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# **A SECURITY ROLE FOR THE UNITED STATES IN A POST-ISIS SYRIA?**

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**CHALLENGES AND  
OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR U.S. POLICY**

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE  
**SSI**  
STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE  
WORKING PAPER

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*A Security Role for the United States in a Post-ISIS Syria?*

*Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy*

*A Strategic Studies Institute Working Paper*

*by*

*Gregory Aftandilian*

*September 2018*



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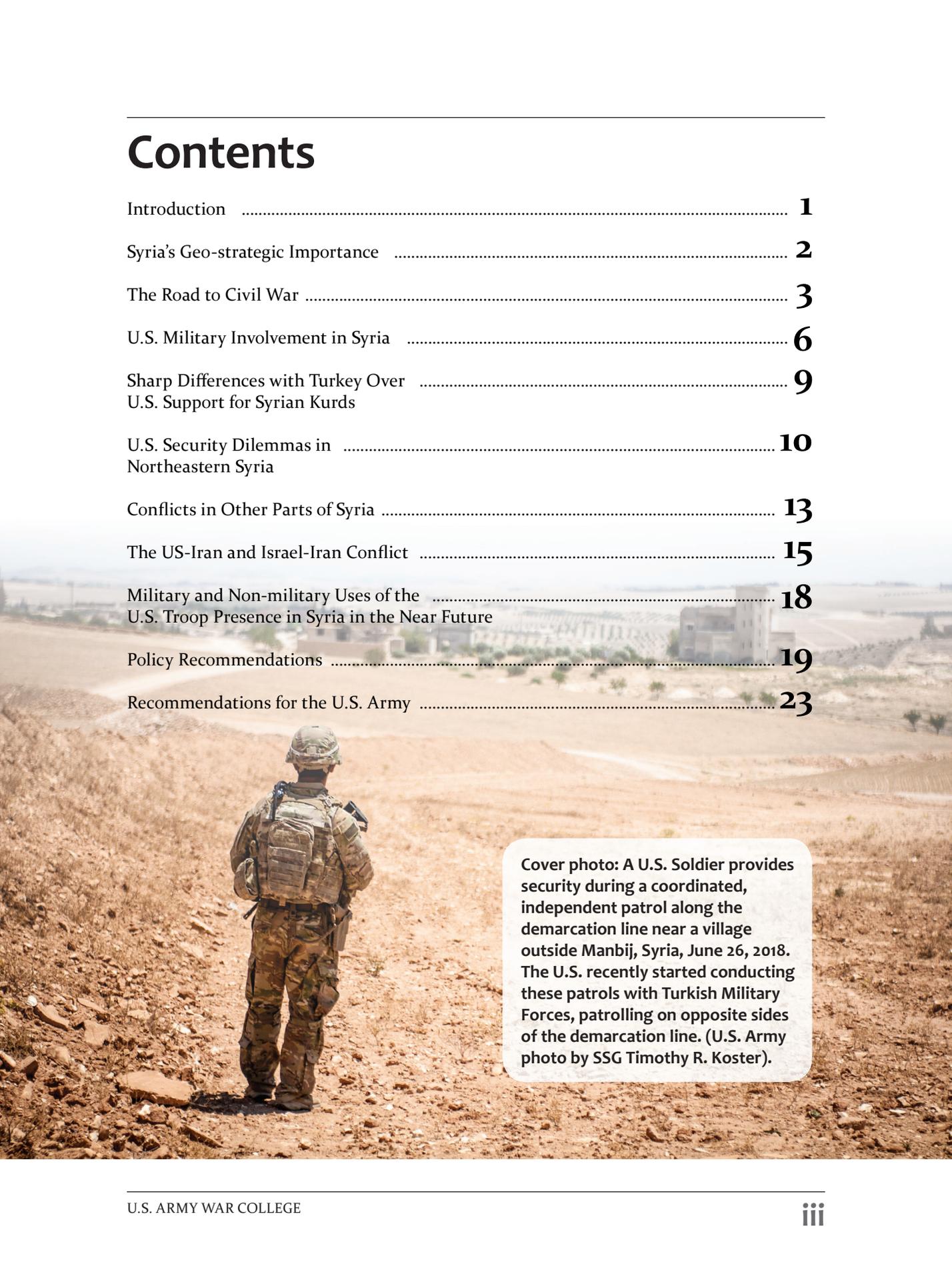
# About the Author

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Cover photo: A U.S. Soldier provides security during a coordinated, independent patrol along the demarcation line near a village outside Manbij, Syria, June 26, 2018. The U.S. recently started conducting these patrols with Turkish Military Forces, patrolling on opposite sides of the demarcation line. (U.S. Army photo by SSG Timothy R. Koster).

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U.S. soldiers drive their tactical vehicle through a blockade created to keep unwanted military vehicles off the road leading toward Manbij, Syria, June 26, 2018. U.S. and Turkish militaries recently began performing reassurance patrols along the demarcation line separating the areas of the country controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian Regime Forces. (U.S. Army photo by SSG Timothy R. Koster).

## Introduction

**S**YRIA has become one of the most vexing and complex problems for U.S. strategic planners in recent times. Currently, the United States has about 2,000 troops in the northeastern part of the country whose primary mission has been to aid the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), made up primarily of Kurds and some Arab tribesmen, to fight ISIS. The near total defeat of ISIS in Syria, especially with the fall of its so-called caliphate capital

in Raqqa in October 2017, might seem to suggest that the military mission is coming to an end and, therefore, the United States should pull out its troops. Indeed, President Donald Trump stated publicly in late March 2018, that he wanted these troops to come home “very soon.”<sup>1</sup> However, since that time, the U.S. President has backtracked from this statement after receiving advice from several of his top military advisers, including Defense Secretary James Mattis,<sup>2</sup> some foreign leaders like French President Emanuel Macron<sup>3</sup> and Israeli

1 Alexandra Wilts, “Donald Trump says US will withdraw from Syria ‘very soon’—despite promise not to telegraph military thinking,” *The Independent*, March 29, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-us-withdrawal-syria-very-soon-other-people-isis-a8280706.html>

2 Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Drops Push for Immediate Withdrawal of Troops from Syria,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/trump-syria-troops.html>

3 “Macron says persuaded Trump to keep troops in Syria,” *The Daily Star*, April 16, 2018. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2018/Apr-16/445409-macron-says-persuaded-trump-to-keep-troops-in-syria.ashx>



A local man and little girl watch from his house as U.S. soldiers conduct a patrol through his village along the demarcation line outside Manbij, Syria, July 14, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by SSG Timothy R. Koster).

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and influential members of Congress, such as Senator Lindsey Graham, all of whom have recommended that the President keep these troops in Syria.

The key questions are: What should the mission of these troops be now that ISIS is on its last legs and how long should they remain in Syria? Outside of the strictly military dimension, what purpose does and should these troops serve? Can the presence of these troops help foster U.S. leverage in Syria that would serve U.S. objectives outside of anti-ISIS campaign, such as reducing the Iranian military footprint in Syria and helping to bring back millions of refugees back to Syria? And what are the risks of keeping U.S. troops in Syria?

This monograph explores these issues, attempts to answer these difficult questions, and offers policy recommendations for U.S. strategic planners who deal with Syria in

particular and the Middle East in general.

### Syria's Geo-strategic Importance

**S**YRIA is situated in the heart of the Middle East, bordering the eastern Mediterranean as well as countries—Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Israel—with which the United States has important relationships and equities. On the symbolic level, Syria is also important. The Syrian capital of Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the world and was the seat of the famous Islamic Umayyad dynasty that stretched from Spain in the west to India and Central Asia in the east. In addition, Damascus was one of the earliest centers of Arab nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and was briefly, in 1920, the seat of a short-lived Arab kingdom of Syria under Faisal bin Hussein of the Hashemite tribe, who was one of the key leaders of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Turks during World

**“In the post-independence period, Syria went through many military coups and regimes and was frequently a country of contestation between Egypt and Iraq.**

War I. This independent kingdom lasted only a few months, however, as French forces drove into Syria to establish their Mandate, which lasted from 1920 to 1946.<sup>4</sup>

In the post-independence period, Syria went through many military coups and regimes and was frequently a country of contestation between Egypt and Iraq. The Soviet Union and the United States also vied for influence in Syria. On the Arab-Israeli dispute Syria often took a hardline stance against the Jewish state. In some circles, it became known as the “beating heart”<sup>5</sup> of the Arab world for its strong stand on Arab nationalist issues, though it occasionally entered into indirect peace talks with Israel that were facilitated by Washington.

