Don’t Give Up Yet
There’s Still a Chance to Salvage Eastern Syria

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THE ISSUE
The U.S. ability to shape high-level outcomes in Syria is limited; Russia and Iran have outmaneuvered the United States. Eastern Syria still offers leverage to salvage a marginally but meaningfully better outcome for U.S. interests and the Syrian population. The United States must determine its sources of leverage, articulate its goals, connect those goals to a stabilization framework, and operationalize burden sharing under an eastern Syria framework. Failing this, the Assad regime will likely take over the east, which has proven to be the ultimate driver of instability and extremism in the country, with effects that will inevitably draw the United States back into the region.

A BEAK NATIONAL PICTURE
As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton assemble their own senior Middle East teams, a number of U.S. interests hang in the balance in Syria: the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Levant; the vulnerability of neighboring Iraq to extremist disruption; the return of Syrian refugees; the mitigation of Iranian influence; the need to both compete and cooperate with Russia to end the civil war; and the security of regional partners and allies. U.S. values are also at stake: the conflict has precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions, with over 500,000 civilians dead and 12 million displaced.

The U.S. ability to shape high-level outcomes in Syria is limited. Russia and Iran have outmaneuvered the United States there. With their backing, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is extending his control throughout Syrian territory—most recently via an offensive on southwestern Syria, previously the site of a “de-escalation zone” agreed between the United States, Russia, and Jordan, precipitating immense civilian displacement. Assad’s consolidation of extremists in Idlib amongst civilians raises the specter of another slaughter like Aleppo in 2016. The UN-backed Geneva process is moribund, though still worth supporting, while the United States has limited influence in the Astana and Sochi processes, which are also demonstrating limited returns. More broadly, Assad is already also brutally shaping the facts on the ground regarding “reconstruction” through forcible movement of populations, demographic engineering, constricting property rights, and predatory governance that favors loyalists. In his meeting with President Putin, President Trump reportedly discussed Syria, although there was no official joint summary of the summit. The discussion may have included options for drawing down U.S. forces in Syria in exchange for Russia convincing Iran to minimize its presence in Syria. However, Russia lacks the will and leverage over Iran to fulfill such a bargain.

The national picture is bleak. Zooming into the Syrian map more closely, one subnational enclave currently outside
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of Assad’s control has taken some steps towards stability. Eastern Syria still offers leverage to salvage a marginally but meaningfully better outcome for U.S. interests and the Syrian population. In the weeks ahead, the United States should: take stock of the sources of leverage in eastern Syria; articulate its goal for translating these sources of leverage into a defined political endstate; develop this stated goal into a broader stabilization operational framework; and then execute “the art of deal” in developing a burden-sharing plan to support these objectives.

This is not a trivial exercise. It will not require massive amounts of U.S. funding—but it will require concerted U.S. leadership at all levels, as well as commitment to continue to provide a modest security backbone to our local partners. The high stakes merit this effort. ISIS is already reconstituting in the region. This approach offers the creation of an alternative to Assad’s form of governance and a winner-take-all mentality in Syria, key drivers of extremism’s appeal. It also would help mitigate the risks to neighboring Iraq, which would be highly vulnerable to extremist destabilization if ISIS rebuilds in Syria. Further, the “burden-sharing” argument may appeal to key European allies concerned about the war’s destabilizing influence on migration patterns—already, some are providing modest security and civilian support to U.S. efforts in eastern Syria. But the promise is highly tenuous—and the window of opportunity is fleeting.

**SOURCES OF LEVERAGE**

U.S. leverage in eastern Syria is limited but not negligible. First and foremost, the presence of U.S. troops, in support of their Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) allies, represents a considerable point of influence, provided President Trump does not bargain this away. However, the U.S.-SDF relationship must be based on a common vision and rule set; the report of an alleged SDF shooting of a U.S. Marine in February, if true, must be dealt with swiftly through constructive engagement if the SDF wants to maintain U.S. support. Russian and regime forces are keen to avoid direct confrontation with U.S. forces. Syrians (including Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and Turkmen) in this area have taken nascent steps towards consolidating local governance, comprising emergent governance and administration, security forces, and police units, all supported by modest international funding and high-caliber technical assistance. If successful, this model could provide an alternative to predatory forms of local governance under the Assad regime and armed extremist groups.

