



 REPORT SYRIA

# Managing Syrian Conflict May Be Possible. Resolving It Isn't.

FEBRUARY 12, 2018 — THANASSIS CAMBANIS AND SAM HELLER

*How much, if at all, should the West be involved in Syria as Bashar al-Assad rebuilds the country? The United States and its allies in Europe failed in almost all their policy aims, and the dictator they sought to topple appears to have survived comfortably in power. TCF fellows Thanassis Cambanis and Sam Heller initially set out to write a joint policy recommendation for how the West should approach the conundrums of aid and reconstruction in Syria; but our disagreements proved more instructive than our common ground. What follows is a written dialogue about the Western policy options for dealing with Syria going forward on matters of humanitarian aid, reconstruction, diplomatic relations, and other potential areas of cooperation.*

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**Thanassis Cambanis:** Is there any such thing, at this stage, as a good U.S. or Western policy for Syria? This question has been coming up with increasing intensity as the conflict winds down into a final stage. Notwithstanding some arguments that the conflict might drag on for quite a few years, I am convinced that—absent some major game-changing shift—Bashar al-Assad and his allies have won the war. Damascus is now focused on reconquering all of Syrian territory, consolidating its authority, and rebuilding its networks and institutions.

I want us to address a range of questions in this dialogue, including some disagreements between us, about aid, reconstruction, the ethics of engagement with Syria, and the West's strategic interests in Syria going forward. The recent focus has rightly been on the military imbroglio in northern Syria, which involves Turkey, the United States, and their various Arab and Kurdish proxies. In the long term, however, the West's most intractable problems have to do with Assad and his government in Damascus.

For the United States and its European partners, this is an ugly and confusing moment. Washington and its hardline anti-Assad allies in Europe seem stuck: they failed to topple Assad, and they don't want to deal with him. They made strategic commitments in Syria that no longer make sense, but they recognize that Syria is too important for them to try to simply wash their hands of it. Now they have to figure out how to deal with a Syria still under Assad, and still in conflict.

Some of the Western interests at stake in Syria are obvious. Pressing concerns like the Islamic State, or the stabilization of the vast desert zone that stretches between Baghdad and Damascus, require unstinting attention. There are systemic pressures to engage with Assad from many Western quarters, as well. Humanitarians want to distribute aid in regime-controlled Syria, no matter how problematic the regime's practices of preventing access to civilians considered disloyal. Public and private interests want the West to invest in rebuilding Syria, some for cynical reasons of profit, others for well-meaning reasons of wanting to help the Syrian population that has suffered from a grueling war. Intelligence and

security services want to share information with Damascus and engage in joint counterterrorism efforts. Diplomats want to reopen communications channels that were hastily severed during the brief period when many Westerners assumed that Assad was on his way out.

What's next in a postwar Syria? How do we deal with reconstruction, the aid regime in Damascus, and the more fundamental question of normalization? On what level should the West engage with Damascus at all? At some point, do we resign ourselves to Assad remaining? And what do we do for the Syrian civilians who, through no fault of their own, live under Assad's rule?

## Assad still rules Syria

**Sam Heller:** Right, these are the big questions policymakers—and anyone who's vested in this conflict, and in the future of Syria—have to grapple with. And I hope I'm not pulling back the curtain too far here, but we weren't originally planning to publish this sort of dialogue. We were going to co-author a piece, but it turned out we actually have some big, substantive differences, even as we agree on other key points. After talking it through, we decided it would be more interesting to interrogate those disagreements, rather than write a consensus piece that was brought down to our lowest, least-challenging denominator.

The reality we face is this: Whatever the outcome of this war—and that outcome now seems clearer, day by day—at its end, Syria will not somehow end with it. Syria will continue to exist, as a geopolitical reality, but also as a society and a people.

We need to weigh how to deal with a postwar Syria that is still ruled by Assad, but which is populated by Syrians who have endured years of hardship and death and who are not somehow to blame.

**Thanassis:** I've been tempted by the argument that the best course is to contain the Syrian war and to try to keep our hands clean of the distressing ways of the Assad regime; to find a way to avoid complicity, and any suggestion that we're bankrolling the reestablishment of an awful regime. It's a harsh position, and it's morally problematic. But the thinking (and I've heard this from many Syrian critics of the Assad regime, as well as from Western diplomats who haven't let go of their 2011 regime-change fantasies) goes that no Western money should flow through Damascus, period. Not emergency humanitarian aid, and certainly nothing more long-term, because whatever the intention, the money and supplies in practice buttress a regime that is retooling its sprawling police state and detention system, a nasty apparatus that was shaken and disrupted by the war, but, sadly, not broken.

