



 REPORT SYRIA

Four Perspectives on Syria, Round II

MARCH 30, 2017 — THANASSIS CAMBANIS, MICHAEL WAHID HANNA, SAM HELLER AND ARON LUND

The Century Foundation's fellows have closely followed the conflict in Syria through another year of major developments, which have affected strategic relationships not just in the Middle East but across the world. TCF fellows Thanassis Cambanis, Michael Hanna, Sam Heller, and Aron Lund joined an online discussion to assess the latest developments in Syria and prospects for the future.

Introduction



Thanassis: It's been the better part of a year since the four of us put our heads together to try to make sense of what's happening in Syria. Since the last time we did this, we've seen some threshold events: government forces retook Aleppo, Donald Trump was elected president, and Turkey shifted direction. We all share a common belief that because of the complexity of this conflict there won't be a sudden, pat resolution. On the other hand, the government of Bashar al-Assad seems to be winning after years of stalemate. For now forgotten are the moments when the regime seemed close to some kind of breaking point. Persistent centers of resistance have collapsed, like Aleppo and Darayya, or are crumbling, like East Ghouta. It's become harder and harder to speak of a non-jihadi armed opposition. The government is reasserting its authority after six years of internal fragmentation. Damascus also is strutting with newfound confidence in the diplomatic arena, trying, with some success, to shift the discussion from "political transition" (read: regime change) to a "development paradigm," with a focus on who will pay for Assad to rebuild Syria. There's a new-old diplomatic process, from which the United States has all but seceded. Trump seems willing to team up with Assad and Putin in a counter-terrorism alliance, but hasn't suggested how that will square with his unrelenting hostility toward Iran, which is already in partnership with Russia and Syria.

Those are just some of the headlines. In short, there's a lot to talk about. I want us to take all these matters and more in their turn.

But let's start with the strategic state of play. Can we say that the government has won the war, and we're now in a final sorting-out phase?

Multiple Conflicts



Sam: Well, as you said, I don't think we're heading towards some conclusive, comprehensive resolution to Syria's war. But Syria's war is actually a sort of composite, the intersection of a set of national, subnational, and transnational conflicts that, together, have destroyed Syria and Syrians for almost six years.

So when we say that the Assad regime has “won the war,” we mean it's achieved a strategic victory in Syria's central civil conflict: the war between, in approximate terms, the regime and its mixed revolutionary-Islamist opposition in western Syria. That's the Syrian war as it's typically discussed and understood, and, in fact, how we discussed it in our last roundtable. Until our July discussion had already concluded, I don't think any of us were conscious that we'd gone on at (extreme) length about west Syria while devoting almost no attention to the largely separate conflicts going on in eastern Syria.

To some extent, I think that's a legacy effect of how Syria originally fit into our collective understanding of 2011's “Arab Spring”—this relatively uncomplicated idea of national popular revolutions against dictatorial regimes—as well as how various Western governments and thought centers aligned themselves with one side in Syria's civil conflict. The result was that the war for and against Assad was “the war,” and, for many outsiders, the revolutionary opposition was their side.

This wasn't an unreasonable impulse, by any means. There are a lot of good, appealing people in the opposition, and, obviously, the regime's repulsive conduct made it uniquely unsympathetic. And even now, after all of the war's complications and convolutions, the war in Syria's west remains the central axis of conflict in the country, from which Syria's other sub-conflicts and human disasters emanate.

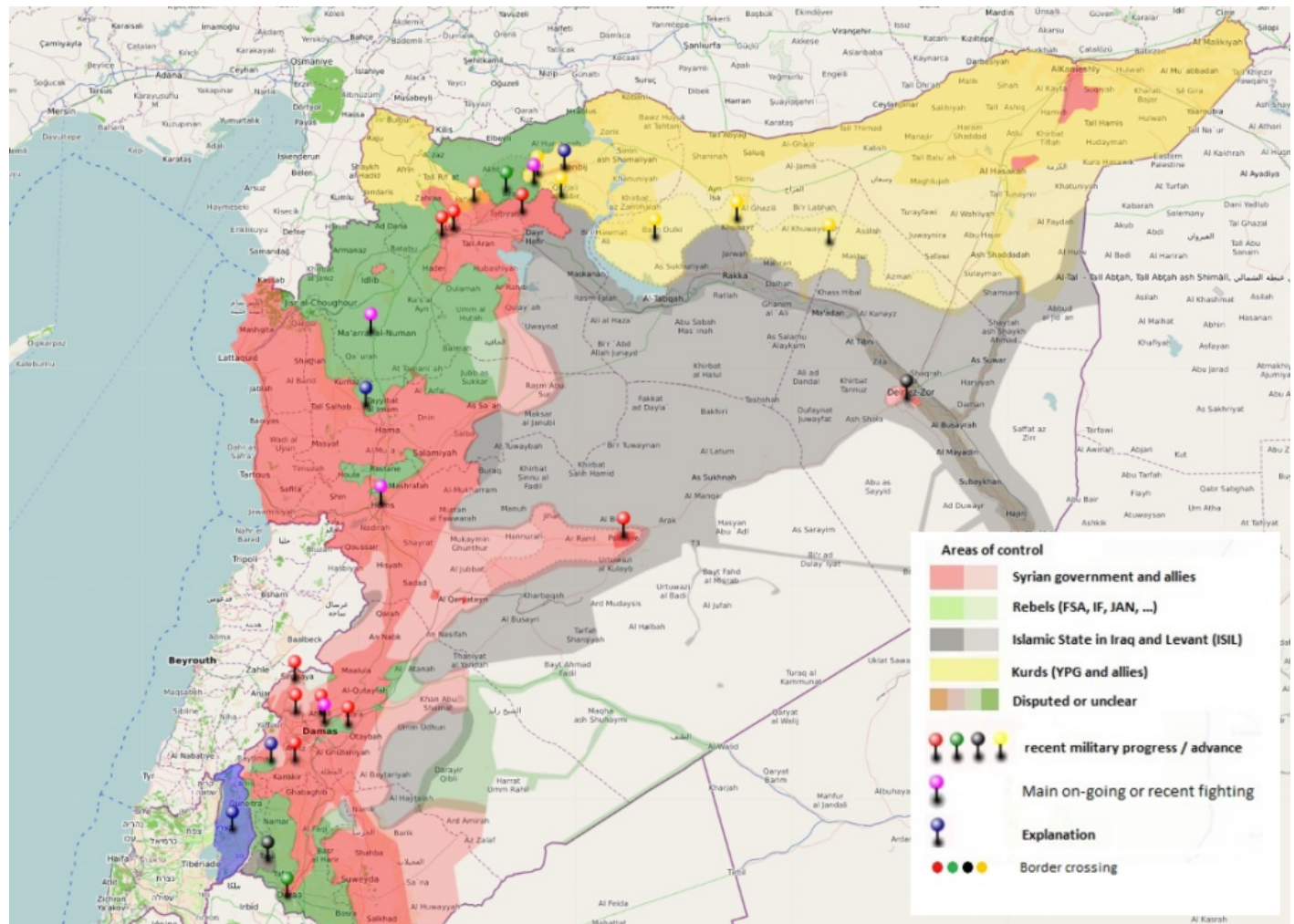
But now “the war” is effectively over, or at least on a seemingly unalterable trajectory towards a conclusion on the Assad regime's terms. The determined intervention of Iran and Russia on the regime's behalf made it effectively unbeatable by early last year, and key opposition backers' recognition of this basic asymmetry pushed them towards de-escalation at the expense of their rebel allies and proxies. The regime has used its allies' help and—with its continuing, calibrated use of siege tactics in particular—its own sinister ingenuity to continue to defeat its insurgent enemies piecemeal. And it has consistently obstructed any negotiated solution to the war that doesn't match its own prerogatives while creating new, increasingly favorable facts on the ground.

The Opposition

Thanassis: To use your term, is “the war” over—that is, the fight between Assad and the rebels who officially aligned with

the United States and other “friends of Syria”?

Sam: To the extent that we’re talking about “the war”: A war has to have at least two sides, and not much is left now of the other side, the revolutionary opposition to the regime. Much of the opposition has been neutralized, diverted from



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the central conflict with the regime and instrumentalized in service of various regional states’ parochial security projects. The choice they now seem to face is between being reincorporated into the extant Syrian state (Assad’s state), serving in a Turkish or Jordanian cross-border protectorate, or indefinite exile.

Or they can die with the jihadists, which is also an option. The largely Islamist and jihadist opposition in Syria's northwest remains vital and devoted to fighting the regime. But this still-relevant resistance is mostly confined to Idlib, a single rural province, and it's generally anathema to the opposition state backers that have sustained Syria's insurgency into 2017. They can and will continue to fight, but they'll likely be doing so alone, against insurmountable odds, and at a terrible cost to their civilian families and communities. They'll also be fighting for an ideological project that bears little resemblance to the Syrian revolution's original ideals and aims.

In that sense, we could say that we've moved beyond the specific original conflict that sparked the Syrian war, and we're onto a new paradigm. Syria isn't and won't be "post-war" for a while, but I think we're effectively post-"the war."

War after the War



Michael: I'll pick up on Sam's last very useful point that we're effectively post-"the war." This is obviously a huge turning point. As Sam noted, our previous collective discussion was almost entirely focused on that central conflict and not so many months later we've entered a stage where those terms of reference have been completely overturned. It's instructive to see what that has meant in practical terms. The internal mergers and bloodletting among the Idlib opposition factions are noted but hardly issues of central focus. Prior to the fall of Aleppo, this sort of infighting received serious outside attention beyond the cadres of specialists and analysts who study these groups for a living. Those battles for power were perceived to be a critical factor in the trajectory of Assad's war with the most potent rebel actors who still remained connected to outside patrons. All that has shifted in material ways, including the relationships with the outside.

For the Assad regime, leaving those rebels to their own devices in a single rural province now seems like an obvious option, although it still leaves open the question of how those remaining factions will respond. It's possible that the infighting will devolve into a struggle among warlords for power over the remaining slivers of territory held by the opposition in the northwest, but it is also likely to include a shift toward insurgency and terrorism as we have witnessed in recurrent cycles in Iraq. These groups may never again threaten the territorial hold of the regime over useful Syria, but they will almost certainly continue to trouble, harass, and kill the regime. And we have already seen signs of a shift in terms of urban terrorism, and I imagine Syria will see more of that in this next phase.