### The Road to Civil War

**W**HILE flaunting its Arab nationalist credentials, Syria has also represented the diversity of the Arab world, home to many different religious sects and ethnic groups. Although Arab Sunni Muslims are the demographic majority<sup>6</sup> in the country (about 65 percent), they have not ruled the country since the mid-1960s. In 1966, a member of the Alawite minority (the Alawite sect is an offshoot of Shi'i Islam), Salah Jadid, seized

power in a military coup. Four years later, another Alawite, Hafez Assad, the then-defense minister, seized power and ruled the country until his death in 2000. As a member of the Baath party, which advocated secular Arab nationalism and socialism, Hafez Assad promoted Syria as a confrontational state against Israel, though he scrupulously adhered to the 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel in the aftermath of the 1973 October war that was brokered by the United States. At the same time, he enabled his own sect to assume key positions of power, particularly in the military and intelligence fields. Because the Alawites only comprise about 11-12 percent of the population, Hafez Assad reached out to other minority groups to bolster his political base. And while his so-called “corrective movement” reined in some of socialist excesses of the radical Baathists who preceded him and made accommodations with the Arab Sunni merchant class, he also pursued a hardline stance against Arab Sunnis who were involved in the militant Muslim Brotherhood organization that threatened his regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After a brutally crushing a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama in 1982, any serious challenge to his rule essentially evaporated.<sup>7</sup>

4 Ayse Tekdal Fildis, “The Trouble in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule,” *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (winter 2017). <https://www.mepc.org/troubles-syria-spawned-french-divide-and-rule>

5 Dave McAvoy, “In isolated Syria, Assad shifts away from pan-Arabism,” *The National*, October 23, 2013. <https://www.thenational.ae/in-isolated-syria-assad-shifts-away-from-pan-arabism-1.297467>

6 “Syria’s demographic map changes after seven years of war,” *AFP*, May 25, 2018. <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/994259/syrias-demographic-map-changes-after-seven-years-of-war>

7 Dasha Afansieva, “Banned in Syria, Muslim Brotherhood members trickle home,” *Reuters*, May 7, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-brotherhood-idUSKBN0NR20Y20150507>

Bashar Assad, who had become the heir apparent in Syria after his older brother Bassel died in a 1994 car accident, took power upon his father's death in 2000 and initially opened up the political system. There were hopes both inside and outside

as well as in Europe. Germany is hosting a million Syrian refugees, sparking a nationalist backlash there, while the large refugee communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey have challenged the fragile sectarian balances in those countries. In

**“The civil war has also become a national and international tragedy.”**

Syria that he would be a reformer but, after a short period of time, he clamped down on dissent and reinstated the authoritarian system. Some scholars have maintained, however, that he was still liked by a majority of the population until the 2011 Arab Spring.<sup>8</sup>

addition, there are at least 6.6 million internally displaced refugees in the country,<sup>10</sup> and significant parts of some major Syria's cities, like Homs, remain uninhabitable after shelling and bombings by government forces and look like photos of Berlin, Germany in May 1945.

The Syria civil war, which grew out of peaceful demonstrations in 2011 against Bashar Assad's rule, soon morphed into a bloody struggle and took on aspects of a sectarian conflict. Although some intellectuals from various minority groups took part in the initial protests in 2011, the vast majority of the protestors and later, the rebels, came from Arab Sunni Muslim backgrounds,<sup>9</sup> and as time went on, Islamist extremist factions within this group came to predominate. The civil war has also become a national and international tragedy. Perhaps 400,000 people have died in the conflict and at least 5.6 million Syrians—roughly one-fourth of the population—have become refugees, mostly in neighboring countries

On top of this humanitarian disaster (and contributing to it), is the fact that Syria has become a place for various regional powers and proxy forces, plus international players, to pursue their own agendas. Iran and Russia have intervened on the side of the Assad government with troops, military assistance and, in Iran's case, Shia militias from various countries including thousands of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and Shia volunteers as far away as Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are an estimated 3,000 Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria,<sup>11</sup> plus around 20,000 Shia militiamen<sup>12</sup> in addition to thousands of Hezbollah fighters in Syria. These forces, with Russian air support, helped to turn the tide of the civil war in Assad's favor by

8 David W. Lesch, “Anatomy of an Uprising: Bashar al-Assad's Fateful Choices That Launched a Civil War,” in Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch, eds., *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), p. 91.

9 For an excellent sectarian analysis of the Syrian civil war, see Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), p. 5.

10 “Syria emergency: UNHCR/USA,” 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>

11 Bel Trew, “As the Syrian war draws to a close, the real question is what Israel and Iran do,” *The Independent*, August 25, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/us-war-syria-force-all-out-war-israel-trump-rouhani-hezbollah-a8506696.html>

12 Nadav Ben Hour and Michael Eisenstadt, “The Great Middle Eastern War of 2019,” *American Interest*, August 20, 2018. The authors cite a figure of more than 20,000 Iranian-trained Shia militiamen in Syria, though other sources give a much higher figure. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/08/20/the-great-middle-eastern-war-of-2019/>

early 2016 after loyalist government forces had suffered many losses and various rebel forces had been on the ascendancy. Although President Barack Obama called for Assad to step down from power and he authorized some covert assistance to moderate rebels,<sup>13</sup> such as the Free Syrian Army (a largely secular force fighting the Assad government), he clearly did not want the United States to get bogged down in the civil war. His administration, however, did provide hundreds of millions of dollars to the United Nations for Syrian refugee assistance.

As for regional countries outside of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey aided some Islamist forces<sup>14</sup> within the rebel camp, while Jordan reportedly joined the United States in providing some assistance to the Free Syrian Army.<sup>15</sup> This force has now been severely weakened, and the United States is no longer providing visible aid. Meanwhile, Israel has undertaken over 130 airstrikes in Syria since the civil war began,<sup>16</sup> mostly against Hezbollah and other Iranian-supported militias that it has seen as a threat. In May 2018, Iranian forces in Syria fired 20 missiles at Israeli military positions in the Golan Heights. Although only four of the twenty missiles made it over the border, Israel retaliated

by having its aircraft hit seventy Iranian targets in Syria, including a base south of Damascus from which the twenty missiles were allegedly launched.<sup>17</sup> In addition to targeting Iranian and Iranian-supported militias, Israel has also clashed with some ISIS militants. In early August 2018, Israeli forces killed seven ISIS fighters who were allegedly trying to cross into the Golan Heights.<sup>18</sup>

The civil war presented an opportunity for Islamist extremists to exploit the chaos. An al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, which now goes by the name Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, became active in the country, while a rival al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was originally from al-Qaeda in Iraq, wanted to be the undisputed radical Islamist leader. When al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri ordered that the two groups merge, al-Baghdadi spurned this directive and decided to branch off on his own. He renamed his group the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) in 2014 and declared himself caliph. This declaration prompted an angry denunciation by Zawahiri who mocked al-Baghdadi's self-promotion as leader of all Muslims.<sup>19</sup>

ISIS's battlefield successes, however, soon

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13 Elise Labott, "Obama authorized covert support for Syrian rebels, sources say," CNN, August 1, 2012. <https://www.cnn.com/2012/08/01/us/syria-rebels-us-aid/index.html>

14 Kim Sengupta, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria," *The Independent*, May 12, 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html>

15 "US Fully Suspends Its Support for Free Syrian Army. Shuts Down Operation rooms in Turkey and Jordan," *Southfront*, December 21, 2018. <https://southfront.org/us-fully-suspends-its-support-for-free-syrian-army-shuts-down-operation-rooms-in-turkey-and-jordan-report/>

16 Nadav Ben Hour and Michael Eisenstadt, "The Great Middle Eastern War of 2019." *The American Interest*, August 20, 2018. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/08/20/the-great-middle-eastern-war-of-2019/>

17 Bel Trew, "As the Syrian war draws to a close, the real question is what Israel and Iran do," *The Independent*, August 25, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/us-war-syria-force-all-out-war-israel-trump-rouhani-hezbollah-a8506696.html>

18 Jacob Magid and AFP, "IDF: Airstrikes kill 7 IS gunmen who crossed from Syria into Israeli territory," *Times of Israel*, August 2, 2018. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-airstrike-said-to-kill-7-gunmen-in-syria-close-to-israeli-border/>

19 James Gordon Meek, "Al Qaeda Leader Al-Zawahiri Declares War on ISIS 'Caliph' Al-Baghdadi," *ABC News*, September 10, 2015. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/al-qaeda-leader-al-zawahiri-declares-war-isis/story?id=33656684>



A soldier conducts artillery strikes with an M109A6 Paladin howitzer at Al-Taqaddum Air Base, Iraq, June 27, 2016, to support Operation Inherent Resolve. (Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Donald Holbert).

redounded to al-Baghdadi's favor. By the summer of 2014, not only did ISIS occupy much of central and eastern Syria, establishing its so-called caliphate capital in Raqqa along the Euphrates River, but it also captured much of western, northern and central Iraq. The rapid territorial gains by ISIS and its self-declared caliphate soon captured the imagination of many radical Muslim youth not only in the Islamic world but also in Western countries, particularly in Europe. An estimated 30,000 Islamist radicals came to Syria to join ISIS,<sup>20</sup> helping to strengthen its ranks to as many as 100,000 fighters and helped to bolster its rather sophisticated social media propaganda operations. Many al-Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East region soon switched *bayah* (allegiance) to al-Baghdadi as result of his organization's initial successes.