I'm troubled because most of Syria's nearly 12 million displaced are innocent (that number includes more than 6 million internally displaced inside Syria and maybe six-plus million more refugees who fled the country). Why should they suffer? Don't we have a moral duty to help them restore their lives—and isn't there a practical benefit as well to stabilizing Syria, even under Assad?

And the answer I keep coming back to is that the overwhelming burden of guilt for destroying Syria lies with the regime. The West can offer humanitarian aid under existing principles of open access to all vulnerable people, a tenet over which Assad has run roughshod throughout the war. Instead, we should start now demanding compliance with international humanitarian law, and withhold all aid unless Damascus allows it. If we can't take aid from Damascus to besieged areas like Eastern Ghouta, then let's not give a single dollar to the vast United Nations-administered international aid-ocracy in Damascus.



CHILDREN SELL SECOND HAND ITEMS AT A CAMP FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE ON OCTOBER 29, 2017 IN AIN ISSA, SYRIA. SOURCE: GETTY IMAGES.

## Reasons to re-engage

**Sam:** I've heard arguments for expanded Western assistance to regime-held areas and for political normalization with Damascus—because, above current levels of aid, they're necessarily related—that I think are serious.

There are two basic rationales, as I understand them: one humanitarian, and one more pragmatic and self-interested. The humanitarian rationale is, as you said, the desire to help millions of Syrians. Whatever the political complications of

the various modes of Western assistance, more aid seems sure to benefit Syrians who need it, and I think you can argue that this altruistic drive ought to win out. (Whether any Western governments actually think in those terms is dubious, of course.)

The other rationale is more grounded: It's in no one's interest for Syria to remain permanently wrecked, impoverished, and dangerous. It's certainly not in the interest of Europeans, who've had their politics upended by refugee flows, or in the interest of Syria's neighbors, who've taken on a refugee burden many times larger and have to worry about their own stability and economic health. The argument, then, is for stability and the restoration of a functioning Syrian economy, whatever the political cost.

Both of those lines of reasoning make sense on their own terms, I think, even if I'm not personally swayed. And of the two, the second ought to prompt some introspection. For years, Western policymakers and analysts have been saying that stability in Syria is impossible under Assad. I think it's probably time for people to reexamine their assumptions and ask themselves: Do they really believe that now, and did they ever? Or was it always just rhetoric?

I think a lot of people, if they're being honest, will decide it was the latter. As for me, I still believe that the Syrian regime cannot promise real, lasting stability (although I think it can do a better job than many give it credit for). That's why I find myself unconvinced by these arguments for deepening engagement, but still in favor of involvement close to the status quo—including the humanitarian aid regime as it currently exists.

You seem to object to that status quo, but in the other direction, in favor of suspending participation in even the current humanitarian aid regime. Is the Syria humanitarian response just too rotten for you?

## Cut off all aid

**Thanassis:** What's best for Syria might not overlap much with what's best for the United States and Europe, or even for Syria's neighbors. A stable Syria is better than a Syria ripped apart, but a stable Assad regime is only a stable Syria for some Syrians. If Assad is solidly in power, will any of the 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees in the region return? A demographically transformed Syria, purged of millions of dissatisfied citizens, might be more stable for Damascus and its security services. But I don't know if it's stable in the long run, since Assad's rule prompted such opposition and defection in the first place. With a quarter of the population gone and something like half the remaining residents of Syria displaced, Assad still is barely in control, with insurgencies still simmering in the north, east, and west of the country. When the conflict is really completely over, there might be a stronger rationale for supporting the country, like the West does in so many authoritarian contexts. But it's wrong, I believe, to actively help Assad seal his victory.

With aid, that means taking a hard line. The United Nations apparatus in regime-controlled Syria long ago forsook its credibility, acting not as an impartial arbiter of international law and principles but as a self-perpetuating billion-dollar bureaucracy that never met a dictate from Damascus too odious to accept.

If Assad will change his practice and give humanitarians unfettered access to all affected areas via Damascus, then we can continue the humanitarian aid—but only then. Short of that, Western governments should leave Assad to stew in this morass of his own making, and show our good faith by continuing to spend billions a year on humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and refugee resettlement—but only in the neighboring countries hosting Syrians.