The shift in the conflict has also coincided with the major geopolitical shifts that have transpired in the meantime, most notably the surprise election of Donald Trump in the United States. Because of Trump's rhetorical approach to the war, the sense of a shift has been further strengthened. It's worth noting here, however, that even if Hillary Clinton had won the election, the options before her and the United States would have been similarly limited from the perspective of positive impact on the central conflict. Despite the sometimes fanciful discussion of future U.S. Syria policy in the run-up to the fall of Aleppo, when it was still assumed that Clinton would be elected, the actual discussions were more an exercise of re-litigating the often acrimonious policy disputes that have marked the conflict from the start.

Confused Superpower Agendas



Thanassis: I count myself among those who thought that the United States and its allies still had options to influence events in Syria for the better, all the way through the spring of 2016 when the campaign for Aleppo accelerated and the foreign backers essentially left the opposition on its own. Others argue that no American option would actually shift the momentum of the conflict. Are you saying that now, despite any appearance of options,

Washington's course is more or less set?



Michael: No—there are still huge open issues for the United States to sort through as they relate to Russia, which has ramifications that go beyond the confines of the war in Syria. The broader (and still mysterious) issue of U.S.-Russia relations in the Trump era overlays this discussion but remains sufficiently vague for the time being in that it offers us little by way of guidance for the future. We can safely assume though that the anti-ISIS campaign will continue

and potentially see an incremental intensification. The military campaign against ISIS has been for quite some time the ultimate priority for the United States and that quite obviously remains the case, including the difficult choices the United States will have to make in terms of its military partners in that campaign in Syria.

The possibility remains, although dim, that the establishment of more stable ceasefire lines and the fatigue of conflict will produce a shift in political imagination on the part of the regime that goes beyond simply military terms.

What remains somewhat in question are the capabilities and intentions of the Russians and those of the Assad regime and its core supporters in the form of Iran and Hezbollah. I am extremely dubious of the idea of driving a wedge among those actors despite the clear frictions and divergences of interests among them. But how those actors collectively respond to this moment of ascendance will be critical in determining how the outside world relates to the conflict and in some cases the post-conflict realities of Syria. The possibility remains, although dim, that the establishment of more stable ceasefire lines and the fatigue of conflict will produce a shift in political imagination on the part of the regime that goes beyond simply military terms. If past is predictive, the chances for that are still unfortunately slim.

Waning Military Role



Aron: Boringly enough, I mostly agree with what was said above. Sure, there will be fighting for a long time and Syria may remain a failed state in many respects, and, of course, some unscripted event could still turn all assumptions upside down. But as things stand, Assad is definitely over some sort of threshold. Western and Arab governments that have framed their involvement in terms of transition and regime change have now mostly accepted that their side

no longer has a path to victory, if it ever did, and they are coming to terms with the fact that Assad is staying, while deciding to what extent they want to play spoilers. They're not willing to say it publicly, but it's happening.

The Syrian government seems to be on track to stabilize much of the country under Assad's control, securing a strategic, political victory in what Sam referred to as "the war," but not a military victory overall—at least not in the foreseeable future. There's not going to be a day when the opposition gives up and guns fall silent. More likely, Syria will imperceptibly shuffle into a situation where military campaigns are reduced in scope and lose their political centrality.

A lot of that is Russia's doing. Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and the United States have also relieved pressure on Assad, each in its own fashion. But there are also internal Syrian reasons. East Aleppo was a remarkable display of government power, and Assad's "green bus" deals have passed the experimental stage and are increasingly defining the conflict. Through it all, the loyalist side has somehow weathered the growing economic strain it is under.

That is not to say there aren't severe problems and constraints on the regime side, including the prohibitive cost in money and manpower to fully reclaim and stabilize some lost areas. Some of those weaknesses will probably become more apparent when Assad shifts his focus to the east, to the Kurdish issue, and to stabilization.

Fragmented Patrons



Thanassis: We talk a lot about the fissures within the insurgencies and the government side. Although we don't always use the same language, the same paralyzing intramural competition also characterizes the foreign sponsors of the Syrian conflict, who just as often work at cross purposes as they collaborate via their proxies and operation rooms. Certainly for the opposition, that means that even when foreign money or weapons are necessary for survival, the foreign sponsors self-sabotage their overall ability to steer the conflict.



Aron: Lack of donor coordination was a huge problem for the opposition earlier in the insurgency. Things seem to run much more smoothly now, despite continued problems. Rather, I think, the opposition is suffering from the fact that it is now treated as a proxy force by some of these nations, and as their priorities shift, rebels are drawn away from the war on Assad into dead-end peace processes or border stabilization projects. Those who refuse to abide by foreign diktats will typically have nowhere else to turn but the jihadis, whose basic project is continued war at any cost and in any form. So on the opposition side, we're now seeing a situation where virtually the entire Sunni Arab insurgency has been co-opted by either Turkey, Jordan, or the jihadis, though there remains a bit of ambiguity and overlap to sort out before we know the exact proportions.

Like Michael says, we're at a point where all these rebel mergers and splits aren't really very consequential anymore. Which rebel groups come out on top may matter to the future of Idlib or the East Ghouta or the Houran, but it will not radically alter the course of the conflict. Barring some external shift or a spontaneous splintering of the regime, the rebels seem to be finished as a driving force in this conflict. They're now playing defense. The same goes for the Islamic State.

I think it makes sense to focus on those actors who can still go on the offensive. They will be shaping the terms of the conflict. To me, that's primarily the Assad government and, although they work under greater constraints and have less ambitious goals, the Rojava Kurds, and of course the regional and international actors. Of those, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United States are currently topping my list of leading actors and potential spoilers.



Michael: One additional point here concerns the international actors that Aron didn't mention, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Geography and circumstances are such that they are no longer among the actors that can shift or shape the conflict. Without active Jordanian or Turkish cooperation in supplying anti-Assad rebels with arms, supplies, and funding, the Gulf is not in a position to drive events in Syria. In the case of Saudi, priorities have also evolved, and the war in Yemen, which is going badly and is intimately tied to Saudi security and prestige, is now a much more central preoccupation. Even Qatar, which has been loath to liquidate its long-cultivated relations and assets, is simply not going

to be able to undertake this kind of effort unilaterally. Perhaps these states will seek to employ a similar strategy to that employed by Iran in Yemen, whereby smaller investments are made simply as a vehicle for extracting costs. But the Gulf is not going to be decisive to this next stage of the conflict.

Normalization



Thanassis: The next goal for Syria's government appears to be a return to the fold of nations. Syrian diplomats have persuaded many of their international detractors to stop talking about regime change and shift to more muted requests for regime reform. This is a major victory, and as far as I can tell, the Syrian government seems eager to start talking about who is going to pay to rebuild everything that the Syrian government destroyed. Syrian official statements, and

private conversations that I've heard about second-hand, seem to suggest that Syria believes that reconstruction will be a huge prize, rather than a burden. They believe that foreign companies will expect a bonanza from the ruined cities, and that Western governments will be willing to finance rebuilding, cycling billions of dollars through the corrupt regime in Damascus, because it will be good for regional stability and good for business.

Will Europe and America pay for Syria's reconstruction? Should they?

Diplomats from the anti-Assad "Friends of Syria" bloc blanch at this presumption, but the fact that it's in discussion at all suggests to me that it's possible. Just a year ago regime change was still on the table. Now, some of the same fire-breathers, having read the shifting winds, talk with somewhat delusional hope about the prospect of political reform and an agreement whereby Bashar al-Assad would accept something short of lifetime rule, under pressure from Iran and Russia. This climbdown suggests that other climbdowns are possible. Will Europe and America pay for Syria's reconstruction? Should they? And short of that, under what conditions should they restore relations with the dictator they invested considerable resources trying to depose?

Assad Expects an Apology



Aron: The Syrian government's public messaging on this point has been quite something. When Economy Minister Adib Mayaleh was interviewed on al-Mayadeen in February, he said no European nations will be allowed to invest in Syria's reconstruction unless they publicly apologize to the Syrian government, then apologize to their peoples, and then change their own leaders in an election. I think maybe he overestimates the level of Western interest in shoveling money into one of the most broken economies on earth.

On the other hand, the EU does seem to be trying to reposition itself to get a slice of reconstruction work. I'm sure there's some long-term profit and influence at stake, maybe more for some countries than for others. Around the time of the retaking of East Aleppo, the EU announced that reconstruction funds will be contingent on political transition. This, I think, is delusional. If you couldn't move Assad out by taking away half the country and killing tens of thousands of Syrian soldiers, then withholding reconstruction funds isn't going to do the trick.

Some smart people have argued that the EU could leverage its economic weight to achieve more limited goals than the pie-in-the-sky dream of a negotiated transition, like trying to promote reconciliation, secure prisoner releases, and create the conditions for refugee return. Or, more cynically, making sure that aid-funded reconstruction contracts will benefit European companies. That's a more realistic way of looking at things, but the Syrian government isn't very good at compromising even over lesser issues. It is likely going to give slim returns on large investments.

Syria First



Thanassis: In other stages of the conflict, we sometimes overestimated the importance of foreign pressure. Might that also be the case in a wind-down phase as Syrians jockey internally for authority and benefits in a reconstruction process? How much will the international community's position determine the approach to reconstruction?



Aron: That's a good question. I mean, the money will obviously come from abroad, but conditions on how they can be spent won't necessarily be respected. Deals will be made, but not exclusively on funder terms, and deals will also be subverted and broken. Vested interests in the regime base are likely going to trump any foreign pressures or enticements in the longer term, even to the detriment of what might objectively speaking be a rational strategy for the Syrian government.

After six years of war and sacrifice and destruction, the regime is a hungry beast. It has to negotiate the expectations of top commanders, loyalist communities, powerful businessmen, and foreign allies who now feel entitled to rewards. There's no way that's not going to impact the reconstruction phase, twisting it and diverting funds to favored regions and businessmen at the expense of less well-connected groups.

I assume Assad will try to keep the worst tendencies of his base in check, because he wants the country to function and he wants foreign investments and aid to start flowing. But, realistically, the corruption, nepotism, and favoritism of pre-2011 Syria must be far worse today. Even when in a mood to compromise, the regime will be beholden to these parochial and often parasitic interests. That will be a major problem for any rebuilding scheme.

