounted for in U.S. policy.

- The announced U.S. withdrawal, even after it was partially reversed, undermines confidence in the American commitment to Syria and will increase the tendency of U.S. partners and regional allies to seek separate accommodations or normalize relations with the Assad regime. Coalition partners stress the importance of American leadership to achieving anything in Syria that benefits the interests of the U.S. and its allies.
- The Russian intervention has enhanced Russian prestige in the region and delivered powerful benefits for Russian interests. Perceived success in Syria has emboldened Russia to seek to undermine U.S. influence in other parts of the region.
- The presence of Russian forces in Syria has compelled U.S. forces to make operational adjustments for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, Russian military activity in Syria has provided its forces invaluable training opportunities and occasion to showcase Russian military equipment.
- Iran and Russia are effective partners to one another and to the regime. Iran may prefer a chaotic Syria, which it can exploit for power projection. Russia prefers Syria's stabilization and reintegration into the international community. In addition, tension and competition exist between Assad, Iran, and Russia over reconstruction revenue, militia loyalty, and control of localities. Russia has not

been willing or able to affect behavioral change by Assad, constrain Iran's presence or activities in Syria, or contribute to a political settlement to end the war.

- U.S.-Turkey tensions, including but not limited to Syria, risk eroding the NATO alliance. Turkey shows no interest in ceding control of the Afrin or Euphrates Shield areas and has blocked U.S. access to these areas. Turkish authorities exercise significant influence over Syrian opposition elements residing in Turkey and, at times, have leveraged these ties to undermine U.S. policy preferences.

Finding #6: Dire humanitarian conditions in Syria and the challenge of internally displaced persons and refugees in and beyond the region are a generational problem with long-term security implications.

- A major Assad regime offensive into Idlib will exacerbate the humanitarian crisis. Turkey is unlikely to open its borders to refugees fleeing violence.
- If the Syrian government retakes Idlib this year, renewal of the cross-border aid delivery (UNSCR 2449) in January 2020 is unlikely.
- Fewer than 150,000 Syrian refugees have returned to Syria; 5.6 million remain outside the country. The pro-Assad coalition has pressed for the return of refugees; however, security and humanitarian conditions in Syria do not permit it. Many refugees may never return home.
- Hosting millions of refugees places enormous political and economic pressure on Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. There is little indication of a long-term plan to deal with this issue.
- Six million Syrians are internally displaced. Tens of thousands are illegally detained by the regime.

Finding #7: The U.S. has key national security interests at stake in Syria.

- U.S. interests include countering the threat of terrorism, protecting a rules-based international order, and contributing to the security of key allies and partners.
- The U.S. Government (USG) has articulated three objectives for Syria: the enduring defeat of ISIS, the removal of all Iranian-backed forces, and a political settlement favorable to the U.S. and its allies. Secondary objectives include: the dismantlement of WMDs and deterrence of their use, mitigation of the humanitarian crisis, and protection of regional partners from threats emanating from Syria.
- These objectives are inextricably linked.
 - The stated USG approach is to deescalate the fighting in Syria while reinvigorating the political process. Other actors, however, see the fighting as a key part of the political process.
 - The U.S. and its partners must maintain pressure on ISIS and Iran, lest the former resurge and the latter build up its strategic capabilities. Yet absent an extended U.S. military commitment to Syria, ultimately a stable political outcome is required to ensure the long-term success of these endeavors.
- U.S. leverage to accomplish these goals includes:

- Troop presence facilitating the control of one third of Syrian territory via the SDF partner force; this region contains valuable hydrocarbon, water, and agricultural resources
- Withholding reconstruction aid, bilaterally and through international financial institutions, until a viable political process is in motion
- Galvanizing international diplomatic support for burden-sharing coalitions in support of stabilization, humanitarian and political goals, as well as continuing to isolate the Assad regime and forestalling rapprochement by other governments
- Enforcing sanctions

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenge #1: The United States' objectives are sound but ambitious given limited resource levels. Stated objectives suffer from an ends-means mismatch. The highest priority objective should be completing the counter-ISIS mission.

- To complete the counter-ISIS mission, the U.S. military withdrawal from northeast Syria should be halted and resources increased for civilian-led stabilization activities.
 - Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) Forward should be returned to Syria and increased in size.
 - Allies should be asked to increase contributions not just to the military force, but also to these civilian stabilization efforts.
 - Unspent funds in the Relief and Recovery Fund should be obligated, even as efforts to share the burden of stabilization in northeast Syria continue.
- DOD should complete a troop-to-task assessment in order to fulfill the following missions:
 - Training, advising, and assisting local partners to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS
 - Conducting kinetic counterterrorism operations with local partners to disrupt ISIS and AQ cells
 - Fostering security conditions necessary for civilian-led stabilization efforts to resume at increased levels
 - Enabling local partners to secure and process ISIS detainees in accordance with international legal and humanitarian standards
 - Serving as the enabling backbone for allied and partner contributions for civilian-led stabilization (e.g. command and control, close air support, logistics, lift, and intelligence)
- U.S. planning should also include contingencies that account for escalation scenarios such as:
 - ISIS resurgence and/or significant deterioration in the security situation in northeast Syria
 - Pressure on U.S. forces at al-Tanf
 - U.S. forces engaging Iranian-backed proxies or Russian-backed mercenary forces