Further, approximately 16.9 percent of the Syrian population and 26.7 percent of the Syrian territory is currently included in SDF-controlled areas. Eastern Syria has historically supported the country’s economic foundations with its agricultural and energy resources. Raqqa, Deir ez-Zur, and Hasaka provinces produced nearly all of Syria’s wheat and cotton before the war. The SDF still control the al-Omar oil field, although refining facilities remain in regime-held territory, limiting the potential for independent oil production. Still, the abundant resources in this area could strengthen the SDF’s hand in future negotiations.

On the other hand, U.S. efforts to shore up this region’s leverage would face constraints. Unexploded ordnance and infrastructure devastation hinder attempts to consolidate
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stabilization. Civilian expectations for improved security and service delivery are increasingly not being met. Moreover, uncertainty about U.S. political commitment, the potential of SDF security force overstretch, reports of SDF members considering deals with the Assad government, allegations of SDF alienation of local populations, and rising Arab-Kurdish tensions (witness the series of attacks on local leaders) further impede efforts. Finally, this SDF-held area is surrounded by adversaries on all sides except for the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. Turkey is hostile to the project, though it has acquiesced to U.S. oversight of ongoing local governance and security initiatives in Manbij.

ARTICULATING GOALS
Current overall U.S. Syria policy goals are murky, particularly with the recent musical chairs of senior-level leadership at both the White House and the State Department. The clearest expression came from Secretary Pompeo’s statement in June that, “President Trump has acknowledged that there is more work to be done to complete the defeat of ISIS and he is committed to … setting the conditions that will prevent its return.” Pompeo also reiterated commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which lays out a political process for Syria. In July, under questioning at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Pompeo insisted, “There’s been no change in U.S. policy with respect to our activities in Syria.” However, UNSCR 2254 calls for a gradual political transition away from Assad, which is now unlikely in the medium term—as morally abhorrent as that reality is. The newly-released U.S. Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) calls for the United States to set “realistic, analytically-backed political goals” in all stabilization endeavors. As such, the U.S. must flesh out how a stabilized, legitimate eastern Syria will play into salvaging a better political end-state aligned with U.S. objectives.

As a recommended path, the United States should sustain commitment of U.S. diplomatic support, military engagement, and stabilization assistance to reinforce a semiautonomous area. It should encourage other international partners’ continued advisory presence, and mobilize an investment by European, Gulf, and East Asian partners to fund targeted, milestone-driven stabilization efforts led by Syrian local governance actors over the next five years. It should retain a small presence of counterterrorism advisers in the area in support of the SDF to prevent the growth of ISIS. This will sustain leverage toward decentralization in the coming negotiations with the Assad government.

If the United States decides not to reinforce its support in eastern Syria, at least two different pathways exist. We do not recommend pursuing either one. In one pathway, the U.S.-backed SDF coalition would maintain control in the east to eradicate ISIS’ territory. The United States would then hand the area back completely to the SDF with their fate undetermined. They may broker an agreement with Assad to reintegrate with the state, but their ability to secure durable concessions for some level of decentralization will be severely limited without U.S. backing. The United States will likely need to “mow the grass” from American bases in Iraq in coming years, given evidence ISIS has burrowed underground and is operating at night in the region. This is not an optimal approach, as it fails to address the drivers and regeneration potential of the extremist group.