That means no more propping up a distorted and sick UN effort in Damascus which has been irreparably captured by the Assad regime, and no more humanitarian aid to regime-held areas, aid which is, effectively, only an injection of fungible support to the Assad war and repression machine.

Let Iran and Russia, who were so happy to bankroll the barrel bombings and sieges, fund Syria's reconstruction. The West should invest in helping Iraq stabilize the areas recently liberated from Islamic State occupation, and in helping Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan shoulder the costs of hosting refugees. No matter what people say, America and Europe didn't start the war in Syria, nor were they primarily responsible for prolonging it. Let the guilty parties take care of the mess they made.

## Outrage versus interests

**Sam:** I think this gets at a key difference in our respective outlooks. You're making an argument based on strategic interests, but also, with due respect, on moral outrage. And justifiably so. Things are outrageous.

I think I tend to proceed from a more utilitarian perspective, and from a pretty limited sense of the possible—what can work, and what saves lives. As for outrage, to be honest, I don't know what that accomplishes. It's part of why I tend to keep my distance from activist calls for solidarity, or whatever awareness-raising campaign is on this week. And when I hear that sort of indignant posturing from actual policymakers and officials—people who could make a difference, instead of just posing theatrically—I actually get superannoyed.

Sorry to get off-track, but just to vent: I just listened to Tommy Vietor's *Pod Save the World* interview with [former deputy national security advisor for strategic communications in the Obama administration] Ben Rhodes and [former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations] Samantha Power while grocery shopping. When Vietor introduced audio of a Power speech at the UN Security Council in which she “kicked the shit out of” the regime, Iran, and Russia—asking

them, “Are you truly incapable of shame?” to collective applause—it made me want to throw canned food across our local Spinneys supermarket. I mean, who cares? It’s not as if Power’s dramatic delivery somehow embarrassed them, much less achieved some positive, tangible change on the ground. What a joke.

**Thanassis:** In my view, the biggest problem there wasn’t the moral outrage—it was the insincerity. Had Samantha Power been executing a policy shaped by concern for the well-being of Syrians, a policy that invested American resources in meaningfully trying to help Syrian people, then her dramatic flair might have been merited. Instead, it came across as melodrama and hypocrisy, speech-making from an eloquent American apparently unaware that her country’s Syria policy was shambolic. I found the speech tone-deaf and irritating, but mainly because I thought the U.S. policy at the time was so weak.



U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA (L) SPEAKS WITH UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS SAMANTHA POWER AT A LEADERS SUMMIT FOR REFUGEES DURING THE UNITED NATIONS 71ST SESSION OF THE GENERAL DEBATE AT THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON SEPTEMBER 20, 2016 AT THE UN HEADQUARTERS IN NEW YORK, NEW YORK. THE GENERAL DEBATE OF THE 71ST SESSION WILL CONCLUDE ON SEPTEMBER 26. SOURCE: GETTY IMAGES.

## Let’s be pragmatic

**Sam:** Back on topic: From my perspective, many of those millions of refugees will not return to Syria under a resurgent Assad. But many others actually will, if only because they aren’t welcome or at home in Lebanon and Jordan, and if, somehow, they no longer have to worry about their military-age male family members being conscripted indefinitely into

Assad's Syrian Arab Army. Whatever the moral character of Assad's continued rule, and however we feel about it, that's where most Syrians will be, and where they'll need help—inside Syria. And I want us to help Syrians where they are, at least in some form.

Now, I use a different political and moral yardstick for humanitarian assistance—which the West now provides to regime-held areas largely through UN agencies, and via international and local NGOs to areas outside regime control—and for the sort of stabilization and reconstruction assistance that's being debated more actively in policy circles. “Stabilization” assistance goes beyond immediate humanitarian aid to help normalize living conditions, and it includes smaller-scale projects that might enable governance, restore basic services, and support local civil society. “Reconstruction” is typically used in the context of large-scale rebuilding of infrastructure.

Stabilization and reconstruction assistance are both widely understood to be political—they're deployed to political ends and entail some endorsement of the political order they're capacitating. Humanitarian aid, meanwhile, is treated as basically apolitical, and motivated by a humanitarian imperative and a set of universal humanitarian principles.