## U.S. Military Involvement in Syria

**T**HE rapid ISIS advance in Iraq to near the gates of Baghdad in 2014 prompted President Barack Obama to send several thousand U.S. troops back to Iraq to retrain the Iraqi military and to provide air support for U.S. and anti-ISIS coalition air force strikes against ISIS targets. He also authorized U.S. coalition air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria in late September 2014 and sent a small detachment of 50 U.S. Special Forces to Syria to help train Syrian Kurdish forces in the northeastern part of that country fighting ISIS in 2015.<sup>21</sup> This indigenous group took on the name of the Syrian Democratic Forces in October 2015. It has been made up largely of Syrian Kurdish

20 "How real is the threat of returning IS fighters?" BBC News, October 23, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-41679377>

21 Kevin Rawlinson, "Barack Obama to send more soldiers to fight Islamic State in Syria," *The Guardian*, April 24, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/25/barack-obama-us-soldiers-islamic-state-syria>

fighters affiliated with the YPG (People's Protection Units) of the PYD (Democratic Unionist Party), plus some Arab Sunni Muslim tribesmen opposed to ISIS. In April 2016, President Obama announced that he would increase the number of U.S. Special Forces in Syria by 250, a six-fold increase from what the U.S. military presence was previously.<sup>22</sup> Later on it was revealed that the number of U.S. Special Forces, plus a U.S. Marine Corps unit, had increased the number of U.S. military personnel in Syria to around 2,000 as the fight to take Raqqa from ISIS intensified.<sup>23</sup> These U.S. forces not only helped to train the Syrian Democratic Forces and provide them with logistical assistance but, like in Iraq, they also assisted the U.S. and coalition air war against ISIS targets in Syria, and even engaged in a few direct clashes with ISIS.<sup>24</sup>

However, President Obama in April 2016 emphasized that U.S. forces in Syria were not going to be spearheading the fight. He stated: "They're not going to be leading the fight on the ground, but they will be essential in providing the training and assisting local forces as they continue to drive ISIL (ISIS) back."<sup>25</sup> As one defense analyst noted at the time, U.S. military forces in Syria were "going to assist our Kurdish YPG friends to widen and deepen their offensive against [ISIS] in

northeastern Syria."<sup>26</sup>

These U.S. forces were not in Syria at the invitation of the Assad government but were there as part of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that, within the U.S. context, gave authorization to the U.S. President to fight against Al Qaeda affiliates broadly defined. Even though ISIS had broken from al Qaeda, U.S. officials believed the deployment of U.S. troops in eastern Syria was justified by claiming that ISIS, as a terrorist organization, was a threat to the U.S. homeland since ISIS propaganda on social media did mention to its sympathizers that they should strike the United States and other Western nations even if only with rudimentary weapons and equipment.<sup>27</sup>

In any event, the Assad government generally did not do much to oppose the presence of these U.S. forces in northeastern Syria, except for issuing some statements opposing it,<sup>28</sup> largely because the regime has lost jurisdiction over this area, did not have the troops to retake it, and was probably happy that ISIS was being bludgeoned there. Over time, part of the area, adjacent to the Turkish border, came under the control of the Syrian Kurds who established their own administration, flying their own flag. They initially called the area "Rojava" (meaning west in the Kurdish

22 Roberta Rampton, "Obama sends more Special Forces to Syria in fight against IS," *Reuters*, April 24, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/obama-sends-more-special-forces-to-syria-in-fight-against-is-idUSKCN0XLoZE>

23 John Ismay, "US Says 2,000 Troops are in Syria, a Fourfold Increase," *New York Times*, December 6, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/us-troops-syria.html>

24 Matthew Cox, "Marines Engage in Direct Gunfights with ISIS in Syria, Commander Says," *Military.com*, June 9, 2018. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/06/09/marines-engaged-direct-gunfights-isis-syria-commander-says.html>

25 Roberta Rampton, "Obama sends more Special Forces to Syria in fight against IS," *Reuters*, April 24, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/obama-sends-more-special-forces-to-syria-in-fight-against-is-idUSKCN0XLoZE>

26 Ibid.

27 Garrett Epps, "The War That Congress Won't Declare," *The Atlantic*, August 22, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/aumf-isis/402017/>

28 Liz Sly, "Assad: U.S. troops must leave Syria," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2018.



**Air Force MC-130 Hercules aircraft crew chiefs prepare cargo and supplies for an airdrop over Syria, June 22, 2017. (Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Jason Robertson).**

language, signaling the western part of historic Kurdistan), but it is now called the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria to make it sound more of a regional rather than an ethnic autonomous zone. This administration, though dominated by Kurds, includes some Assyrian Christians and Arab Sunni Muslims.<sup>29</sup>

U.S. military forces found that the Kurds of this area were the most committed and capable forces fighting against ISIS and developed a close relationship with them. This involved not only military training and the provision of weapons but also logistics for ground operations. U.S. military commanders grew to respect these

Kurds and their willingness to put their lives on the line in helping to destroy ISIS and roll back its territorial gains.<sup>30</sup>

President Trump, despite his campaign comments that he would pursue a tougher line against ISIS than President Obama, essentially pursued the same policy in Syria. In other words, he supported the SDF in its fight against ISIS with a relatively light U.S. military footprint and continued the air war, with coalition partners, against ISIS targets. The one main difference was that U.S. military commanders in both Iraq and Syria were given more leeway to make targeting and force deployment decisions without checking in with Washington.<sup>31</sup>

29 For a sympathetic assessment of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, see Rahila Gupta, “The world’s most progressive democracy is being born. Don’t let it get strangled,” CNN.com, February 12, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/12/opinions/worlds-most-progressive-democracy-born-dont-let-turkey-strange-it-opinion-gupta/index.html>

30 Rod Nordland, “On the Northern Syrian Front, U.S. and Turkey Head Into Tense Face-off,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/world/middleeast/us-turkey-manbij-kurds.html>

31 Dion Nissenbaum and Maria Abi-Habib, “Trump Gives Generals More Freedom on ISIS fight,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-gives-generals-free-rein-on-isis-fight-1492218994>

## Sharp Differences with Turkey Over U.S. Support for Syrian Kurds

A major problem was that Turkey saw the YPG and the PYD as an extension of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) that Ankara has long considered a terrorist organization. From the Turkish government's perspective the PKK was establishing a "terrorist" enclave<sup>32</sup> to its immediate south and feared that this entity would encourage the PKK in Turkey to do the same.

Even though the United States has also categorized the PKK as a terrorist organization, it has refused to pin this label on the YPG and the PYD. U.S. military commanders on the ground in Syria have praised the YPG's fighting abilities against ISIS. One stated, for example, "When nobody else could do it, they took Raqqa [from ISIS in December 2017]. I think that has earned them a seat at the table."<sup>33</sup> This stark difference in how the United States and Turkey viewed these Syrian Kurdish fighters prompted an extraordinary spat between the U.S. military and Turkey that took place in early 2018.