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Alternatively, the United States could work with Turkey to manage the north and east. The U.S.-backed SDF coalition would remove ISIS’ territorial control, but it would hand off responsibility to Turkey. Yet, Arab-Kurd tensions would likely immediately spike, and outright conflict between the Turks and the Kurds is also possible. Turkey would have to manage an agreement with Assad, in exchange for concessions from the regime on the empowerment of local governance actors and security forces, but it is unlikely to press as hard as the United States in this regard. Moreover, Turkey’s ability to manage this area effectively and with sufficient capacity remain highly doubtful, particularly given reports of Arab-Kurd tensions and tenuous civilian security in the areas currently under Turkish control.
The U.S. goals for Syria need to be clarified to address realities on the ground. The immediate, or medium-term, departure of Assad is not likely. As such, U.S. efforts now should seek to advance better options in the future. The objective of salvaging a better outcome for eastern Syria will depend upon pushing for greater formal decentralization for the area in ongoing negotiations, leveraging the fact that the area has already, de facto, become more autonomous. Decentralization is far from a panacea. Syria’s Legislative Decree 107 provides a starting point in principle. But it contains considerable leeway for the Assad regime to exploit in practice, including the highly empowered role of the centrally-appointed governor of each governorate. The United States and its partners will have to engage robustly in the details of any national decentralization framework to increase downward accountability and check the role of the Assad security services. Negotiations would need to convene a wider range of Syrian representatives than previously, and grapple with ways in which the Assad regime is already reasserting control, such as: housing, land, and property protections; security sector reform; and confidence building dialogue built into national and subnational reconciliation talks among Arabs, Kurds, and minorities. On the security front, there would need to be options for further U.S.-Russia deconfliction in pursuit of shared counterterrorism objectives. If the Trump administration proposes counterterrorism cooperation with Russia, it will require congressional change to U.S. law prohibiting such activities.

CONNECTING GOALS TO A STABILIZATION FRAMEWORK

In support of these goals, the United States should then work alongside key allies in developing a stabilization framework for how they will work together to achieve them, building on current efforts. Incorporating lessons learned from previous stabilization engagements, the framework should include four key components.

The first priority is reinforced security. Already, security has deteriorated significantly since the “golden hour” immediately after the liberation of Raqqa last fall. The United States and key allies (such as France) must provide a credible, although modest, political commitment to a continued troop backbone to underpin all other stabilization efforts: our leverage evaporates as lame ducks when our commitment is pegged to a timeline rather than conditions. Security is the sine qua non non component for bolstering a stable, legitimate eastern Syria. Furthermore, ongoing security advisory engagement is needed to ensure that SDF partners perform their duties in a way that is capable and legitimate. Our continued engagement with SDF forces is needed to maximize protection of civilians and minimize human rights violations. Over time, composition of U.S. civilian and military advisers may change to reflect shifting emphasis and missions—for example, a reduction of conventional forces while sustaining special operations forces advisers.

Second, stabilization projects must shift toward greater citizen engagement. Successful stabilization programming, at root, is more about process than product. The Stabilization Assistance Review advises to “start with small, short-term assistance and scale up cautiously,” while empirical academic research demonstrates that “modest, secure, and informed” development projects are most effective at reducing violence in conflict zones. As a consequence, multinational donor civilian presence may need to expand from its current level of only a handful—but by comparison, the level will still be dwarfed by previous major civilian presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Early stabilization projects have focused on jump-starting urgently needed electricity, water, sanitation, and demining efforts, but in the months ahead, ongoing community engagement components will need to be expanded.
Third, donor stabilization engagement must push for more inclusive governance. Analysts have documented concerns about the lack of representativeness in the Kurdish governance structures in eastern Syria. Pushing for more inclusive governance serves pragmatic purposes as well as normative ones: exclusionary governance and forced conscriptions are primary drivers of recruitment to extremism, and some Raqqa residents are already protesting SDF rule. Ensuring a greater Arab say may somewhat mitigate NATO ally Turkey’s concerns about Kurdish-dominated structures, and thus decrease their potential to be a spoiler. Though some SDF structures have broadened on paper, observers doubt that this has deepened meaningful inclusion. The United States and its partners will need to state verifiable steps the SDF should take toward greater representativeness and, once again, will need enough civilian official presence on the ground to actually verify, particularly at the lowest level of neighborhood councils. Finally, donors must continue to bolster civil society as another means to foster accountability.