- A Turkish incursion into northeast Syria
- A breach of the Euphrates de-confliction line by the regime, Iranian-backed proxies, or Russian-backed mercenary forces
- The success of the U.S. mission in northeast Syria will also depend on regional security and diplomacy. To that end, the U.S. should:
 - Prioritize the Iraqi partnership in order to maintain a military presence, assist the Iraqi Security Forces in preventing ISIS' resurgence, and partner with non-military Iraqi institutions to assist in Iraq's post-ISIS recovery
 - Address legitimate Turkish security concerns vis-à-vis Syria while pressing Turkey to halt destabilizing actions that will undermine the counter-ISIS objective
 - Confirm U.S. ambassadors to Iraq and Turkey
- Develop an internationally coordinated strategy for addressing the ISIS detainee problem set, including elevating this as a new line of effort for the Global Coalition to Defeat-ISIS. Designate a U.S. lead for ISIS detainee issues (including foreign fighters, Syrian/Iraqi detainees, and their families).
 - Encourage allies in Europe to repatriate their own citizens who are being held as ISIS detainees as well as their families.
 - Improve strategic communications on U.S. willingness to repatriate U.S. citizens and publicize successful U.S. prosecutions of repatriated ISIS fighters.

Challenge #2: Preserving both the U.S. strategic alliance with Turkey while maintaining support for the Kurdish-led SDF is essential, contradictory, but potentially resolvable.

- Agreement on a buffer zone could open space for improved U.S.-Turkey ties but the long-term solution to Turkish-YPG tensions lies in a renewed Turkey-PKK peace process.
- Empower local actors in eastern Syria to create viable governing alternatives to the Assad regime that represent the local population and do not threaten Turkey's security.
- Convene regular mil-to-mil dialogue led by OSD/Joint Staff with USEUCOM, USCENTCOM, and Turkish MoD on regional issues, including Syria, to alleviate tensions in USCENTCOM-Turkey relationship.

Challenge #3: The U.S. and Israel share the goal of removing Iranian-backed forces from Syria, but are not likely to accomplish this goal at current resource levels.

- In the near term, the U.S. should:
 - Continue economic pressure on Iranian actors via sanctions
 - Support Israeli efforts to degrade Iranian capabilities inside Syria
 - Engage in a concerted campaign to highlight Iranian actions in Syria, including the entrenchment of militias and economic exploitation
 - Leverage Israel's relationship with Russia to constrain Iran's movements in Syria

Challenge #4: A return to meaningful negotiations for a political settlement is stalemated by great power competition and Assad's refusal to compromise.

- The U.S. should continue its policy of isolating the Assad regime through increased economic and diplomatic pressure. This will require significant international support, but over time may increase the willingness of Russia and domestic Syrian actors to compromise.
 - Strongly discourage Arab governments from reengaging with Assad. To the extent such reengagement occurs, seek to shape it to minimize damage to U.S. interests.
 - The U.S. should refuse to accept the legitimacy of the 2021 presidential elections if they occur absent meaningful compromise and reform by the Assad regime and are not conducted according to international standards. It is highly unlikely that the Assad regime will agree to such conditions.
 - Continue to deny reconstruction aid to areas nominally controlled by the regime absent a political transition.
 - Continue to support the development of civil society inside Syria while acknowledging the risks to local partners.
- Pass and sign into law the Caesar Civilian Support Act in order to signal unified U.S. legislative and executive support for economic pressure on the Assad regime.
- Even if an acceptable political compromise between the Assad regime and the opposition can be found, Syria's long-term stability is likely to require accountability for war crimes. This work can begin by supporting the documentation of such crimes, and by asserting the commitment of the U.S. to full accountability.
- The U.S. must continue to prioritize the release of detained American citizens in any political compromise.

Challenge #5: Even if the fighting subsides, most Syrian refugees are unlikely to return given fears for their safety. This has serious implications for the stability of Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq as well as for the long-term stability of Syria itself.

- The U.S. should continue to support allies who have borne the brunt of the Syrian refugee burden.
 - Establish pooled funding mechanisms for medium-term assistance in consultation/coordination with affected countries.
 - Improve education opportunities, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, for Syrian refugees in the region.
 - Nominate and confirm a U.S. ambassador to Jordan to ensure full and high-level coordination between Washington and Amman.
- Shoulder part of the refugee burden by accepting and resettling an increased number of Syrian refugees in the United States in 2020.
 - Resettling 5,600 would represent 0.1 percent of all Syrian refugees worldwide, and roughly 1 percent of the Syrian refugees in Germany. This would send an important signal to both European allies and regional host countries.

- Ensure that the international community resists pressure from the Assad regime and its backers to involuntarily repatriate refugees when the human rights conditions do not allow for return.

Challenge #6: A renewal of the conflict in Idlib may be imminent and would deepen Syria's humanitarian catastrophe. Neither such a development nor the status quo serves U.S. interests.

- Reassert U.S. involvement in diplomacy over the ceasefire, with priority placed on gaining air access to conduct surveillance and targeted counterterrorism operations.
- The U.S. should also seek to deter the Assad regime from attacking by warning that the use of CW or other forms of indiscriminate civilian targeting will bring a swift military response from the U.S. and Europe.