Now, some argue these distinctions are false. I've heard people say the distinction between “stabilization” and “reconstruction” is artificial, and you could claim that all aid—humanitarian included—has some political content. And on the ground, assistance of all kinds can look similar. Still, I'm basically willing to buy into this taxonomy.

And if we assume that each variation on assistance entails a different relative quotient of humanitarian versus political motive, then I'm willing to accept a lot more distortion and bad behavior with the more purely humanitarian assistance. If the regime doesn't allow relief convoys into besieged Ghouta, that's atrocious—but, for me, it's not reason to terminate the humanitarian response via Damascus, which is also serving millions of needy and displaced Syrians inside regime areas. I'm in favor of keeping food, blankets, and sanitary kits coming through Damascus, at least to the people who receive it, and using cross-border access to serve most others outside the regime control.

My tolerance for that sort of manipulation and instrumentalization of assistance is different when it comes to more political stabilization and reconstruction assistance, which aren't obviously, immediately life-saving. With those, I say no. Not worth it.

## Perils of intelligence sharing



**Thanassis:** You made this pragmatic argument for America to stay away from reconstruction in a very compelling *Foreign Affairs* piece in October, where you wrote that “postwar development and reconstruction will not be some sort of rematch, or the next round in a contest to remake Syria.” The West wanted Assad to democratize, to shut down his gulag, to provide services to his citizens. But during the war, America and allies couldn’t dislodge or pressure Assad using military force; so it’s fatuous to think that aid money will succeed where force failed.

If this is true, then there’s no reason to trust Assad on any score. I’m convinced that he’ll do whatever he wants, scorning the wishes of even his primary sponsors, Russia and Iran, if they diverge from Assad’s interests. But then we should mistrust him and his regime on all fronts. They’ve lied about everything else: why would they suddenly start telling the truth about former Islamic State militants or other jihadists whose activities and identities were supposedly known to Syrian intelligence?

I fear that one of the future problems we’ll encounter will be counter-terrorism collaboration between Western intelligence agencies and Assad’s security services. Syria will feed the West tips about, let’s say, Al-Qaeda or ISIS operatives who have fled to the West—with no reason for us to trust that these really are extremists and not simply Syrians whom the regime wishes to see suffer.

## The interlocutor of last resort

**Sam:** I’m much less concerned that the regime would deliberately provide misleading or false intelligence to Western governments as part of some counterterrorism-related swap. I don’t really have good visibility on how these intelligence-sharing relationships work, but if the regime intentionally fed Western agencies misinformation, I think it’d be caught out pretty quick—only a real jerk would just take the regime’s word, without some sort of cross-check. Security and intelligence cooperation is one of the more attractive things the regime has to offer Western countries, in the context of a broader political normalization. For the regime, it would be stupid and self-destructive to undermine that by purposely corrupting the counterterrorism intelligence it provided.

The main concern, as I see it, is not that the regime would provide junk information. Rather, I’m more worried that it would offer something of genuine value, but it would want something terrible and compromising in exchange.

There’s actually a case to be made that—among the members of the regime axis, and on issues related to Syria—Assad is the most credible interlocutor, and the one most able to deliver on its commitments.

The United States and its allies have now spent years testing Russia's capability and willingness to restrain the regime, or to compel the regime to engage more productively in Geneva. And this idea of Russian leverage is still an operative part of America's Syria strategy. Look at Secretary Tillerson's recent remarks on alleged chemical weapons use in Ghouta and Russia's culpability as the regime's guarantor. I understand that statement as a not-so-subtle American attempt to ratchet up political pressure on Russia, which is then supposed to bring the regime into compliance—not just on chemical weapons use but more generally, including on Geneva.

And it won't work. Russia has demonstrated it has only a marginal ability to impose on the regime, to compel Damascus to act or not act against its own preferences. That's why Russian-facilitated arrangements like the U.S.–Russian–Jordanian-sponsored “de-escalation” agreement in Syria's southwest corner need, in the end, to be satisfactory to the regime. Because otherwise, Russia can't force the regime to abide.

In any case, engaging Russia on Syria is basically a circuitous way to avoid actually talking to Assad. But if we really want the regime to do something—including, maybe, prevailing on its Iranian ally to keep its distance from specific, sensitive border areas—we may just need to negotiate with the regime itself. The regime may be the only one who can make promises about its own behavior.

And just to circle back: I wrote that *Foreign Affairs* piece to argue against the idea of using political conditionality on reconstruction funds to extract concessions from the regime. In contrast to the humanitarian and self-interested rationales I talked about before—which, again, I think at least make sense on their own terms—I'm convinced that this idea of using reconstruction for political leverage is wholly implausible.