Fourth, the stabilization framework must focus particularly on communications and information. Ultimately, successful stabilization depends upon instating a sense of predictability for the population. Clear communication about service availability and locations would help reinforce a sense of functional, reliable governance and administration. Robust engagement at the community level is needed. Above all, it would clarify perceptions of U.S. political commitment.

**OPERATIONALIZING BURDEN SHARING**

Once this stabilization framework fleshed out, the United States should accelerate a diplomatic surge to operationalize burden sharing in support of it. As the new Stabilization Assistance Review notes, the United States must “establish a division of labor and burden sharing among international donors and local actors that optimizes the strengths of each.” Though President Trump and Secretary Pompeo have made repeated calls for others to do more, there exists an urgent need for the United States to specify how. Demonstrating U.S. leadership isn’t the same as spending U.S. dollars—it is rallying partners to align their capabilities to these objectives. Already, the Trump administration has requested technical support from European allies and implementers, as well as key non-NATO partners such as Japan and South Korea; this will continue to be a key opportunity, as European allies understand the stakes of destabilized Syria for their own migration concerns. The administration has also signaled its interest in Gulf partners’ support for this endeavor; this may also be part of the puzzle, but needs to be carefully channeled to ensure it aligns with U.S. objectives for a stable, inclusive eastern Syria. Working with local partners, the United States should also coordinate closely with humanitarian implementers.

In developing a burden-sharing arrangement, the administration can build upon key mechanisms and
cooperation venues that already exist. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has long been a coordination forum. USAID and State Department implementing partners already have programs and offices that have programmed successfully in the challenging context of eastern Syria; in Syria and elsewhere, multi-donor trust funds and stabilization funding facilities have been key venues to channel support. Potential to further leverage these mechanisms exists, but requires considerable refinement. Transferring funds between donor countries is no simple undertaking. Further, as the SAR notes, “More important than dollars spent is having a singular, agreed-upon, strategic approach to unify efforts” — and should always support progress toward a politically-backed end state. Moreover, time is short: stabilization efforts cannot be turned on and off overnight, and the U.S. freeze in stabilization funds has jeopardized key relationships, personnel, momentum, and ability to plan strategically.

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Without U.S. leadership in burden sharing for stabilization, considerable risks would emerge. On the civilian side, incorporating contributions from non-allies (e.g., Saudi Arabia) may prove difficult from a legal and organizational perspective. Synchronizing funds and expertise on the ground will require higher levels of coordination by the United States to ensure these investments are reinforcing a common purpose; it will not be a total “burden shift” on to partners. From a security standpoint, contributing countries may pursue their own objectives at cross-purposes absent U.S. leadership. The presence of Saudi or Emirati troops could serve as a magnet for groups they previously supported—which radicalized—to disrupt the stabilization effort. Some partners may have better tribal awareness and relationships than others; not all Sunni Arabs have these attributes. The United States must oversee an operational framework in which partners can contribute. It should include a clear mandate and rules of engagement (e.g., peacekeeping only, civilian protection, and/or the ability to push back against Assad’s forces, or Iranian- or Russian-backed militias). It should establish clear command and control relationships via U.S. forces and the SDF and clarify the duration of the commitment, based on local conditions. Finally, the United States must understand the political expectations and transaction costs of partner commitments before proceeding.

CONCLUSION

The United States faces a critical—yet fleeting—opportunity in eastern Syria. It could offer a decentralized model connected to a unified Syrian state that could shape coming decisions about Syria’s governance and constitution. But a lesson learned from previous stabilization contexts is that local progress and stability—even grassroots and locally-driven—is not self-enforcing or automatically durable. Considerable U.S. political commitment, high-level leadership, and mid-level spadework will be needed for this statelet to solidify into a durable success. Moreover, transparency with the American public about the U.S. mission in Syria is paramount, given potential risks to U.S. forces.

Failing this, the Assad regime will likely take over the area, which has proven to be the ultimate driver of instability and extremism in the country. It will likely be only a matter of time before ISIS comes back and al-Qaeda affiliates gain a greater foothold. Recognizing both the significant constraints and possible opportunities, pursuing a strategy to salvage a better outcome is a worthy goal in service of U.S. interests and the Syrian people.