Then again, what do you do—there's not going to be anyone else to work with. If you're the EU and you want Syria to start functioning better and stop bleeding refugees, then where do you send your aid money if not into Syria? You can certainly try to sponsor some areas outside of regime control, but that's going to be a political investment with low impact on overall stability. If you want to restore the Syrian economy and facilitate refugee return, and you want your money to matter maximally, you need to see reconstruction and economic growth in places like Aleppo and Homs. That means working on terms set by Bashar al-Assad, which is what you were trying to avoid. But it's either-or, you can't eat your cake and have it too.

It's the same thing with sanctions. You can keep the Syrian economy isolated and under sanctions forever, sure. But ultimately, what's the point? Some of the sanctions are precisely targeted, but others impact the economy as a whole. So if you're no longer trying to engineer a transition, the latter kind will just be further destroying the economy for no political purpose. Like, what's the actual argument to explain why you would accept Assad staying but not accept that he buys German or American machinery to repair a gas plant supplying Damascus with electricity?

Of course, sanctions on Assad, his family, his ministers and security chiefs, and the armed forces—those are going to stay. Maybe those war crimes prosecutions will even materialize at long last. That's another matter.

But when it comes to blockading the wider economy, I do think that both the EU, the United States, and the Arabs will start to question the utility of it once they formally give up on regime change. They're not there yet, but at some point, they'll start to try trading sanctions relief for specific and more limited concessions. And once sanctions begin to be lifted, and when reconstruction aid starts flowing, you can expect to see profit-driven horse-trading over contracts. But it's not going to be a straightforward process. It could be very protracted and messy, with a lot of false starts and incoherent policies.

Dirty Precedents



Thanassis: There are some awful precedents out there though. I'm thinking, for example, of the thirteen years of sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and sporadic bombardment—enough to keep the country in ruins but not enough to bring about any significant change or improvement. Saddam didn't move on, or reform, or deliver better governance. The policy was awful for Iraq and Iraqis, and accomplished nothing for the international coalition that executed it. I wonder if one option for Syria is some version of this kind of purgatory: not fully isolated, not fully integrated in the international system (kind of like the no war-no peace twilight zone that appears to be the fate of the entire Levant).

A different version of limbo is the status of Iran over the decades since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In that case, Iran was able to recover from its war with Iraq in part because of oil money, in part because it is a much bigger, richer and more productive economy than its Levantine Arab neighbors, and in part because plenty of countries never stopped engaging in trade and political relations. That kind of scenario would be far better for Assad's government, and appears to me to be more likely based on the number of states already dealing with the Syrian government, whether openly or sub rosa.

I'd also add that the United Nations' spotty, compromised record in Syria offers another, insalubrious, model of the way forward for foreign governments that want to normalize. The UN's approach has been to strengthen the regime while pretending to be an impartial and neutral arbiter, distributing humanitarian aid that has disproportionately provided life support for Assad's side of the conflict. I imagine the Syrian government has carefully studied these precedents and its own successful positioning during the conflict as it charts its path back to recognition. Over the past six years, outbursts by top Syrian officials, like Mayaleh's incredible tantrum about future aid, or some of the shocking performances of Syria's ambassador to the UN Bashar al-Jaafari, have ultimately not caused any setbacks for the regime.

Half-life?



Aron: Well, first, let me register a mild objection to how you describe the UN's work in Syria. I do agree that UN aid being channeled through Damascus has helped Assad. There's every reason to have a debate over the consequences, but a UN rulebook based on interactions with member states—rather than nonstate actors—is a different thing than a pro-Assad bias, even if it tends to play out in the same way in Syria. At the end of the day, aid professionals working for

UN and other international organizations in Syria do so at considerable risk, and in my view they are pretty much the only good thing that happened to the country in the past six years.

But back to your question. Yes, I suspect we're going to be looking at a kind of frozen, unholy half-life for Syria in the years ahead. Both of the potential extremes—a fun, bouncy comeback with vibrant economic growth and political rehabilitation, or a skeletal pariah state teetering on the brink of economic apocalypse—seem wrong.

In a thing I wrote for *IRIN News* recently, I tried to point to pre-liberalization Myanmar as an example of the future Syria might be entering. It may not be a great parallel, but hopefully it is a little bit illustrative. You could easily end up with that kind of half-isolated, internationally detested, and not very well-functioning regime, struggling to tamp down peripheral insurgencies, while feeding off of humanitarian aid, smuggling, and the war economy as best it can.

Iraq is also a meaningful comparison in some ways, though of course Syria won't have major oil income, like Iraq did. On the other hand, Syria is not going to be the globally isolated pariah state that Iraq was after the Kuwait War.

This is a point I think Western debate very often misses: Europe and the United States aren't, in fact, “the international community;” they just happen to be a very rich and bossy part of it.

This is a point I think Western debate very often misses: Europe and the United States aren't, in fact, “the international community;” they just happen to be a very rich and bossy part of it. Unlike Iraq, Syria is not under any UN sanctions—Russia hasn't allowed it. The American and European sanctions certainly do have a global effect and the regime is really troubled by them, but it's still not the choking impact of a Security Council-ordered sanctions regime with worldwide reach. And while Syria is definitely staring into a dark economic future, Assad will not find himself running the very peculiar kind of bottled-up patronage economy that Saddam did in Iraq. That was a unique outcome of Chapter VII sanctions on an oil-rich socialist rentier state.

On that point, it's also worth noting that Syria's diplomatic rolodex remains half-intact. Assad still has fine or working relations with countries like Russia, China, India, Iran, and South Africa, as well as a few Arab states like Algeria, and of course Iraq and Lebanon, his neighbors. Egypt and Jordan are also winking at him and making kissy noises, but they're not in bed with him yet.

These are not countries that are going to be able to fund reconstruction, but it leaves Assad a decently sized chunk of global market to interface with. In his Mayadeen interview, Adib Mayaleh raged against what he said are nefarious Western or Arab attempts to sneak in through the backdoor to join the upcoming reconstruction bonanza, via front companies registered in Lebanon. I don't know to what extent that is really happening, but maybe Lebanon is not the only place that could serve as that kind of middleman arena.

Bad Blood



Thanassis: Where does that leave us? Plenty of powerful governments might be quite willing to let relations wallow in dysfunction, whether in the belief that they're teaching old rivals a lesson, or simply in a fit of pique.



Aron: Definitely. Civil wars are not chess games. There are serious emotional, legal, and moral issues at stake, and a lot of blood has been shed. It is wrong to imagine that either side will simply pick the most expedient course and can easily forgive its enemies.

Syrian leaders make this mistake all the time. Sure, Western policy is often hypocritical, as they are fond of pointing out. But the government loyalists misread their enemies when they think the moral case made against Assad in the West is just self-serving propaganda and cynicism. Many Europeans and Americans, including influential decision-makers, are 100 percent sincere when they say they're disgusted by the Syrian regime. They've seen the war crimes, they've talked to the refugees, and they want nothing to do with Assad, ever again. Those emotions matter when decisions are made. They will continue to matter.

On the other hand, the Syrian government is also not some robotically rational machine that could turn around and shake the hands of its enemies as soon as it seems practical. That's a cartoon image that is unfortunately very popular among people writing about Syria. But Syrians are humans and they have been totally traumatized by this war—Syrians on all sides. Western commentators easily understand this when it comes to the opposition, but many seem to miss that it also applies to the loyalist side. Everyone in the regime from Bashar al-Assad on down has lost friends and family members, and they blame rebels and foreigners for ruining Syria and destroying their future. Just like the opposition hates and fears the loyalists, the loyalists hate and fear the opposition. Those feelings are genuine, not just propaganda.

This will be an obstacle to public reconciliation or renewed economic relationships. In the end, I suspect the Syrian regime may turn out to be too much of a hostage to its own beliefs and instincts and to its own constituency, too

blinker, too resource-starved, and perhaps just too diplomatically incompetent to deliver the sort of face-saving conciliatory moves that could help it wriggle out of its current predicament. Instead of seeking common ground and playing to its advantages, the Baathist political apparatus keeps sending out people like Mayaleh to yell nationalist slogans and deny any realistic possibility of a compromise. It is not the best way to win hearts, minds, or checkbooks.

Moscow doesn't seem to be much more adept at this, judging by recent diplomacy. Russian leaders have been hectoring Western diplomats and telling them to pay up and say they're sorry, never suggesting there could be anything in it for them but humiliation. It seems a little tone-deaf.

On the other hand, it's early in the game and maybe they feel they are still working to break the will of their opponents, so they need to show that there's no other way forward, no compromise, nothing left to hold out for. Perhaps the smart and subtle negotiating moves come later.

The West Wants to Be Persuaded



Sam: Well, Aron, the regime's pitch might be typically smug and unappealing, but I don't think we should underestimate the extent to which some internationals want to be convinced. My impression is that many Europeans are looking for a justification to re-engage Damascus and to direct funds towards stabilization and reconstruction.

Politically, I think some are privately convinced that abruptly severing diplomatic ties was, in retrospect, an error. Six years in, they've found themselves a long way down a policy blind alley—full-throated support for the Syrian opposition and commitment to a formula for a “transition” or a “political solution” that's an obvious non-starter—that might be morally superior, but is nonetheless decreasingly relevant.

In terms of stabilization aid, there's a fairly obvious humanitarian need for this sort of investment, for rebuilding homes and schools from Syrian civilians stricken by war. But the livability and economic health of the country is also related to the migration issue, which, for Europeans, is their prime, most immediate interest related to Syria. The Assad regime seems aware of this, which is why figures including Assad himself are apparently less interested in encouraging the accommodation of Syrian refugees abroad than in keeping Syrians at home by pushing for an end to foreign support for insurgents and the lifting of the economic “embargo” on Syria. The regime's argument, as I understand it, is that it would be substantially more affordable for internationals to sponsor Syrians in place—inside Syria—than in their own countries, and that absent some economic normalcy and recovery inside Syria, it will continue to shed refugees more or less indefinitely.