Which means, of course, that it's now central to U.S. policy thinking on Syria.

## Contact at arm's length

**Thanassis:** You're being sarcastic, I take it—ridiculing another ham-handed U.S. policy turn that's based on wishful thinking. Certainly, the latest American policy declared by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggests an indefinite troop presence and a continuing desire to see Assad deposed, somehow or another.

This is magical thinking; Assad is quite secure individually, as is the regime he has built, which might be dominated by one man but is much more than a one-man show. Syria is a republic with institutions, not a small monarchy.

If one could set aside sunk costs—which is hard when dealing with a leader responsible for so much death and displacement, or for so much successful nihilistic undermining of the international system—then you’re right: a Syria policy going forward would require some uncomfortable contact.

This is already the case: the U.S. government continues all manner of indirect contact with the Assad regime. I’m personally in favor of open diplomatic and communications channels with adversaries, and I don’t see the deployment of diplomatic staff to Damascus as some kind of reward. So I’m fine with staffing the American mission to Syria, and with having active military deconfliction channels with all parties (including Iran and Russia). But what I’m far less confident about than you are is that the Syrian government wouldn’t peddle misleading junk. I’m also fearful of the implications of the regime’s winner-takes-all mentality and proven track record as a spoiler. Strategically, the Syrian regime poses a far bigger threat to American interests than the Islamic State ever did.

It seems you’re arguing for a pragmatic re-engagement with Assad’s government. Would you spell out what you think the U.S. should be willing to give Syria and what it should expect? How do you think the U.S. can contain contamination or instability coming from Syria—and how can it avoid complicity in all the awful things to come?

## Dialing back Western goals

**Sam:** In fact, I think I’m arguing for the opposite: not re-engagement, but disengagement.

The United States and its Western allies can try to guarantee their respective interests in Syria with policy projects independent of or opposed to the Assad regime, but, for various reasons, those projects have no future and will fail. The regime will continue to be Syria’s political nexus and reference point. If the West is going to remain involved in Syria over the long term in a way that might plausibly secure its interests, that’s going to mean, on some level, dealing with the regime.

That’s why I’d actually rather that the West re-define its interests and objectives in Syria in more limited terms and, to whatever extent possible, just withdraw. I think our aim should be to pare down our involvement inside Syria to the skeleton minimum—mainly, continued humanitarian assistance through uncontroversial international channels and whatever counterterrorism activities we can safely deconflict with other stakeholders.

Beyond that, I think the benefits of engagement are outweighed by the political and reputational costs.

And all this presupposes that the regime wants Western countries to re-engage, which I don't think we can take for granted in all cases, and which—in a Syria that is increasingly back under the control of its sovereign national government—actually matters again.

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Syrian official not enamored with U.S. attempt to dictate political outcomes using reconstruction funds, but who knows, maybe no one's proposed the right sovereignty-violating conditionality scheme to him yet. <https://t.co/9sjkEvdteU>  
[pic.twitter.com/zoWhWUKjJr](https://pic.twitter.com/zoWhWUKjJr)

— Sam Heller (@AbuJamajem) January 23, 2018

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The United States and its Western allies in Syria have lost in Syria. They should be looking to leave the field. Syria is rightly a space for other, more interested actors, including the regime, its allies, and regional countries that have an enduring stake in the country's politics and security.

And I think that's a point on which we both agree. To pull back the curtain once more: that agreement, as much as our differences, is why we thought that publishing this sort of dialogue might be useful. We had talked about drafting a full-length joint prescriptive report dealing with Western involvement in Syrian reconstruction and aid. But it turns out that our prescription for reconstruction, at least, is basically: "don't."

Neither of us was interested in proposing some elaborate, hypothetical system of conditionality for reconstruction, complete with demands for reforms to Syria's political center or the devolution of power to the periphery. So when it turned out that our bulleted list of consensus policy recommendations was going to be a single bullet long—the one bullet: "refrain"—we decided to focus on where that consensus was missing.

## Invest in Syria's neighbors

**Thanassis:** And that leads us to the question of what should be done (and its corollary, what *can* be done).

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In my view, the United States, and the European Union, should engage heavily in the region, and should do so in coordination in order to maximize the impact.