For example, in response to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks that he would not tolerate a "terrorist army" on its southern border and that he could not guarantee the safety of the U.S. military

in northern Syria if they stood in the way of a Turkish incursion, Lt. General Paul Funk said: "[I]f you hit us, we will respond aggressively. We will defend ourselves."<sup>34</sup> This comment then prompted Erdogan to issue more threats, stating: "To those who say, 'if they hit us, we will respond with force,' it is clear that they have never experienced the Ottoman slap."<sup>35</sup>

There was also concern by the U.S. military over the Turkish incursion into the Afrin area of northwestern Syria, which is a largely a Kurdish ethnic enclave. The Turks wanted to clear the area of the YPG because it did not want the Afrin area to be linked up to the Kurdish areas in Syria east of the Euphrates River. When the Turks invaded this area in late January 2018, the U.S. Government issued a statement calling on the Turks to "use restraint,"<sup>36</sup> while U.S. military commanders in Syria lamented that the operation had hindered the campaign to wipe out the last ISIS strongholds in eastern Syria because so many YPG fighters within the SDF had gone to Afrin to aide their comrades.<sup>37</sup>

This crisis prompted then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to travel to Ankara in February 2018 in an attempt to ease U.S.-Turkish tensions. Although the fate of the Kurdish enclave in northeastern Syria was left unresolved, the United States appears to have tacitly accepted the removal of the YPG from the Afrin area and agreed

32 Gul Tuysuz, Schams Elwazer, and Hilary Clarke, "Erdogan accuses US of creating Kurdish terror enclave on Turkish border," *CNN.com*, January 16, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/15/middleeast/erdogan-us-terror/index.html>

33 "At U.S. outpost in Syria, U.S. general backs Kurdish fighters," Associated Press, February 7, 2018. <https://wtop.com/middle-east/2018/02/at-us-outpost-in-syria-us-general-backs-kurdish-fighters/>

34 Rod Nordland, "On the Northern Syrian Front, U.S. and Turkey Head Into Tense Face-off," *New York Times*, February 7, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/world/middleeast/us-turkey-manbij-kurds.html>

35 "Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatens US forces with 'Ottoman slap,'" *Washington Examiner*, February 13, 2018. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/recep-tayyip-erdogan-threatens-us-forces-with-ottoman-slap>

36 "US tells Turkey to show 'restraint' with Syria Kurds," *Deutsche Welle*, January 21, 2018. <https://www.dw.com/en/us-tells-turkey-to-show-restraint-with-syria-kurds/a-42247165>

37 Eric Schmitt and Rod Nordland, "Amid Turkish Assault, Kurdish Forces are Drawn Away From U.S. Fight With ISIS," *New York Times*, February 28, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/world/middleeast/syrian-kurds-isis-american-offensive.html>



**U.S. soldiers maneuver toward a coordination point to link up visual and radio communication with Turkish soldiers while conducting a coordinated, independent patrol outside Manbij, Syria, July 16, 2018. The United States and Turkey began conducting independent, coordinated patrols to help reinforce the safety and security in the region after the elimination of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. (Army photo by SSG Timothy R. Koster).**

to joint U.S.-Turkish patrols in the Syrian city of Manbij that straddles the Euphrates River in north central Syria and lies in-between Afrin and northeastern part of the country.<sup>38</sup> These joint patrols have been in operation since the summer of 2018.<sup>39</sup>

## **U.S. Security Dilemmas in Northeastern Syria**

**W**HILE the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria played an important support role in the

near defeat of ISIS, it inadvertently fostered additional problems: ethnic tensions between Kurds and Arabs; possible confrontation with the Syrian government; ability of U.S. forces to withdraw without leaving the Syrian Kurds to the mercy of either the Assad government or Turkey. Each of these problems is explained below:

- 1) The U.S.-supported SDF now occupy a fourth of the country, basically most of the area east of the Euphrates River from the Turkish

<sup>38</sup> “US and Turkey agree to mend ties after Tillerson holds talks in Ankara,” Reuters, February 16, 2018. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-and-turkey-agree-to-mend-ties-after-tillerson-holds-talks-in-ankara-1.705200>.

See also Karen DeYoung and Erin Cunningham, “Accord seeks to defuse U.S.-Turkish tension over Syrian town,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Kyle Rempfer, “US and Turkish troops coordinate patrols in tense Manbij region of Syria,” *Army Times*, July 26, 2018. <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-air-force/2018/07/26/us-and-turkish-troops-coordinate-patrols-in-tense-manbij-region-of-syria/>

border to the Iraqi border. Part of this area was under ISIS's control, particularly the towns along the Euphrates River. ISIS is believed to hold some desert territory in the eastern part of this region next to the Iraqi border. The area also includes Syria's main oil region near the city of Deir el-Zor.<sup>40</sup> Although the Kurdish-dominated SDF is the main military power in the area, supported by the United States, most of the area, except for the Kurdish-populated northeastern corridor, is inhabited by Arab Sunni Muslims.<sup>41</sup> Since the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa in October 2017, U.S. civilian officials have helped anti-ISIS Arab Sunni Muslims to form local councils to run the municipalities.<sup>42</sup> Although this effort has been welcomed by local residents, there are tensions between the Arabs in the cities and towns and Kurdish SDF military units. One Arab resident of Raqqa after ISIS was defeated there wrote sarcastically that PKK leader Ocalan was now the new "caliph" in the city.<sup>43</sup> The SDF, as mentioned earlier, has a significant proportion of Arab fighters, and U.S. officials have been doing their best to increase their number to help patrol and protect liberated Arab cities and towns, but there are not enough of them.

Moreover, the Kurds predominate in the SDF's officer corps.<sup>44</sup>

2) ISIS is down but not out. As mentioned earlier, some of their fighters in Syria are now believed to be concentrated in a desert area along the Iraqi border so the campaign is unfinished. In mid-August 2018, the *Washington Post* reported that there were still a significant number of ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq. It cited a report from the UN Analytical Support and Monitoring Team that claimed that there were between 20,000 and 30,000 ISIS fighters across Syria and Iraq, divided roughly equally between the two countries. The same *Washington Post* report quoted a U.S. military spokesman who said these figures "seemed high" but added that ISIS remained a threat and vowed to "pursue them until they are completely defeated."<sup>45</sup> What was perhaps more revealing from the UN report was its assessment that ISIS had "rallied" from the two-month pause in SDF operations earlier in the year when Syrian Kurdish fighters had gone to Afrin to try to halt the Turkish offensive against fellow Kurds in that area. This pause allowed ISIS "breathing space to prepare for the next phase of its evolution into a global covert

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40 Sarah El Deeb, "US-backed forces take Syria's largest oil field from Islamic State," *Associated Press*, October 23, 2017. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-syria-oil-field-islamic-state-20171022-story.html#>

41 Fabrice Balanche, p. 60.

42 Hadi Haid, "Local Participation is Important to Post-ISIS Governance in Raqqa," *newsdeeply.com*, May 16, 2017. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/05/16/local-participation-is-important-to-post-isis-governance-in-raqqa>. See also John Davison and Tom Perry, "After victory in Raqqa over IS, Kurds face tricky peace," *Reuters*, October 17, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-future-ana/after-victory-in-raqqa-over-is-kurds-face-tricky-peace-idUSKBN1CM2C6>

43 Louisa Loveluck, "US-led coalition declares ISIS forces vanquished, battle for Raqqa over," *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-led-coalition-declares-isis-forces-vanquished-battle-for-raqqa-over/2017/10/20/85da033a-b4f6-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.9029b2892813](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-led-coalition-declares-isis-forces-vanquished-battle-for-raqqa-over/2017/10/20/85da033a-b4f6-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html?utm_term=.9029b2892813)

44 There are conflicting figures on the actual number of Arab fighters within the SDF. See Fabrice Balanche, pp. 64-65.

45 Liz Sly, "30,000 Islamic State fighters remain in Iraq and Syria, new report says," *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2018.

network.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, a week later (August 22, 2018), ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a message to mark the Islamic Eid al-Adha holiday. While acknowledging that ISIS has been expelled from much of Syria and Iraq, he emphasized that the “tides of war [do] change.” He then urged his followers to carry out attacks in the West by stabbings, gunfire, bombings or using vehicles to run over individuals.<sup>47</sup>

The United States and its allies believe it is important for the U.S. military to stay in Syria to root out the last vestiges of ISIS, a position that was mentioned in late August 2018 by U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton.<sup>48</sup> The problem is that Syrian government forces and their allied Russian and Iranian-backed Shia forces in the southeast are also close to this ISIS pocket, and the potential for clashes between the United States and these forces remains. Indeed, there were a couple of clashes in this vicinity in 2017 after U.S. military commanders warned government forces to stay away from U.S. lines. During Congressional testimony, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. emphasized that the U.S. military had responded defensively.<sup>49</sup> There was also a rather bizarre incident in February 2018

when a group of about 200 Russian mercenaries was decimated by U.S. aircraft and artillery after they attacked a base in eastern Syria housing SDF and U.S. military advisors.<sup>50</sup> The Russian government did not make much of this incident, perhaps because to do so would acknowledge Moscow’s connections to the mercenaries and because Russian President Putin did not want to damage his relationship with President Trump. Although there has been a de-confliction process in place since the autumn of 2015 to prevent the U.S. and Russian air forces from inadvertently engaging in clashes or accidents in the skies above Syria, the potential for U.S. clashes with Syrian government troops and its allied forces remains high.