Thanassis: It's hard to imagine a scenario where refugees return to Syria, or even where internally displaced people return to areas the regime considers strategically sensitive, like the Qalamoun Mountains bordering Lebanon. So even if mass human displacement comes to a halt, we're still talking about at least 5 million refugees and 6 million internally displaced who will likely try to continue to live wherever they've ended up. Some Syrians would return from Lebanon and perhaps from Turkey if they were assured that they would not face retaliation, detention, torture, or the military draft, but again it's hard to imagine the Assad regime credibly giving such assurances. Realistically or not, some international donors clearly hope to effect the prospect of refugee return.



Sam: I think some are also convinced that Europeans and various multilateral institutions can, by re-engaging and committing funds, ensure that the Syrian government isn't wholly and exclusively beholden to Russia and Iran. The extent of lasting Iranian influence seems to be of special concern. Realistically, economic investment can't be levered into something as ambitious as a negotiated transition, but the idea is that it could be wedded to some of the more limited examples of conditionality you identified—ensuring rights of refugee return, for example, and ensuring that a war-damaged area's original residents benefit from its reconstruction.

The presence of other international donors inside the country might, I've been told, ease some of the burden on the United Nations. The UN has been criticized sharply for accommodating Assad, but, mostly on its own inside the country, also lacks the mandate or leverage to dictate to the regime.

Zero-Sum Game



Thanassis: It seems to me that there's a case to be made for ignoring sunk costs and figuring out what, looking ahead, the West could achieve with aid. But it also seems to me that, analytically, one can explain the Syrian regime's approach as shrewdly placing a cascade of all-or-nothing bets, demanding that the international community operate via Damascus as Damascus wishes, or else Damascus plays the spoiler. The costs of that spoiler strategy end up being so high for outsiders (not to mention for the Syrians directly in the line of fire), that outsiders regularly accede to the terms of Damascus.



Sam: That does seem to have been the regime’s strategy to date, and it’s been a successful one. But at least for now, would-be reconstruction donors or diplomatic normalizers are looking for the Syrian government to offer political concessions, if only in token form. And—surprise!—it seems incapable of making them.

Stabilization money—as opposed to humanitarian relief, which is less controversial—is seen as necessarily political, and impossible to consider in isolation. Any progress towards a half-plausible political settlement or process would, I think, trigger a substantial shift in internationals’ posture on the regime. But the regime can’t even offer them the sort of 10-percent concession, the fig leaf, they would need to start handing over money. Instead, it sends Bashar al-Jaafari to scramble and disrupt various rounds of internationally sponsored negotiations while, on the ground, it enforces the sorts of local surrenders and gunpoint “reconciliations” that Europeans and others can’t bring themselves to reward.

Reconstruction funds and the various gradations of political-diplomatic normalization are seen as many internationals’ last real sources of leverage, particularly for the Europeans, and surrendering them for free seems stupid. But I also don’t think they can be used to extract substantive, satisfactory concessions from the regime, even if we adjust our ambitions substantially lower than a political transition. So it begs the question: If you have an asset—a “source of leverage”—that can’t actually be traded for anything in exchange, what is it really worth?

Europe Divided



Michael: Sam and Aron have laid out the basic issues and trade-offs at stake on the question of reconstruction, but I actually think we remain a ways off of any real movement on this because of the ingrained behaviors and attitudes on both sides. Sam is correct in saying that there are internationals wanting to be convinced here, but we should also not underestimate the existing divisions among the Europeans on this question.

While the European Union seems to have at least put the issue into consideration at a very preliminary point, there remain member states that are still vehemently opposed to any steps that might be seen as helping to prop up or rehabilitate the Assad regime. I think those attitudes among key European states will be very difficult to overcome. I think Aron is right when he points to the wholly justifiable moral outrage at the core of these objections. That outrage is real, and it is a real barrier to big shifts on this issue.

And even to the extent that Brussels has delicately put it on the table, there isn’t much substance as to what this might

entail beyond very vague mentions of a political transition. It's just not very serious yet. Furthermore, this division among states who remain committed to the notion of political transition and others who are now willing to consider the possibility of stabilization assistance is significant and not at all easily bridgeable.

I do think there are ways to bridge that gap, but they are ultimately dependent on the regime and its approach to this next phase. As I mentioned previously, this new phase of the conflict does open up different sorts of political possibilities, and even some constructive steps would have little impact on the regime. But the biggest hurdle for even modest sorts of engagement will be the sheer pigheadedness of the regime. There really are obvious ways to get the Europeans to shift based on some not particularly onerous preconditions, but I just continue to doubt that even those kinds of minimal compromises will be at all viable with the regime.

Saving Face



Thanassis: How can the anti-Assad bloc find a way forward with Assad, after all the animosity? Is there any way?



Michael: The military situation is such that I wouldn't necessarily imagine a way forward in which the anti-Assad bloc formalizes political arrangements with Damascus. And I also don't think those preconditions would have to necessarily be linked with any kind of formal political transition as we have come to imagine the term. Limiting

ongoing military campaigns and allowing for ceasefire lines to serve as de facto lines of political demarcation coupled with eventual non-interference and recognition of decentralized political control would give European states an incremental face-saving way to engage while also allowing them to avoid running all assistance through the regime. It would also be a very positive step toward a sustainable long-term political settlement. I think structuring an offer of conditional assistance along such lines would be appropriate, but the prospects remain slim because the Assad regime is not willing to countenance that sort of political compromise, even if it remains de facto and implicit in the near-term. Perhaps the intended audience for those kinds of assistance proposals should be Russia and Iran, who will likely be eager to have outside assistance for stabilization and reconstruction, but even if they were amenable there is no reason to date to imagine that they would be willing or able to discipline their client to fall in line.

I think it is worth considering the impact of U.S. attitudes on this. The questions presented by humanitarian aid, stabilization assistance, and reconstruction support are much more tightly linked to European security than that of the United States, but American attitudes will necessarily be a factor here. In all likelihood, future engagement will be a European affair that does not involve the United States in any significant fashion. Based on the basic rhetorical thrust of Trump's "America First" demagogic populism and their budgetary priorities it is hard to imagine the Trump administration countenancing the provision of major new foreign aid and assistance programs.



PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, GEN JOSEPH VOTEL, CENTCOM COMMANDING GENERAL, (RIGHT), AND GEN RAYMOND A. THOMAS III, SOCOM COMMANDING GENERAL, (RIGHT) REVIEW TROOPS ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2017, PRIOR TO DELIVERING REMARKS AT THE CENTRAL COMMAND HEADQUARTERS IN TAMPA, FLORIDA. SOURCE: OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY SHEALAH CRAIGHEAD.

Balanced against that is the ingrained fear of ungoverned space and future prospects for organized militancy, but it is hard to see this administration shifting in the direction of anything remotely related to nation-building, which it has consistently derided. While I don't think this will be dispositive for Europe, which has its own priorities and interests on this, the fact that the United States is likely to be uninterested in cooperating or burden-sharing on this may act as a further deterrent.



Thanassis: Implicit in your comment, Michael, is a useful corrective to a lot of recent breathlessness about America in the Middle East since Trump's election. For a long time, certainly since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the collapse of the fiction of a U.S.-brokered Palestinian-Israeli peace process, serious analysts of the Middle East have recognized the power of the powerful United States has limits, that it can't dictate outcomes in the Middle East. That is true, and a useful realization. Since Trump, however, we've seen a lot of sharp commentary and speculation, especially from within the region, that seems to presuppose that an American strongman will suddenly be able to determine

outcomes that in fact no single state actor can control. So thanks for putting that in perspective.

America's Weak Record



Sam: I agree that American power is necessarily limited, certainly in terms of useful U.S. influence over regional allies like Israel and Egypt. But with respect to Syria, I think it's also worth noting that the inherent limits of U.S. power are not necessarily why America failed to better shape the Syria conflict.

To a large extent, the Syrian conflict refused to conform to America's stated preferences not because America was somehow incapable of imposing its will, but because American preferences were actually rather weak. Put bluntly, America didn't care enough. At least under President Obama, my impression is that Syria was never judged important enough to justify more than lukewarm American involvement. Initially, the Obama Administration's mistaken assumption was that Syria's uprising would somehow sort itself out. By the time it became clear that wasn't the case, the unlikelihood of any genuinely desirable, worthwhile outcome resulting from more robust U.S. intervention discouraged more decisive U.S. escalation.

To a large extent, the Syrian conflict refused to conform to America's stated preferences not because America was somehow incapable of imposing its will, but because American preferences were actually rather weak. Put bluntly, America didn't care enough.

The United States did a lot in Syria, but it was its unused policy options—things like the introduction of MANPADS, and up to and including overt U.S. military intervention to topple the regime—that would have been decisive. But once it became clear that those tools were actually needed, that America really had to put its shoulder into it, the United States didn't actually want to do it. And, in any case, those options couldn't be matched to an objective seen as plausible or compelling.

The result was a Syria policy that entailed expansive rhetorical aims and a large material investment, but never the appetite or will to do the things that would have really made a difference. The U.S. government, including Obama himself, periodically telegraphed its ambivalence about involvement in Syria, as with Obama's somewhat famous

dismissal of Syria's rebels as "farmers and dentists" for whom victory was "a fantasy." But the policy itself was half-hearted and incoherent, and it mystified Syrians and regional actors, who kept thinking and hoping things were about to be something they weren't. Personally, I have to wonder if things today would be so dire if America's real preferences had been properly communicated and more people had really internalized them and planned accordingly.

And as we look forward toward a Syria policy under Trump, as Michael suggested, what America can theoretically do may be less relevant than what America actually feels like doing. In all likelihood, that's going to be very little that's unrelated to torching the Islamic State.

Unrealistic Expectations



Aron: That point about communication is a good one, Sam. People talk about what Obama should have done differently, but it is always in terms of how he should have responded to the expectations raised by his calls for Assad to resign. In fact, the mismatch between words and deeds could also have been corrected on the "words" side.

I have a Syrian friend, an opposition supporter and refugee, who told me a while ago how much she hates Barack Obama. I said, okay, but you'll miss him now that Trump is in charge, and she said, no, anyone is better. At least least Trump is honest about not wanting to help us. And when I interjected that Obama was quite clear about not wanting to go into Syria, she quoted that formula that U.S. diplomats always used in 2011, 2012, and 2013: "all options are on the table." That was the auto-response whenever someone asked the U.S. government about military options in Syria, and it was given in the context of just having intervened in Libya to smash Gaddafi. It allowed least some people in the opposition to fool themselves that the United States would come to their rescue if they just held out long enough.

This is with 20/20 hindsight, and I can see why the Obama administration felt compelled to say that. They hoped this implicit threat would help the opposition and restrain government behavior. The alternative was for the United States to say that intervention is forever off the table, there are no red lines, do as you please. It would have undermined U.S. policy even more. But in the end, calling publicly for regime change while flirting with military intervention did help Syrian dissidents dream themselves over a cliff, and in some ways, they dragged the United States down with them.

I don't mean to say that insincere U.S. messaging determined the course of the war. It was a marginal factor, and events in 2011 and early 2012 were mostly an internal Syrian breakdown. But of course, what the world's sole superpower said had an impact on how people acted and rationalized their choices in those early days. And in retrospect, issues like these

will grow into symbols, whether that is justified or not.

False Confidence in Arab Uprisings



Michael: America's key initial failure on Syria was analytical. Once you make the assumption that Assad's fate is sealed and that he will become the next tyrant to be toppled in this regional cascade, then maximalist positions are easy and seemingly cost-free. It's in that awkward next phase when Assad doesn't fall and it becomes clear that the totality of the opposition is problematic for a variety of reasons that U.S. policy is trapped.

Aron is absolutely right that the mismatch between words and deeds could have been partially remedied on the words side, but the political blowback of that kind of shift was clearly part of what restrained the Obama administration from explicitly stating what had implicitly become U.S. policy. I think that was a mistake and a price that was worth paying, particularly because it might have shaped Russian attitudes toward the war prior to their direct intervention. The pivot should have long ago been toward civilian protection as opposed to any grand notions for political transition. Again, though, all of this inevitably runs up against the unreasonableness of the regime, which might have vitiated the impact of this kind of recalibration.

It's also worthwhile to think about this less in terms of American power but in terms of what is being asked of American power. There has been a consistent move to expand notions of American interests. That might be wholly appropriate, but leaving that discussion aside, it is critical that we not lose sight of the fact that restructuring the governments and societies of the Arab world isn't something that the United States used to be capable of and now simply isn't. It is a fairly new endeavor that is largely doomed to unsatisfactory outcomes.

Restoring State Authority



Thanassis: Let's talk a bit about the Syrian state: what's left of it, what level of authority can be restored, how fragmented it is. Some anti-Assad Syrians who also dislike the armed opposition fantasize that with the war largely settled, Assad will move on. They imagine he might be persuaded, or deposed in a coup by an Alawite or security figure, or forced aside by Russia.

There's also a lot of analysis that holds that the fragmentation of the war era will live on forever, that Syria is destined to follow the course of Iraq, or Lebanon. Much of that is wishful, based on justifiable dislike for Assad's way of governing rather than any evidence about how state power operates. Syria's leaders have had to share

power with new local allies, and have had to let foreign powers (Russia and Iran) deeper into the inner sanctum of authority than at any point since Hafez al-Assad came to power. What sense do we have of the reversibility of this process?

What can we tell about the condition of the Syrian state from the way it is attacking the remaining rebel strongholds? Is Damascus going to have to wage a war of conquest over its own loyalists, who have grown accustomed to greater latitude during the war? If the government effectively wins, will it be the pyrrhic victory of a failed state?

I imagine that a victorious state, with a certain amount of cash and force at hand, will be able to rein in the armed groups it created or tolerated in order to prosecute the war. But that's a far cry from rebuilding institutions and networks of control, whether we're talking about the health and education system, the Baath Party patronage network, or state security informants. I consider several possible scenarios: some version of the Iraq scenario; a more violent version of Lebanon; or the failed state scenario, where Assad wins but there's very little regime to speak of in terms of governance or control—a balance where Assad's circle can extract wealth for itself from the country, and can stave off challenges, but can not meaningfully govern or provide services to the extent that it did through 2010. What can be reconstituted of the centralized Syrian state? What are the wider regional risks?

Damascus Shrouded in Secrecy



Aron: Those are some great questions, but if you allow me to digress a little, I'd like to pick up on that first point about inner-regime workings. Could Assad be pushed aside without breaking the state? Might he decide to resign or share power? Will Russia back a challenger? If so, what would be the proper mix of stick and carrot to achieve that? Obviously important questions. But they are also questions that have been allowed to weigh too heavily on policy, because the answer to all of them is: we really don't know.

I don't think anyone outside the Baathist upper stratum knows enough to be able to predict regime evolution with any precision. I am actually dubious that even Assad has a good idea of what will happen to the regime years down the line. The Syrian government has never experienced anything like this in the past. The 1980s uprising was probably an instructive first lesson, but in scope and impact it doesn't come close. All of this is new, and I have no doubt they're just winging it like everyone else.

It is also path-dependent. What the regime looks like in ten years will depend on what Syria looks like then. Vice versa, too. That may in turn depend on everything from Assad's health to elections in France or climate change. Many moving

parts.

Basic facts about the official state are hard enough to come by, and it's all one big blur of rumor and guesswork when we get to the more informal aspects of the regime—like the role of business interests, high-level friendships, family rivalries, and so on. Ask two Syrians about how the regime functions, you get three opinions. Ask a professional Syria analyst, you get a 10,000 word paper with cool diagrams. But no one knows. Even basic facts elude most of us working on these issues. How involved is the president in day-to-day decisionmaking? In what institutions are the major issues debated? How do the various security chiefs and presidential advisers relate to each other? Can they contradict Assad? And so on.

Imagine a whole cadre of Americanologists trying to predict the next few years in U.S. politics without ever having seen a copy of the U.S. Constitution and not knowing whether Republicans or Democrats control the Senate. That's kind of where this is.

In some ways, Hafez al-Assad's regime was better understood on the level of public debate. There were at least some well-done studies explaining who held what top-level post and whose niece was married to which brigadier general, by people like Nikolaos Van Dam and Patrick Seale. There's really none of that now. Maybe deep inside a drawer at the CIA.



Michael: I really hope that drawer exists, but I have my doubts!



Aron: We should ask the FSB. Anyway, all that said, of course there's no alternative to speculating. I don't want to seem like I'm saying all attempts to understand the Syrian regime are futile. It's fine to use whatever evidence is available and build sensible arguments on that, as long as one remains cautious and acknowledges how much remains

unknown. And if we move a little further out from the black box at the regime center, the ground gets a little firmer.

Wishful Analysis of a Splintering State



Thanassis: The data we have is episodic and colored by assertion. Some analysis claims that state institutions meaningfully make decisions and that entities like Ali Haidar's reconciliation ministry, or the army and security services, are fully independent and make decisions that don't depend on Assad and his lieutenants. While that might be true, as you point out Aron, we don't actually have any evidence to support it. On the other end of the spectrum, we have the Syria-as-

Somalia assertions that appear to me equally speculative.

A lot of this qualifies as wishful analysis. Some supporters of the regime assert, without evidence, that the state would continue just fine without Bashar al-Assad because it's not a one-man family-mafia show. Other regime supporters make the contradictory argument that Assad is the symbolic core of national unity, indispensable to keeping the state together. Both views cannot simultaneously be true. Meanwhile, critics who want to see an irreversible process of state collapse assert every evidence of fragmentation proves that there is no Syrian state anymore—as if, because they want the regime to fail, they seize on any data point to diagnose state collapse. This points to a wider problem with analysis, and follows a long pattern of wishful analysis that exaggerated the number of nationalist opposition fighters in order to pretend that a moderate secular army was ready to unseat the Assad regime. The regime fragmentation issue is interesting and important in my view because it might be true, and because we probably will never be able to assess whether it is until long after the fact.

I think the Somalia and Lebanon comparisons probably go too far; if in the years to come Assad is the dominant figure in Syrian government territory, with no credible rival for national leadership, and if he continues to have the backing of Russia and Iran, which at some level both want to see a functional national government in Syria—then why wouldn't he be able to reign in the warlords? He's done it before, and a mafia-style state is not the same thing as anarchy.

Assad Picks Winners



Sam: Yeah, the regime is a real puzzle box. I suspect that divining the regime's workings and true intentions—a Syrian sort of neo-Kremlinology, although “Damascusology” doesn't exactly roll off the tongue—is going to figure increasingly into Syria analysis, although I'm not confident it will get us much closer to analytical certainty.

My rough-draft understanding of the regime, based largely on the impressions of outsiders who regularly transit to and from regime-held Damascus, is that Assad and those around him preside over a set of competing institutions and power centers that lack much of a comprehensible, official hierarchy or clear lines of authority. Thus, when their prerogatives inevitably conflict and there's no obvious, legal means to resolve the dispute amongst themselves, they turn to the top tier of the regime or to Assad personally to arbitrate. Assad picks winners, basically. He's what ensures the continued functioning of a system that would otherwise be contradictory and incomprehensible.



Aron: I think that's probably true, and it's also more or less the way the regime functioned before 2000 as well. If you read Hanna Batatu, Patrick Seale, and other top Syria scholars on the Hafez period, that's exactly how they described it. It is in some sense just classic coup-proofing, by compartmentalizing the security core and having criss-crossing hierarchies that converge at the presidency, except it bled over into the civil state and the economy. A system like

this does terrible things to government efficiency and it creates overwhelming inertia, but it also forms a really sticky web of power that you cannot easily unspool.

Early on, Bashar did seem to focus a lot on institutionalizing and professionalizing the incredibly run-down bureaucracy that he inherited. In the first years of his presidency, he brought back exiled academics and technocrats from abroad, hired Western consultancies, set up a new elite administrative school, a lot of things like that. It seems to have been something of a Sisyphean task, though—or maybe an Augean task. Also, I don't think it ever applied to the upper echelons of the regime, where it was all about personal loyalty and sharing the spoils. In those inner decision-making circles, he apparently continued his father's game of being the chief arbitrator of a divided system.



Sam: Some of the interviews I did in Damascus last fall supported this idea, this chief arbitrator model. I was told repeatedly about Assad adjudicating between disputing elements of the state or para-state. For example, Ilya Samman, an advisor to National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar, told me that the Syrian military initially resisted the Ministry's attempts to negotiate "reconciliations" with besieged opposition-held towns on the outskirts of Damascus and that

Assad himself had to intercede to ensure Heidar's team had space to work. Similarly, former Economy Minister Humam al-Jazaeri complained about butting heads with bureaucratic rivals in the Ministry of Finance, but said, again, it was Assad who stepped in and settled their intramural dispute. "I wish it were a one-man band," he said, "The problem is the orchestra."