3) As the outside power aiding the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS, the United States has also become their de-facto protector. A symbiotic relationship between the U.S. military and these Kurds has developed. The U.S. military still sees these Kurds as its best combat ally against ISIS, and the Kurds see the U.S. military as their protective shield against Turkey, the Syrian government, or another ISIS-like group that may emerge. However, comments by President Trump earlier in 2018 about wanting to

46 Ibid.

47 Liz Sly, “ISIS ‘caliph’ breaks his long silence,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2018.

48 Don Williams, “Trump advisor Bolton says Russia ‘stuck’ in Syria, Iran must leave,” *Reuters*, August 22, 2018.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-russia-inter/trump-adviser-bolton-says-russia-stuck-in-syria-iran-must-leave-idUSKCN1L709R>

49 Anne Bernard, “Russia and Syria Denounce US Airstrikes on Pro-Assad Militia,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/world/middleeast/syria-russia-us-convoy.html>

50 Mike Eckel, “CIA Director: ‘Couple of Hundred Russians’ Killed in February U.S. Assault in Syria,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 12, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/cia-director-couple-hundred-russians-killed-in-february-u-s-assault-in-syria/29162797.html>

withdraw U.S. troops from Syria have made the Kurds nervous.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the fact that President Trump has backtracked from these comments and that some of his top officials in his administration have spoken about an “enduring” U.S. presence in Syria<sup>52</sup> to ensure the defeat of ISIS, it appears that the Kurds are hedging their bets. In July and August 2018, the political wing of the SDF, now called the Syrian Democratic Council, began talks with the Syrian government for a “roadmap leading to a democratic and decentralized Syria.”<sup>53</sup> It is unclear how these will fare. Moreover, even though the Syrian regime has endorsed the concept of de-centralization, the word has different interpretations. One scholar has noted that for the regime, de-centralization means local administration, whereas for the Kurds, it means federalism.<sup>54</sup> Although the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem in 2017 did show some flexibility in saying that the government would be open to a limited degree of self-rule,<sup>55</sup> the Syrian Kurds are approaching the

talks with a good deal of skepticism. Furthermore, the aggression and confidence showed by the Syrian regime, backed by Russia and Iran, in occupying areas of the country that had been outside of its control for several years, has undoubtedly added to the Kurds’ worries.

## Conflicts in Other Parts of Syria

**H**AVING routed the rebels from suburbs around Damascus and in areas near the Jordanian border and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in 2018 (only a few pockets of rebels are left in this region), the Syrian regime now appears to be setting its sights on the Idlib province in the country’s northwest, the last major rebel stronghold. This province contains 3 million people, some of whom have fled from other parts of Syria, an estimated 70,000 rebel fighters, including al-Qaeda’s affiliate, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, and some Turkish troops who have been reinforcing their observation posts during the summer of 2018.<sup>56</sup> Turkish President Erdogan has warned the Syrian government and outside parties that Idlib is a “red line” and vowed to resist any attempt to take it away from Turkey’s sphere of influence.<sup>57</sup> A major push

51 Ellen Francis, “Wary of US Ally, Syrian Kurds look to Damascus for talks,” *Reuters*, July 25, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/wary-of-u-s-ally-syrian-kurds-look-to-damascus-for-talks-idUSKBN1KF2NN>

52 Laura Rozen, “Pompeo names high-level Syria team as Trump looks for the exit,” *Al-Monitor*, August 21, 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/pompeo-names-high-level-syria-team.html>

53 “US-backed opposition authorities in northern Syria push for ‘de-centralization’ agreement with Damascus: SDF,” *Syria Direct*, July 30, 2018. <https://syriadirect.org/news/us-backed-opposition-authorities-in-northern-syria-push-for-de-centralization-agreement-with-damascus-sdf/>. See also, “Syrian Kurdish-led council visits Damascus for new talks: co-chair,” *Reuters*, August 14, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-08-14/syrian-kurdish-led-council-visits-damascus-for-new-talks-report>

54 *Ibid.*

55 Tom O’Conner, “Will War in Syria End? US Allies Prepare to Rebuild Ties to Assad After Trump’s Talk With Putin,” *Newsweek*, July 17, 2018. <https://www.newsweek.com/us-allies-syria-prepare-rebuild-ties-assad-after-trump-talk-putin-1029017>

56 Liz Sly, “Syria’s war could be entering its last and most dangerous phase,” *The Washington Post*, August 10, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-war-could-be-entering-its-last-and-most-dangerous-phase/2018/08/09/e9e60442-8f60-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.970de812c8b5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-war-could-be-entering-its-last-and-most-dangerous-phase/2018/08/09/e9e60442-8f60-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d_story.html?utm_term=.970de812c8b5)

57 Reema Hibrawi, “The Sticky Situation of the Final Idlib Offensive,” *Atlantic Council*, August 15, 2018. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-sticky-situation-of-the-final-idlib-offensive>



**U.S. soldiers and Iraqi Security Force fire a howitzer at known Islamic State of Iraq and Syria locations near the Iraqi-Syrian border during Operation Roundup, June 5, 2018. The soldiers are assigned to the 3rd Cavalry Regiment. (Army photo by SPC Anthony Zendejas IV).**

by the Syrian government into Idlib, some analysts have warned, would not only cause further bloodshed but would exacerbate the refugee crisis,<sup>58</sup> as many civilians would try to flee into Turkey and, from there, to the European mainland.

Some reports have suggested that the Russians would prefer to have Idlib absorbed back into the Syrian state without bloodshed, in part because an offensive would strain their warming relations with Turkey, as the Syrian government would likely want Russian air support in a military engagement.<sup>59</sup>

However, the status quo would keep a strategically important province outside of the Syrian government's writ and would allow al-Qaeda's affiliate to continue to operate in the region. Hence, it seems that the Assad government, despite possible Russian advice to the contrary, might indeed launch an offensive to retake the area.

From the U.S. perspective, preventing another large refugee flow outside of Syria would be in its interests, as the refugee issue has put a strain on neighboring countries like Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, and has

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Liz Sly, "Syria's war could be entering its last and most dangerous phase," *The Washington Post*, August 10, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-war-could-be-entering-its-last-and-most-dangerous-phase/2018/08/09/e9e60442-8f60-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.970de812c8b5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-war-could-be-entering-its-last-and-most-dangerous-phase/2018/08/09/e9e60442-8f60-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d_story.html?utm_term=.970de812c8b5)

fed right-wing movements in Europe that are not only morally repugnant but are also no friends of the United States.<sup>60</sup> Many of these right-wing movements share more values with the autocratic Russian leader Vladimir Putin than with U.S. and European democratic traditions.

As of this writing (August 2018), the Trump administration has only issued warnings that it would respond by force against the Syrian government if it used chemical weapons in an Idlib offensive, similar to U.S. air attacks in April 2017 and April 2018 (the latter in conjunction with Britain and France).<sup>61</sup> But while these retaliatory actions were important in laying down a marker about further chemical attacks by the Syrian regime, they did not stop the Assad's government's offensive aimed at regaining territory that had been in rebel hands. Moreover, the Syrian government has shown that it is very capable of using conventional weaponry and so-called barrel bombs against civilians, which have actually caused more casualties than its use of chemical weapons. A pending Idlib offensive thus poses another dilemma for U.S. security planners. To stand idly by while more civilians are killed or made into new refugees would be a stain on the United States and the international community, but to intervene against such an offensive might put the United States on the same side as al-Qaeda and run the risks of putting U.S. troops in conflict with Syrian and Russian government forces.

## The US-Iran and Israel-Iran Conflict

ONE of the stated objectives of the United States in Syria is to prevent Iran from establishing a so-called land corridor from Tehran to Beirut, through which it could funnel military personnel and equipment into the heart of the Arab world. This preventative goal was enunciated by former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in January 2018 in a major policy address on Syria at Stanford University.<sup>62</sup> Although Tillerson was fired two months later, the speech reflected the consensus of the entire U.S. government at the time, as it was cleared through the interagency process.<sup>63</sup> In May 2018, the Trump administration took an even more hardline position against Iran by pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal, formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Tillerson's successor, Mike Pompeo specified twelve actions that Iran had to take to avoid strong sanctions, including removing its forces and those of its allied militias from Syria.<sup>64</sup> These demands remain as U.S. policy, and National Security Advisor Bolton stated in August 2018 that not only does the United States remain determined to finish off ISIS in Syria but also to "deal with the presence of the Iranians."<sup>65</sup> However, he did not say how the latter would be accomplished.