Now, other than Assad himself, it's an open question who commands real power. I've met with people who've confidently dismissed senior ministers and advisors as essentially decoration, or who've said they suspect that some of the most influential people within the regime might be people we've never seen or heard of—a "Mister X" somewhere in the shadows. But at least Assad himself seems to be regarded as a central figure at the nexus of the regime's various networks.

Although, of course, maybe I'm super-wrong. That is also entirely possible.

Has Assad's Rule Really Changed?



Thanassis: The most recent entry in the “chronicles of a failed state” department is a gripping report in Der Spiegel, which is full of excellent new reporting about pro-Assad militias in Hama and Lattakia. We see up close how two powerful warlords operate in today’s Syria, and the apparent impunity with which they smuggle, defy some official security branches, plunder, loot and kill. The main warlord interviewed in the story swears fealty to Assad, but this report goes on to assert that Assad no longer has state power, couldn’t check these new warlords even if he wanted to, and that this marks a major decline in the writ of the Syrian state. That may be true, but we can’t know that from the reporting that precedes the assertion. When I learn such information, I wonder—how different is this from pre-war Syria, which (contra to the portrayal by its admirers) was also a violent kleptocracy. Then, as now, some entities were empowered by the center, or able to operate unchecked, and made their money through smuggling, shakedowns, engineered monopolies, or other predatory schemes. Then, as now, some vulnerable people’s possessions were opportunistically looted by the more powerful, though of course not on the scale that we have seen during wartime. Then, as now, although again not on the same scale, thousands languished, were tortured, or murdered in the regime’s prison gulag.

While all this is awful, I’m still completely unclear on whether Assad’s state structure is shaken but intact, and will be able to reassert the tenuous control it had before, or whether it has crossed the threshold past which Assad will rule, like the Spiegel article claims, as a powerless figurehead at the mercy of the new warlords.

Something Old, Something New



Sam: Thanassis, on your point about “violent kleptocracy” and the parallels between the pre-war and wartime Syria: Yes, I agree with you that this sort of warlordism and mafia rule is not entirely novel.

The term “shabbiha” has, since the war, become synonymous with pro-regime paramilitary militias. But I first heard it in Damascus before the war. I had been eating a lot of eggs, lifting weights in my Jeremana basement gym, and growing a fairly robust beard, and a local friend joked that, as a heavily bearded meathead, I could be a shabbih. Of course, back then the shabbiha were just high-and-tight-wearing toughguys and thugs doing steroid-fueled curls and working as enforcers. But even as straight criminals then, I don’t think they existed independently of the domestic intelligence and kinship networks that constituted the regime, and I think they remained part of those networks when they were turned into a weapon of war.

And that's why—contra your earlier question, Thanassis—I'm not sure the regime necessarily needs to rebuild its networks of control, at least within its core loyalist geography. I think the networks are still there, they've just evolved. With the regime's paramilitary auxiliaries, I don't think they exist outside the regime's networks—I think they are the networks, just weaponized and electrified as an implement of regime defense. Aymenn al-Tamimi's profiles of some of these militias, for example, have highlighted how many of them are actually armed outgrowths of the regime's various intelligence services and its patronage apparatus. These militias may be permitted to engage in freelance racketeering and criminality, but my impression is that their strings run back to upper levels of the regime to pull as needed.

That said, I also think that loyalists are engaging in magical thinking when they insist these paramilitaries will be dissolved or absorbed into the formal, normal institutions of the state in some postconflict scenario, something I've heard said about both the regime's various auxiliary militias and the YPG/SDF. First, I don't believe there will be a "postconflict," not really. Conditioning the dissolution of these militias on reaching "postconflict" basically means they'll be around forever. But also, these factions are clearly taking on their own independent characters and accumulating political and economic capital. I don't think they'll just disappear or consent to cede their autonomy to the formal state. Now, the YPG/SDF is sort of its own animal. But as for the rest, I expect they'll persist, but they'll mutate—maybe into half-legitimate political boss operations or permanent gangster outfits—and they'll remain as nodes within the regime's networks, which will shift and adapt to accommodate them.

For Syrian civilians living under Assad, I think that means the continuation of the regime, but a regime that is constituted in part by snapping, hungry predators. Which seems bleak.

The exception to the regime's ultimate control of these militias may be the forces, Syrian and foreign, that have been created by the regime's allies, and which may not be as clearly and directly beholden to the regime. That's obviously the case with the non-Syrian units fielded by Iran and the Chechen military police units now on the ground, but I'm interested to see whether it also applies to Syrian-manned "resistance" units constituted and trained by Iran and Hezbollah. None of this means that Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah are necessarily working at cross-purposes with the regime, and, for their part, they're keen to emphasize that they're operating inside Syria at the invitation and pleasure of the Syrian government. But they also have their own interests, and their proxies seem not to be situated within longstanding regime networks. Over the long term, we'll have to see if those militias turn into tools of independent influence.

Squaring Assad and the State



Michael: To come at this from a different angle, many of the Russians I have spoken with about the future of the regime have ended up in a largely notional space. The line seems to be that Russia is in no way personally tied to Assad the man, but is committed to the state and its institutions based on historic friendship and links and its position contra regime change and in defense of state sovereignty. But when you probe further as to what this actually means in practice, it becomes hard to differentiate the man and the regime. For the Russians, their intervention was spurred by the weakness and frailty of the Assad regime, and any suggestion of attempting a transition at a point of regime weakness was and remains a non-starter. As long as the impact of Assad's departure is seen as a potential threat to the sustainability of a governing regime, Russia is not going to be interested. And I don't think that Russian decision makers themselves have a way of answering this question definitively. It's very clearly a risk factor though, and, as such, more than enough reason to further strengthen their support of the status quo.

Even if he is able to reconstitute some semblance of a functional national government, the regime itself is going to be strapped for resources and under various sorts of pressure. It is hard to see what scenario could force or allow for such a major shift on the part of Russia, let alone Iran. And without getting too far afield, it's totally unclear to me that Russia would be able to bring about such an outcome even if it wanted to. There is no evidence of decisive coercive leverage on the part of Russia. Of course, in the unlikely scenario where the Assad regime is dramatically strengthened, one can assume that a strong Assad would have no motivation to leave. Exogenous shocks or some unexpected contingency could overturn all this, as could the largely unknowable internal pressures that Aron touches upon, but I find it highly unlikely that outside forces will be dispositive in reshaping the regime in that kind of drastic fashion.

The Other State: Islamic State



Thanassis: Okay, so that we don't dive too deeply down the rabbit hole that we spelunked in July, let's turn to that other war, in the east, against Islamic State. There's an assumption that the war against ISIS is just a matter of time now, but I'm not convinced. We see reports of the Islamic State reconstituting on the margins of Mosul even as a massive international coalition is driving its forces out of the city. In Syria, the slow, grinding, and troubled campaign against ISIS relies on a motley, probably untenable coalition that includes Turkey, Kurds, Syrian Arab rebels, and the United States with its allies, working in parallel but not really in harmony with the more limited Russian, Syrian government, and Iranian efforts against ISIS. Aron, you wrote a while back that ISIS is always a second priority for its enemies, and that's why it's so hard to get concerted action against it. Even with the rollback of ISIS' territory, I think that analysis still carries weight—as does the fact that ISIS does in fact have some real degree of indigenous support, among tribes and

true believers. It is not some easily dismissed foreign import that will wilt and die along with its foreign fighters. Should we expect ISIS to continue to bedevil Syria, Iraq, and the very notion of an inviolable sovereign state whose writ extends to recognized borders?

Takfiris Here to Stay



Sam: Oh yeah, I think that ISIS is probably immortal.

I think the thesis that only matchy-matchy Sunni Arab rebels could defeat ISIS—that Arab communities under ISIS control would necessarily reject liberators who didn't basically look like them, or that they'd hate Kurdish atheists so much they'd all reflexively join ISIS—was probably overstated. ISIS undoubtedly has some indigenous support, on both a positive basis (sincere commitment to its ideological-political project) and a negative one (hostility to the various alternatives). But I don't think we should overstate the degree to which most civilians actually have really developed, committed politics. This isn't to deny Syrian civilians agency or dismiss them as props or bystanders. But I think there are also a lot of people who just want to live, or, alternately, not to die. There are definitely Arabs with, for example, links to Free Syrian Army factions or revolutionary local councils who can't exist comfortably under YPG-SDF control. But for your average farmer or shepherd, it seems like he can probably acclimate in the near term to a weird, leftist political order under which he's not being bombed and his kids don't see caged people and crucifixions in the local market.

I do buy, though, that the PYD/TEV-DEM/Qandil-led political order that the United States has helped erect in these areas is probably untenable over the medium and long term. At least from the outside, it looks like there are still enough accumulated ethnic and political grievances that some sort of destructive reflex action is coming.

That ISIS ultimately has to be defeated politically—that it can't be beaten with a pure security solution—is a sort of analytical shibboleth, but I don't think it's necessarily wrong. If ISIS is going to stay down, it needs to be replaced in these areas by a sufficiently inclusive, consensual political order to short-circuit the cycle of resentment and hate that ISIS feeds off of. An Apoist utopia supervised, in real practice, by Qandil cadres is not the instrument of that political defeat.

Lessons from Mosul



Michael: The ongoing battle to liberate Mosul should also temper some of the pre-existing and conventional views about ISIS and how to liberate ISIS-held territories. Now, Iraq is obviously not Syria, and the demographic differences between the two countries are hugely consequential, but what is happening in Mosul has overturned much received wisdom about the underlying dynamics that fuel ISIS and also about how to defeat it on the battlefield. We should take the political component of liberation quite seriously, but we should also bear in mind that the notion that only Sunni forces can defeat ISIS was a convenient political posture when the actual goal of many who advanced that argument was the Assad regime. But I definitely agree with Sam that the desires of some civilians might confound our expectations for expected behavior/reactions if the only lens through which we adjudge each political-military situation is an ethno-sectarian one.

Team Trump-Putin-Assad?



Aron: As with most international plans for Syria, the U.S. project to eliminate the Islamic State has slowly snaked its way through a maze of least-bad-choices and it is now ending up somewhere it really wasn't supposed to go. The United States is now basically the air force of the PKK, and there is a growing likelihood that the United States will end up falling in line with Assad and Russia, too.

To be fair to the man, President Trump does not have a wide range of à la carte proxy options to pursue in Eastern Syria. He is pretty much stuck with the SDF, and thus with the PKK, though Turkey keeps proposing its own Sunni rebel groups as an alternative and there's an emerging argument for U.S. bases in eastern Syria as a third option. Then you also have the option of backing the Assad regime, or just doing nothing.

In the long run, an SDF-run Syrian statelet will come with a lot of problems. Internally, it may suffer from Kurdish-Arab tension, despite the SDF's campaign to promote a nonsectarian and multicultural discourse (for which, frankly, it isn't getting enough credit). Even in a best-case scenario, northeastern Syria will remain a broken and terrorized place with an enormous amount of war trauma, socioeconomic frustration, and other grievances. These problems will fuel opposition among both Arabs and Kurds, to which the SDF authorities will respond with arrests, beatings, and gunfire, as per the usual routine. In Arab areas, the resulting tension will find an easy outlet in opposition to Kurdish dominance. This, in turn, can create new openings for Arab-identity rivals looking for a way back into that region—whether Baathist, Turkish-backed Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, or some combination. A future spiral of ethnic conflict is easy to imagine, hard to avoid.



SYRIAN PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD MEETS WITH RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN IN RUSSIA ON OCTOBER 20, 2015.
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA.

On the other hand, the ethnic divide is not the only problem that you would face in Raqqa, and it is certainly not the first one. Any transition away from the Islamic State in the Euphrates region will be violent and messy, and whatever its other weaknesses, the SDF seems well equipped to deal with those primary challenges. The YPG/PKK component of the SDF brings military and administrative muscle, and it supplies the central control necessary to pull off a large operation. Who else has that?

The Ankara-backed Sunni Arab groups do not, and, importantly, they also have no way of getting to Raqqa. There is no credible third option. The Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute recently suggested the United States should solve its Islamic State problem by shifting support away from both Turkey and the SDF to instead occupy the Syrian-Iraqi border and hatch a brand new force of pro-Western Bedouin clans in that region. This is fantasy. Say what you will about the Turkish-backed groups, but they do have the crucial advantage of actually existing, albeit in the wrong place.

The reality is that the only U.S. ally on the scene is the SDF, in which the Pentagon has already invested heavily. It is a problematic partner for the United States in many ways, but it is also as potent, palatable, and pliable an ally as anyone in Washington can realistically hope to find in eastern Syria at this point. If it's not good enough, then maybe waging proxy warfare in the Euphrates valley is simply not for you. And beyond the SDF there's no force in that region with the muscle needed to take on the Islamic State except the Assad regime.

Turkey Is Key



Thanassis: I find it relatively easy to imagine Trump, like Obama, concluding that all the options are bad and deciding to do as little as possible. But you're suggesting a step further, that Trump might judge Assad the best of a sorry lot of choices, and take the plunge to join forces with Damascus. Is that at all realistic? What could make the United States end up backing Assad?



Aron: Well, I don't think it's something the United States is particularly keen on doing, but it seems like it could be the end station of another one of those routes composed by least-bad choices. The reason is that Turkey has declared its determination to block the only option realistically available to America right now, which is the SDF. If Ankara decides to follow through on this threat, the United States will be faced with some really hard choices.

To some in the Pentagon and the U.S. political establishment, the Washington-Ankara relationship will always be more important than anything that happens in Syria—or, for that matter, in Turkey. It is a relationship rooted in Washington's non-negotiable need to balance the existential military threat of Russia's nuclear arsenal, through NATO, and it needs to be managed with some care. Although the United States can cope with tension in its relationship with Ankara, maintaining the basics of that alliance is important to U.S. security in ways that the Islamic State is not—despite its best efforts.

With Turkish politics now boiling over in spectacular fashion and Erdogan mutating into an Islamist Hugo Chavez, things are getting uncomfortable for the United States. Washington may in the end decide against a full SDF-led uprooting of the Islamic State if it seems too destabilizing to Turkey or to the U.S.-Turkish relationship, or if Turkey begins to retaliate by attacking the SDF elsewhere, as it has threatened to do.

The threat of Turkey going off the rails is what has kept the United States from throwing its full weight behind the SDF and committing to letting it grab Raqqa and the eastern oil fields. How the SDF would handle Arab community relations is a second-order issue. What Turkey is prepared to do to stop it is more important. The longer this continues, the more aggressive Turkish brinksmanship you should expect, with threats of invasion through Tell Abyad, sabre-rattling in Manbij and perhaps Efrin, and attempts to rally Turkish allies in Iraq against the PKK, like we're seeing now in Sinjar.

It is not an inescapable dynamic. Erdogan may decide to rebalance his politics after the constitutional referendum on April 16, and that could create new options vis-à-vis the Kurds. Or the United States may test him over the SDF and find that he backs down, because, after all, his options are also really bad. Or Assad and Russia may move first, backed by

Iran and Iraqi troops, perhaps after the battle in Mosul winds down.

But if not, we've got ourselves a bind. I suppose the likeliest outcome is that the United States slowly muddles through with the SDF, trying to buy Turkish acquiescence at every turn and deepening the U.S. footprint to show who is in control. In fact, that seems to be the instinctive policy of the Pentagon, which, for lack of clear directives from the White House, is now running on auto-pilot. But with Trump in charge of foreign policy and a transition in Syria widely understood to be off the table, I would also not be surprised if the United States ends up ushering Syrian or Iraqi government troops into eastern Syria, simply because the SDF route creates too much static with Turkey.

Of course, that would create a whole new set of problems, but maybe the U.S. will feel less responsible for fixing them. In the end, the Islamic State can probably be crushed in several ways, but I see no near-term scenario in which the core



MARINE CORPS GEN. JOSEPH DUNFORD JR., LEFT, CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, SPEAKS WITH GEN. HULUSI AKAR OF THE TURKISH ARMY, CENTER, AND GEN. VALERY GERASIMOV OF THE RUSSIAN ARMY IN ANTALYA, TURKEY, MARCH 6, 2017. THE THREE CHIEFS OF DEFENSE ARE DISCUSSING THEIR NATIONS' OPERATIONS IN NORTHERN SYRIA. SOURCE: FLICKR,



Michael: We should also consider the possibility, as we have already seen elsewhere, that Turkey will be the party looking to negotiate directly with Russia to allow the Assad regime to retake territory to foreclose the possibility of SDF territorial advances. It's no longer a question as to which is a higher Turkish priority, and this kind of ad hoc but negotiated process might be the only realistic way forward.

Only Bad Choices



Thanassi: Sam, you mentioned the creation of new problems. Is there a smarter approach?



Sam: I'm convinced there is no decent alternative course in the fight against ISIS, no option we haven't encountered that will somehow avoid an eventual retrograde into insurgency. The ideal political component to the counter-ISIS campaign does not and will not exist, not in Syria. So instead we'll get the sort of subterranean animosity

that ISIS can tap into and that, with time, will erupt in new rounds of violence.

And if insurgency comes back in east Syria, I'm convinced it will come back as ISIS. I think the greatest victory ISIS ever won wasn't any single battle against the Iraqi government or the Assad regime, it was its triumph over its own aggrieved Sunni Arab constituency. My impression of what ISIS did in Iraq, and what it absolutely did in eastern Syria, is that it eliminated every plausible rival for leadership of the Sunni Arab insurgency. The other factions that made up east Syria's rebellion basically don't exist anymore, at least not in any coherent, independent form, or with anything close to the strength they'd need to ever challenge ISIS. ISIS destroyed every Sunni Arab insurgent champion other than ISIS.

Soon after ISIS took the entirety of eastern Deir al-Zour province, a local dispute between ISIS foot soldiers and members of a half-subdued clan called the Shaeitat escalated into a mini-rebellion. ISIS put it down with terrifying, ruthless force, apparently killing hundreds of Shaeitat men and burying them in shallow desert graves—people still occasionally find Shaeitat bones. And when ISIS did it, it cited a Quranic verse—"and, with them, scatter those behind them"—that refers to the Prophet Muhammad's terrible, demonstrative retribution against the oath-breaking Bani Qureidha tribe in old Arabia. ISIS made an example of the Shaeitat that scattered all those who might come after them, just like Muhammad did with the Bani Qureidha.

Even if ISIS loses more territory, it will just re-infiltrate these communities and wage a campaign of silencer and sticky-bomb assassinations against perceived collaborators and alternative centers of Sunni Arab authority. And when insurgency returns, ISIS will be all that's left. It will have reduced everything else to scattered nothing.

Unrest Benefits Jihadis



Aron: I think that is probably true. It depends a little bit on which insurgency we're talking about—I mean, what it is insurging against. If you end up having conflicts colored by other types of identity, you may see other actors in charge. For example, Arab attempts to shake off Kurdish dominance could play out very differently, perhaps with Syrian or Iraqi government or Turkish sponsorship. Foreign interference would go on even in a so-called post-Islamic State setting, and would likely empower other groups.

Then again, the jihadis do stand to profit from all types of continued unrest. Like in Iraq from 2013 to 2014, they control a lot of the infrastructure of the political underground, and will profit handsomely from the arms trade, the conflict economy, and gaps in governance. And if we're talking about conservative Sunni Arab Bedouin groups that oppose the central government generally and Assad and Baathism specifically, well, yeah, those forces now seem to have been pocketed by the Islamic State. Alternative power centers are either small and local, destroyed, or in exile.

If you look at Iraq, there are a lot of Anbari sheikhs-in-exile who have been presenting themselves as opposition leaders and third force saviors, first contra Maliki and then the Islamic State. They have held meetings and press conferences in Erbil, Doha, Amman, and so on. But I don't think they mattered much. We may see a similar circuit of eastern Syrian sheikhs and ex-rebels haunting the hotel lobbies of Amman, Baghdad, and Istanbul when the next round of insurgency erupts, but their pleas for support as an alternative opposition will mostly be background noise.