Despite the new, hardline policies the Trump administration is pursuing against Iran, which is to include an oil embargo

60 Charles Hawley, "Europe's Far-Right Flirts with Moscow," *Spiegel Online*, April 14, 2014. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/european-far-right-developing-closer-ties-with-moscow-a-963878.html>

61 Barbara Starr, "US on alert as Syrian regime prepares for assault on final rebel stronghold," *CNN.com*, August 27, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/27/politics/us-alert-syria-idlib/index.html>

62 U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria" January 17, 2018. <https://translations.state.gov/2018/01/17/secretary-of-state-rex-tillerson-on-the-way-forward-for-the-united-states-regarding-syria/>

63 Personal contacts with government sources.

64 "Mike Pompeo's speech: What are the 12 demands given to Iran?" *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/mike-pompeo-speech-12-demands-iran-180521151737787.html>

65 Loveday Morris and Anton Troianovski, "Bolton: Putin would be happy if Iran left Syria," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2018.

## Israel has vowed that it will not tolerate a long-term Iranian presence in Syria because it sees Iran as its mortal enemy.

and the placement of sanctions on European companies doing business with Iran, it does not appear to want an actual war with Tehran. The stated hope is that crippling sanctions would compel Iran to stop meddling in the Arab world, not only in Syria but also in other countries like Yemen, and to come back to the negotiating table and agree to give up its entire nuclear program. This is a tall order and Tehran is unlikely to comply even when faced with mounting economic problems. So the question remains, how is the United States going to force Iran out of Syria, especially when the Iranians are so heavily invested in keeping the Assad regime in power and ensuring that its supplies to Lebanon's Hezbollah organization (most of which is done by air) is not interrupted? Bolton has suggested that the Russians could be induced to compel the Iranians to leave. While on a trip to Israel in August 2018 Bolton said Russian President Putin told Trump that an Iranian presence in Syria does not conform to Russian interests and that he (Putin) would "be content to see Iranian forces all sent back to Iran." Bolton added that Putin said he could not do this himself and that "a joint U.S.-Russia effort may be needed."<sup>66</sup> But again, what such a joint effort would entail remains unclear.

A few days later, Bolton met with his Russian counterpart in Geneva and appeared less optimistic about removing Iranian forces with Russian help. He

admitted that this objective was "far from easy to achieve," but added that he and his Russian interlocutor "talked about a variety of ways it might be accomplished through a series of steps." Bolton did say he rejected a Russian proposal to constrict Iranian forces to certain parts of Syria, away from Israel's border in exchange for the United States suspending plans to impose an oil embargo on Iran.<sup>67</sup> In other words, this Russian idea was dead on arrival because Washington does not want to entertain any proposal that would weaken its economic squeeze on Iran.

Another conflict looming over the horizon is the potential for a major clash in Syria between Israeli and Iranian forces as well as those forces allied with Iran. Israel has vowed that it will not tolerate a long-term Iranian presence in Syria because it sees Iran as its mortal enemy. As mentioned earlier, Israel has conducted at least 130 air strikes in Syria since the civil war began, often targeting Hezbollah forces, Syrian government shipments of military supplies to that organization, Iranian proxy forces, and even an Iranian drone that had ventured into Israeli air space.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Israel has also attacked ISIS positions near the Golan Heights.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has underscored to Russian President Putin in several face-to-face meetings the threat posed by Iranian and Iranian proxy forces in

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Bolton and his Russian counterpart discuss arms control, Syria and Iran," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Loveday Morris and Ruth Eglash, "Israel says drone it shot down was Iranian copy of a U.S. craft," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2018.

Syria. Netanyahu also successfully lobbied Putin not to supply Syria with the S300 anti-aircraft system that could pose a threat to Israeli aircraft.<sup>69</sup> Russia has not interfered with Israeli air strikes in Syria and has said in the immediate aftermath of the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki in July 2018 that Iranian and Iranian proxy forces should be at least 50 miles away from the Golan Heights, but that is not sufficient from Israel's perspective.<sup>70</sup> Netanyahu wants all Iranian forces and Iranian-supported Shia militias to leave Syria, which is also a U.S. goal, as enunciated by both Pompeo and Bolton.

However, Russia might not have the clout or the willingness to force the Iranians to leave Syria militarily. Hence, the potential for a major clash between Israel and Iranian and Iranian proxy forces in Syria remains a real possibility. This could quickly evolve into a wider war, with Israel attacking targets within Iran itself and Hezbollah launching thousands of rockets into northern Israel from its abundant arsenal.<sup>71</sup> If such a conflict takes place, the likelihood of the United States, as an ally of Israel, getting dragged in would increase. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that Russia would stay neutral as it would come under pressure from both Syria and Iran to defend Syrian air space. Such action would scuttle

Putin's efforts over the past several years to cultivate closer relations with Israel, but he may decide that protecting his equities with Syria and Iran are more important than currying favor with Israel.

If a major military conflict between Israel and Iran were to take place in Syria, U.S. forces in the northeastern part of Syria could be vulnerable to attack. Iran might direct some of its Shia proxy forces to strike U.S. forces to deter the United States from assisting Israel and make its stay in Syria so painful that Washington would decide to leave altogether. This tactic was effectively employed in the early 1980s by radical Shia militias in Lebanon, prompting the Reagan administration to move U.S. forces "off-shore" as opposed to keeping them in Beirut. On the other hand, during the few military encounters between the United States and Iranian proxy forces in Syria since 2017 the U.S. military has demonstrated clear overmatch. Even though these Shia proxy forces in Syria (about 20,000 men) far outnumber U.S. forces (about 2,000), the firepower and effectiveness of the U.S. military would give Iran pause. Moreover, if Iran were to direct such proxy forces to attack U.S. military personnel in Syria, it would have to worry about U.S. strikes on Iran itself. The last major encounter between U.S. and Iranian forces occurred in

**“If a major military conflict between Israel and Iran were to take place in Syria, U.S. forces in the northeastern part of Syria could be vulnerable to attack.”**

69 Bel Trew, "As the Syrian war draws to a close, the real question is what Israel and Iran do now," *The Independent*, August 25, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/us-war-syria-force-all-out-war-israel-trump-rouhani-hezbollah-a8506696.html>

70 "What Does the Ongoing Israeli-Iran Confrontation in Syria Mean?" *Atlantic Council*, August 2, 2018. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-does-the-ongoing-israel-iran-confrontation-in-syria-mean>

71 Nadav Ben Hour and Michael Eisenstadt, "The Great Middle Eastern War of 2019" *The American Interest*, August 20, 2018. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/08/20/the-great-middle-eastern-war-of-2019/>



**U.S. soldiers and Iraqi Security Forces fire a howitzer at known Islamic State of Iraq and Syria locations near the Iraqi-Syrian border during Operation Roundup, June 5, 2018. The soldiers are assigned to the 3rd Cavalry Regiment. (Army photo by SPC Anthony Zendejas IV).**

the last two years (1987-88) of the Iran-Iraq war and the U.S. military easily prevailed.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, although there are certainly risks in keeping U.S. military forces in northeastern Syria over the coming years when the possibility of an Israeli-Iran confrontation looms over the horizon, the benefits outweigh them. The potential advantages of maintaining a U.S. military presence are outlined next.

### **Military and Non-military Uses of the U.S. Troop Presence in Syria in the Near Future**

**A** recent study by two scholars suggested that the presence of “even a small U.S. military contingent in northeastern Syria might discourage pro-Iranian Shia militias from moving through these areas to the front” in the event a war were to develop between Iran and

<sup>72</sup> F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 82-84.

Israel. Such a U.S. presence, the authors note, would limit these militias' movement to "a few roads in southeastern Syria—thereby facilitating their interdiction by Israel."<sup>73</sup> In other words, the U.S. military presence would prevent the land corridor that Tillerson mentioned in early 2018 from developing. This blocking action would not only hinder the shipment of men and supplies during so-called normal times but would serve to prevent Shia reinforcements to their militia in a land war in Syria between Iran and Israel.

Another benefit of a U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria would be to enhance the U.S. role in an international political process that might take place on the future of Syria. This same reason might be why French President Macron sent a small contingent of French forces from Iraq to northeastern Syria in 2018.<sup>74</sup> In other words, boots on the ground give both the United States and France some political leverage, whereas their absence would diminish their clout, especially as Russia and Iran are unlikely to leave Syria anytime soon. The fact that the U.S.-supported SDF controls the oil regions near Deir el-Zor also gives Washington some economic leverage over a future political settlement.

Past efforts through a so-called Geneva process to find an acceptable outcome for the Syrian crisis have all failed. Part of the problem was that the Syrian opposition wanted Assad gone, and that was not going to happen as long as Assad believed he could retain the loyalty of his troops and allies, and prevail on the battlefield. Now that the

tide of the civil war has moved decidedly in Assad's favor there is even less of a chance he will give up power. In addition, Russia, Iran and Turkey all participated in a rival political process, based on meetings in the Kazakh city of Astana, that has purportedly reached agreements on achieving various so-called "de-escalation" accords,<sup>75</sup> but most of these have been violated by the Assad regime which opted to recapture more and more territory from rebel forces.

However, even though Assad is clearly in the ascendancy, there are still a number of issues that need to be settled for the situation in Syria to be stabilized. These include the rebuilding of damaged parts of Syria and the return of the refugees. The recent decision of the Trump administration to withhold \$230 million it initially pledged for Syrian rebuilding efforts at least while Assad remains in power, while intended to encourage other nations to bear most of the costs,<sup>76</sup> may be seen by some that the United States does not care very much about Syria's future. While it is important for the international community to be more involved in this stabilization process, diminished U.S. funding, even if temporary, may discourage other actors from fulfilling their own commitments.

## Policy Recommendations

**T**HE preceding analysis has painted a picture of a fractured country that might still experience even more violence and dislocations in the near future. U.S. policymakers in the national security disciplines should accept certain

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73 Nadav Ben Hour and Michael Eisenstadt, "The Great Middle Eastern War of 2019" *The American Interest*, August 20, 2018. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/08/20/the-great-middle-eastern-war-of-2019/>

74 Fergus Kelly, "French and US troops are operating on the ground, northern Syria official says," *The Defense Post*, April 3, 2018. <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/04/03/french-us-troops-manbij-tal-abyad-syria/>

75 Reema Hibrawi, "The Sticky Situation of the Final Idlib Offensive," *Atlantic Council*, August 15, 2018. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-sticky-situation-of-the-final-idlib-offensive>

76 Karen DeYoung, "Others to pay \$230 million U.S. had planned for Syrian rebuilding," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2018.

realities in Syria while working toward the following objectives:

■ However unsavory, U.S. national security policymakers must accept the notion that Assad is unlikely to step down from power and, therefore, will remain the president of Syria into the foreseeable future. He is likely to retain the support of a significant portion of the Syrian population, particularly the Alawites and other minority groups, plus some Arab Sunni Muslims who simply want a return to the *status quo ante* when peace prevailed. Importantly, both Russia and Iran see Syria under Assad as a valuable strategic asset. Russia values its longtime naval base at Tartous on Syria's Mediterranean coast and its new Hmeimim air base near the city of Latakia.<sup>77</sup> For Putin, such assets give Russia strategic depth in the heart of the Arab world and allow Russia to be a major player once again the Middle East. For Iran, its deepening alliance with Assad helps to enhance its role in the Arab world and facilitates its connections to Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon. Moreover, through its position in Syria, Iran can show its enemies in the Arab world, like Saudi Arabia, that it is a force to contend with and that it intends to counterbalance the tacit alliance between Israel and some Sunni Arab states that emerged in recent years.

■ The United States must finish the

job of defeating the last remnants of the ISIS and ensure that another Sunni extremist group does not emerge in Syria in the future.<sup>78</sup> This means that the United States must continue to work in the Arab Sunni Muslim areas of eastern Syria to ensure that this area, particularly the bombed parts of the city of Raqqa, are rebuilt and that the Kurdish military footprint in places like Raqqa and areas further to the southeast is minimal. More efforts by the United States and coalition partners must be made to recruit Arab Sunni tribesmen into the SDF and ensure that such forces patrol and protect this part of Syria to avoid ethnic antagonisms.

■ Along these lines, Washington should desist from the idea of convincing Arab militaries coming into Syria for stabilization purposes. Such an idea never really had the support of the Egyptians and the Saudis,<sup>79</sup> with whom the Trump administration initially tried to induce for this purpose, and their presence in Syria would likely stoke more problems than help. Egypt's union with Syria from 1958 to 1961 proved to be highly problematic, as the Syrians came to resent Egypt's domineering position in their country, while the Saudis may be worried that many Syrians have come to resent its support for some Islamist groups within the rebel camp in the current civil war. However, the

77 Daniel Brown, "These are the 11 types of Russian military jets and planes known to be stationed in Syria," *Business Insider*, February 26, 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/these-are-the-10-russian-military-aircraft-stationed-in-syria-2017-10>

78 Missy Ryan and Paul Sonne, "As Trump urges Syria exit, troops see unfinished job," *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2018.

79 Julian Borger, "Syria: proposal to replace US troops with Arab force comes with grave risks," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/18/us-syria-arab-force-replace-american-troops-saudi-arabia-egypt-uae>

oil-rich Arab countries like Saudi Arabia can play a role in providing reconstruction funds to help rebuild damaged Syrian cities and resettle Syrian refugees back in their homes. The Saudis and other Gulf countries would have to swallow the bitter pill of tacitly accepting the rule of Bashar Assad, but over the past year the Arab world has begun to accept that Assad is likely to remain in power.

■ The United States should support the idea of a kind of loose federalism in Syria to ensure that the Kurds of northeastern Syria retain their autonomy. To do otherwise would abandon these Kurds, who have been very supportive U.S. allies, to an uncertain fate and would set a bad precedent for other groups in the Middle East region and beyond who have cooperated with the United States in counter-terrorism operations. To obtain buy-in from the Syrian government for this idea, the SDF should relinquish the oil fields under its control south of this area and agree that border patrols be administered jointly between the Kurds and Syrian government forces. This will help reinforce the notion that federalism does not mean separation from Syria. In other words, the Kurds would be in charge of local administration but would recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian state.

On the issue of Turkey's opposition to the Kurdish autonomous zone in the northeastern part of Syria, the United States should pursue a mix of carrots

and sticks. It should encourage the local Kurdish administration to bring in non-PYD members to dilute the connection to the PKK, discourage YPG fighters from trying to reclaim the Afrin area, and pledge not to opt for an independent state. At the same time, the United States should warn Ankara that a Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria to put down the Kurdish autonomous zone would not be tolerated by Washington and conceivably might produce a military response. And if the Assad government were to spurn Kurdish autonomy talks and use force, the United States should signal that such action would prompt a military response.

■ A new Geneva process should be developed to bring all parties to the negotiating table and ensure "amnesty for amnesty" as a first step in the process of bringing millions of Syrian refugees back to their homes. As difficult as it would be for members of the Syrian opposition and the international community, this must entail amnesty for Syrian government, military, and militia officials who have been accused of war crimes. In return, Syrian refugees, including rebel fighters, should be able to return without fear of imprisonment, torture and execution. In many past civil wars, retribution by the winning side against the losing side has been a feature of the end of conflict. For example, after Franco's forces won the Spanish Civil War in 1939, there were at least 20,000 executions of loyalists from the Republican side, and many thousands more died in prisons and labor camps in subsequent years.<sup>80</sup> For Syrian refugees to come home,

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80 Jason Webster, "Franco's bloody finale," *Spectator*, March 19, 2016. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/03/francos-bloody-finale/>

they must be assured that no such retribution occurs, but realistically this can only come about if Syrian regime officials themselves are assured that they will not be brought before the International Criminal Court. Such an agreement could be an area where the United States, Russia, and the EU can cooperate.

■ If an “amnesty for amnesty” policy is applied, the international community can then assemble a donors’ conference to raise funds to rebuild the country and facilitate the return Syrian refugees. It is likely that most Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon would want to return home after having lived for several years under very difficult conditions, but many of those who have been granted asylum in Europe would probably may want to stay there. Still, the United States and the European countries should encourage those in Europe to return home if political and economic conditions in Syria improve. As mentioned earlier, the refugee crisis has spurred a number of problems in Europe, including the growth of right-wing anti-immigrant movements. A reduction of Syrian refugees in Europe could mitigate this problem. However, those refugees who decide to stay in Europe should be not be penalized and be protected by European governments. Instead of talking about European culture being adversely affected by refugees from Muslim nations, U.S. officials should encourage European governments to embrace inclusiveness.

■ It is unrealistic for U.S. officials to demand that Iran and Iranian proxy forces, like the Shia militias, leave Syria in the short-term. As mentioned earlier, Iran is heavily

invested in Syria and its relations with the Assad regime are strategic. For reasons of national pride, Iran is not going to leave even under onerous, new sanctions. However, over the long-term, a gradual withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria is possible. If an “amnesty for amnesty” policy is implemented and refugees are allowed to return home without retribution, a mechanism could be put in place whereby foreign military forces—including those from Iran, Iran-supported Shia militias including Hezbollah, Turkey, France, and the United States—are reduced in stages and according to an agreed-upon timetable.