Mess in Manbij



Michael: Any discussion of the anti-ISIS campaign in Syria now has to contend with the fraught situation that has evolved in and around Manbij, where a small number of U.S. forces have effectively been deployed as a buffer to minimize the possibility of military conflict between Turkey and U.S. supported-Kurdish rebels. With Russian and Syrian forces also in close proximity there are serious possibilities for accidental escalation. What's startling about this development is how it came to be—with little top-level political guidance, it appears that the U.S. military has created facts on the ground. This kind of delegation, to the U.S. Department of Defense, seems like a potentially recurrent Trump administration dynamic, particularly at a time when staffing throughout the government remains sparse. What really worries me at the moment is that the United States has a limited diplomatic presence and posture. It's essentially up to Brett McGurk and the Pentagon to make sure that this tense stand-off holds. But this seems like a major commitment undertaken without much public discussion and at a time when the administration has yet to offer up any kind of coherent vision for what it seeks to do in Syria. And maybe the bottom line here will be significant continuity

with pre-existing Obama administration plans for the anti-ISIS campaign, but this is very clearly a departure. It seems that there is already a bottom-up process of mission creep that is happening without explicit political guidance. That should make everyone uncomfortable, particularly at the Pentagon.



FIGHTERS FROM THE SYRIAN KURDISH FACTION PYG. SOURCE: FLICKR.

If U.S. forces can act as an effective buffer then this won't be a major issue, and as I mentioned above, territorial advances may end up being a negotiated and choreographed affair. But if there is some sort of inadvertent escalation, it presents a major quandary. I don't think there is any grand political bargain that can solve the major Turkish-Kurdish conflicts at the heart of this, so I don't mean to suggest that energies should be focused on that sort of deal or that the anti-ISIS campaign should be indefinitely paused until some sort of all-Sunni fighting force is stood up that is capable of leading the fighting, but this does seem a rather hasty step that might prove consequential.

Syria as Driver of Western Politics



Thanassis: That sounds like the worst of all worlds—an escalation in Syria by the United States, brought into being by Pentagon inertia and without any political decision by the White House. Maybe Manbij will be Trump's version of Obama's Red Line episode. In any case, the deepening U.S. military role in Syria reminds us once again how central this Levantine war has been to American politics, despite all protestations and wishes to the contrary.

Did Syria determine the outcome of the U.S. election? I've heard this theory, and while at first it seemed silly, I've come around to its fundamental wisdom. The idea is this: As Syria melted down, America and Europe sought to stay out of it as much as possible—fueling the conflict through limited proxy support, but determined not to get so involved that they might actually steer events but also risk implicating themselves in a quagmire. First Syria collapsed into conflict, and the Islamic State swelled into part of the ensuing vacuum. Then, million of refugees fled the pandemonium, making their way eventually to Europe. Syria's civil war, uncontained, propelled the ISIS and refugee crisis that more than anything else propelled western nativism and chauvinism to the next level. Trumpism and European right-wing movements already were doing well, but the optics of world crisis spawned by Syria arguably gave them the final push.

What do you think? How much should we connect the war in Syria, and the West's role at every stage, to developments in domestic politics in Europe and the United States? Can we safely say that despite the ascendant nativism and isolationism in America, Syria proves that the world is undeniably interconnected and we simply can't try to dig moats, strategic or conceptual or otherwise?

Interconnected World



Michael: Syria and the refugee crisis have been much, much more consequential for Europe and European politics. The United States has not experienced the refugee crisis. Despite the fulminations of Trump and his cohort, the refugee resettlement program is actually quite intensive, the screening is very thorough, and the numbers are small. That isn't to say that it was a non-factor, because it was a useful rhetorical prop throughout the campaign. And the rise of

ISIS and the various attacks in Europe and the United States did have an effect in terms of coarsening political discourse and sharpening nativist impulses. But there is a convenience and simplicity to the broader argument and linkage that is probably misleading and ignores the long-standing historical roots of the Trump phenomenon. We should also recognize the role this argument has played in the ongoing recriminations surrounding the war. So yes, it was a factor but we would be daft to ignore deep-rooted issues like automation, the ramifications of the financial crisis, the Iraq invasion and subsequent debacle, longstanding culture wars, shifting demographics, changing social mores, and gerrymandering that played a much more decisive role in determining electoral outcomes.

Syria and the refugee crisis have been much, much more consequential for Europe and European politics. The United States has not experienced the refugee crisis.

To go back to the war and its impact, though, it is a testament to interconnectedness, particularly as it relates to the Arab world. Geography, technology, and history mean that developments in the region are going to be consequential for the West. If we look at the impact of civil wars throughout the Cold War, we can see how differently things currently play out than in the past. And that represents a real conundrum because the spillover impact is much more direct and serious while the policy tools to deal with these kinds of crises are not any more effective than previously. If anything, the return of great power competition at the heart of the war has further undermined our collective capacity to respond. The broader lesson for me is how difficult it is to deal with state failure, which isn't to suggest that the chosen policy course hasn't been flawed. But I am skeptical of any narrative that suggests stable and satisfactory endings to the Syria conflict if only certain calibrated policy responses had been undertaken earlier.

A Curse



Sam: I think I buy that there was some partial causative link between Syria's collapse and the election of Donald Trump. And to the extent that, as Americans, our role in Syria helped lead us here, then sure. Good. We earned it.

I agree with Michael that many things led to Trump's election. The Trump presidency is the interaction of a number of longer-term trends and social ills, ranging from structural change inside the American economy to our stupid reality-television celebrity culture, which now seems like the tail happily wagging the dog of American society.

But Syria's war and its reverberations worldwide seem to have figured in as well. And, at least to some extent, that's America's fault. The United States never had more than partial control over the course of Syria's war, and Michael is correct that there seems not to have been some easy policy counterfactual that produced a stable and satisfactory outcome. But what America did do under the Obama administration seems to have ensure that the war was more protracted and more destructive for no obvious, justifiable end.

Syria's war is a curse, one that's obviously afflicted Syrians most terribly. But if even a faint, weakened emanation has

touched America and darkened our politics, that seems fair to me.

Western Failures



Aron: I assume few voters were drawn to Donald Trump because they specifically liked his Syria policy, since he didn't really have one. But Syria still mattered. It boosted certain narratives, fed the media-terrorism loop and intensified anti-Muslim sentiment, strained relations with Russia, and so on. It also created a relentlessly negative buzz around Obama—often, I think, due to unrealistic expectations and unreasonable demands, but that doesn't matter. The sense of

American fecklessness and failure stuck, and it surely had some impact on the election.

Of course, it's worth recalling many of these doom and gloom narratives had other sources to draw on, which were partially obscured by Syria. For example, there has been very little political soul-searching over the collapse of Libya, largely because everyone has instead been talking about the collapse of Syria. Though a lesser crisis overall, Libya was more clearly a Western-made disaster, and, as a counterfactual, I think a presidential campaign where Libya was the Middle Eastern crisis-du-jour instead of Syria could have been even harder for Hillary Clinton. Unlike Syria, her fingerprints were all over the trigger there.

In Europe, no ballots have been won or lost over Syria policy as such. Insofar as there were voters who wanted to see more forceful intervention against Assad, they blamed Obama instead of their own leaders. Those who wanted less involvement had no tangible policy to mobilize against, except, briefly, in the United Kingdom in 2013, when parliament voted to block an intervention.

It is true, however, that the Syrian crisis has fed into every one of Europe's worst impulses. It has vastly inflamed the refugee issue and jihadi terrorism, helped fuel anti-Muslim bigotry and deepened the clash with a resurgent Russian nationalism. But at the end of the day, what is happening in Europe is a profoundly internal crisis, and racists and demagogues would be ascendant with or without Syria. Marine Le Pen is a legacy fascist and Wilders, Farage, Petry, and that whole lot are scavenger animals preying on liberal democracy as it slowly succumbs to technological innovation and globalization. Syrians can relax, they're not responsible for this one.

Downside Potential



Sam: If I can circle way back to the start, on how Syria's war is a composite of multiple overlapping conflicts: I am concerned that the United States may be edging towards an intervention that would inflame Syria's existing conflicts and layer on dangerous new ones.

Earlier, Aron referenced the Institute for the Study of War-American Enterprise Institute's latest report, in which the paper's authors advocate a sort of unilateral, omni-directional intervention in east Syria—a U.S. occupation that would be used to incubate a Sunni Arab sectarian army to fight jihadists and then Iran, in both Syria and Iraq. The recommendations are detached from any ground reality and, frankly, unhinged. But there are also rumors, at least, that they have traction with key members of Trump's national security team.

At a moment when Syria's war otherwise seems headed towards a partial denouement, this sort of ultra-hawk interventionism seems like the kind of exogenous shock that could push Syria and the broader region in new, unpredictable directions. Things in Syria are already terrible, and they weren't headed towards much that was any better. But I don't think we should underestimate our capacity to make things worse, and this time—from the U.S. perspective—with substantially more American exposure in terms of political risk and Americans in the line of fire.

I'm worried that we might have a lot of new discussion material in our next roundtable because America has done something extreme. But I'm hoping we don't.

Until Next Time



Thanassis: Let's hope. But like you, I'm afraid that we'll have plenty to analyze in six months' time, and that very little of it is likely to be good for the well-being of Syrians, the prospects for the better governance, or the strategic stability of the Levant. Continuing rebel offensives remind us that even if the conflict has settled into another phase, it remains a conflict, and an insurgency on the defensive can still mount a significant threat. Less than two years ago, an air of inevitability hung around the armed opposition; today, Assad's regime wears that mantle. Cocksure analytical certainty is among the many casualties of the Syrian war. There are many chapters still to come in this saga.



Thanassis Cambanis, Senior Fellow

Thanassis Cambanis is a journalist specializing in the Middle East and American foreign policy.



Michael Wahid Hanna, Senior Fellow

Michael Wahid Hanna is a senior fellow at The Century Foundation. He is also a non-resident senior fellow at the Reiss Center on Law and Security at New York University School of Law. Hanna works on issues of international security, international law, and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and South Asia.



Sam Heller, Contributor

Sam Heller is a Beirut-based freelance writer and analyst. He has written extensively on the Syrian war for outlets including Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor, War on the Rocks, VICE News, The Daily Beast, and World Politics Review.



Aron Lund, Fellow

Aron Lund is a Swedish writer on Middle Eastern affairs and a fellow at The Century Foundation who has published several books and reports on Syrian politics.