■ The Russian military presence may be more difficult to solve. Russia has certainly increased its military presence in Syria since it intervened in September 2015, but its naval base in Tartous predates the conflict and goes back to the Soviet era. Moreover, Assad may believe that the Soviet military presence in Syria gives him protection against an Israeli attack even though the Russians have not blocked any Israeli air strikes. It thus may be unrealistic to assume that the Russians would adhere to a withdrawal of all of their forces from Syria, but if there were indeed real movement by the other parties to the conflict to reduce their military contingents, the Russians might confine their military presence to the naval base in Tartous and the air base near Latakia.

One prominent think tank in Washington, DC has proposed “international recognition of de facto zones of control” of three zones in Syria for the time being, in other words, a regime zone for most of the country, a Turkish zone in the northwest, and a U.S.-

supported Kurdish zone in the northeast.<sup>81</sup> While that is the reality on the ground at this juncture (August 2018), giving such zones a kind of international legitimacy could cause more problems down the road for Syria.

■ First, acknowledging Turkish control of northwestern Syria, even temporary, could feed into Turkish President Erdogan's Ottoman-type foreign and security policy, which is controversial and inimical to the national interests of Syria and several other Arab states. Although Turkey has established military bases in Qatar and Sudan in recent years with the consent of these countries, there is suspicion of Turkey's motives in other parts of the Arab world, particularly as Erdogan has supported the Muslim Brotherhood in various countries and, for several years, even allowed jihadist elements from Europe to cross the Turkish-Syrian border to join ISIS. Secularists and nationalists within Syria, even those not supportive of the Assad government, would resent a Turkish zone of influence in Idlib province, and that would feed conspiracy theories of Western powers, in cahoots with Turkey, wishing to take away Arab lands. Moreover, Syria has never acknowledged Turkey's incorporation of the Alexandretta/Hatay province that was given to Ankara in 1939 by the French who were then Syria's colonial masters. To acquiesce to Turkey's control of territory (Idlib province) adjacent to this area would merely add another irritant to Syrian Arab nationalist feelings.

■ Second, while the United States has justified its presence in northeastern Syria as part of the AUMF of 2001 and the war on terror, its troops are not there with the consent of the Syrian government. Giving some type of international legitimacy to a U.S.-supported zone in northeastern Syria could create the impression that the United States was going to stay in Syria indefinitely, further stoking Arab fears that Washington seeks to carve up the region. It was not too long ago that similar sentiments appeared in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003.

Sometimes, silence is better than articulation, because the latter can lead to different interpretations that may not be in a country's interests. Giving a stamp of international legitimacy to current divisions within a country like Syria is likely to cause more problems than are currently evident and may hurt efforts at stabilization efforts as well as the proposal of "amnesty for amnesty" outlined earlier.

## Recommendations for the U.S. Army

**G**IVEN that much of the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria consists of Army Special Forces, the Army has both a professional and moral duty to continue to assist the Syrian Democratic Forces in routing the last vestiges of ISIS in Syria, particularly along the Syrian-Iraqi border. To leave Syria before this mission is completed would be perilous on several levels.

■ First, even though ISIS is on its last legs in Syria and Iraq, it could regroup

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81 Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, and Daniel Benaim, "Seizing the Diplomatic Initiative in Syria," *Center for American Progress*, July 19, 2018, p. 3. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/07/19/453742/seizing-diplomatic-initiative-syria/>

and take advantage of discontent among Sunni Arabs in eastern Syria and western Iraq. Although many of these people deeply resented ISIS rule, particularly its draconian interpretation of Islam and its reign of terror, if their plight does not improve they might support ISIS or another extremist group once again.

■ Second, the U.S. Army should encourage Arab tribesmen within the SDF to recruit more ethnic Arabs into this military organization. Having Arabs provide their own security in eastern Syria below the Kurdish-populated region would lessen ethnic tensions and augment stability. Such a policy would also serve as a hedge against another ISIS-like group. Moreover, having a population trust local military commanders will likely yield better intelligence on extremists attempting to re-infiltrate the area.

■ Third, failure to completely defeat of ISIS would fuel its propaganda efforts. That ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is still alive and issuing messages to his followers keeps the ISIS “brand” still in play. Such messages can still inspire so-called “lone wolves” in Europe and the United States to undertake terrorist attacks even by rudimentary means. By contrast, a complete defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq may give such followers in the West pause that the so-called caliphate that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi created and championed did not bring about a new era of “justice” that he promised but merely wound up wasting thousands of lives.

■ Fourth, the U.S. Army, having worked closely with the Syrian Kurds in combating ISIS, should not leave

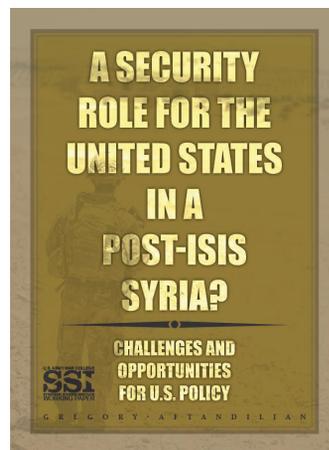
the area prematurely, as that would put these partners in jeopardy. Only when iron-clad assurances are given that neither the Syrian government nor Turkey are going to put down the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria should U.S. Army begin to leave the area as part of a withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria. As a hedge against a renegeing of such promises, a U.S. Army liaison office to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, similar to what has been established in the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, should be established as a symbol of U.S. resolve. Although the decision on whether the U.S. Army should remain in northeastern Syria for a period of time will be made by the President, the Army’s input will be important in the policy process. One of the more effective arguments that can be made is that if the United States wants to continue to rely on local partners in the Middle East and around the world for counterterrorism operations, it must not be seen abandoning these partners to an uncertain fate once the job is completed. Otherwise, obtaining help from local forces becomes all the more difficult.

■ Fifth, U.S. Army commanders on the ground in Syria should avoid getting into public spats with Turkish or Syrian political leaders. While it was entirely understandable for a U.S. commander to defend his Kurdish partners against overt threats from the Turkish president, a media war can backfire, causing political leaders to dig in their heels and become even more obstinate. That the political wing of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria has been in negotiations with

the Syrian government without U.S. Army involvement is a positive development, as it shows that Syrians are trying to resolve disputes by themselves. Granted, the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria gives these Kurdish interlocutors more resolution to press their case, knowing that a Syrian military incursion into their autonomous area would have to contend with a well-armed and well-trained contingent of U.S. Army Special Forces but, as mentioned earlier, some things are best left unsaid.

■ On the potential for a major Israeli-Iranian clash in Syria, U.S. Army officers, with direction and supervision from Pentagon authorities, should try to convince their Israeli counterparts that a war with Iran might be even more destabilizing than the current situation. Despite Tehran's bravado, Iranian forces and those of their proxies in Syria are still no match for the Israelis. Although these forces have occasionally targeted Israeli positions in the Golan Heights,<sup>82</sup> they have proven to be more of a nuisance than anything else. Moreover, an Israeli-Iranian war inside Syria may work to put off a settlement of the Syrian crisis and set back recent efforts by the Syrian government to take back areas near the Golan that had been under ISIS's control. Having the Syrian government, as opposed to ISIS, in this region adjacent to the Golan is in Israel's interest.

■ Over the short term U.S. Army officers, again under the direction of the Pentagon, can assure their Israeli counterparts that as long as the United States has a presence in northeastern Syria, they will ensure that Iranian and Iranian proxy forces will not be able to use that area to reinforce allied militias in other parts of Syria, especially in the event of an Israeli-Iranian war in Syria. That said, U.S. Army officers should try to avoid any discussions with the Israelis about moving U.S. troops outside from northeastern Syria to other parts of the country, as that might encourage the Israelis to be more aggressive inside of Syria. Although Israel certainly has a right to defend itself in the face of real threats, U.S. Army officers should not encourage them to engage in conflict, as a minor war with Iranian and Iranian proxy forces in Syria could quickly spiral into a larger regional war whose outcome might not be in the U.S. national security interest. 



82 Loveday Morris, "Iran fires rockets at Israeli military in first direct attack ever, Israel says," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iranian-forces-fire-rockets-at-israeli-military-in-first-direct-attack-ever-israeli-army-says/2018/05/09/62e3a526-52f7-11e8-a6d4-ca1d035642ce\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.1f79488804a2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iranian-forces-fire-rockets-at-israeli-military-in-first-direct-attack-ever-israeli-army-says/2018/05/09/62e3a526-52f7-11e8-a6d4-ca1d035642ce_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1f79488804a2)