America remains heavily invested in the Middle East, despite all the talk about a “retreat” under Obama and isolationism under Trump. In practice, America implicitly recognizes major stakes in the Middle East. Insecurity in the Middle East can’t be bottled up—it continues to affect core security interests farther afield, including in Washington. And the region’s oil means it’s a global market-maker, affecting even those economies that don’t directly depend on Middle Eastern oil. First Obama and now Trump might not be getting it right, but they’ve kept the U.S. government involved.

The best tool the West has available at this stage is to stabilize the areas bordering Syria with the aim of containing the conflict. That means, primarily, spending lots of money on the displaced Syrians and their hosts in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Some of that money will be lost to corruption, but it’s a fair cost for helping the five-plus million registered refugees living in the countries that border Syria. It’s also a rare opportunity to show support for and enjoy common ground with problematic allies, especially Turkey and Lebanon, with whom there are so many other agreements.

Since 2011, the United States has given about \$7.5 billion to the humanitarian response for Syria, making it the single biggest donor. Over the same period, the European Union and its member countries have collectively given even more, \$10.4 billion.

In order to show a serious commitment to containing the destabilizing fallout from the Syria conflict, Washington and Brussels should coordinate a major, long-term investment—at least \$2 billion a year for five years. That money should go to Iraqi areas recently held by the Islamic State, and to the communities hosting Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

This injection of money would not be a silver bullet, but it would continue the one piece of this policy that Western governments got partially right. And it would reduce the risks of Syria exporting its conflict even more than it already has.

## Containment might be possible

**Sam:** I agree that it’s mainly Syria’s neighbors in which the United States and Europe should be investing. For the United States, these countries are either allies or partners to whom we have long-standing strategic commitments. To a large extent, our interests in Syria are derivative of our interests in, for example, the security and well-being of Jordan and Turkey.

Some people will argue that Syria's war can't be properly contained, and that we need to solve Syria itself for the sake of regional stability.

At this late stage, I'm not convinced. When the Syrian war really roiled the broader region in 2013 and 2014, it wasn't as if we had somehow carefully quarantined the Syrian conflict: the United States and its allies were pouring material support into the insurgency, and Syria's borders had been thrown open to jihadist militants. Syria's spillover, and transnational threats like the Islamic State, were a product of that particular, exceptional circumstance. In 2018, that circumstance no longer exists.

I'm not sure there's any sum of money the West can commit that will fully defray the cost to Syria's neighbors of accommodating millions of refugees, to say nothing of the accompanying social and political strain. These huge refugee populations hosted by Syria's neighbors have been sort of hanging, suspended, for as long as the war has continued. As the conflict now concludes in much of Syria, political gravity is going to work on these refugees more intensely, and the pull for them to return to Syria will become much stronger.

I think it's worthwhile for America and Europe to do whatever we can to resist that pull, to equip Syria's neighbors to bear a continued refugee burden and prevent forced refugee returns to Syria. Of course, these countries will also need key security assistance, among other modes of support the United States and its Western allies will be well-positioned to provide.

That's in addition to continued humanitarian assistance inside Syria and stabilization assistance to areas of Syria outside regime control, which we should provide as long as it's viable. But with time, I'd argue U.S. and European involvement in Syria should mostly recede to its borders. Syria's internationally recognized borders, that is—not the "borders" of a U.S.-sponsored Kurdish statelet in Syria's northeast.

## Conflict management, not resolution

**Thanassis:** As you intimated, stability in the region requires stability in Syria. Bringing about that stability, however, is not within America's ken. Today, we see the last gasps of the United States' incoherent Syria policy, for example in the tensions with Turkey. Forced to choose between a local Kurdish proxy force in Syria (the PKK/YPG), and a major NATO ally (Turkey), the United States will end up figuring out a way to accommodate Turkey, even as the interests of Ankara and Washington continue to diverge. These difficulties, however, appear to be bumps on a path to an equilibrium that is guaranteed to be unstable unless the underlying disagreements can be resolved. With Bashar al-Assad in charge and a plethora of destabilizing disputes still unresolved inside Syria and between Syria and its neighbors, the spoiler in

Damascus will still cause wider problems—for starters in Lebanon, and possibly in Iraq.

We should conceive of American and European policy as an effort to manage, rather than contain, the ongoing problems that will flow from Syria. The more coordination between Washington and Brussels, the more effective any conflict management strategies can be, but Bashar al-Assad will never be an ally for the West in the Levant. Let's keep our expectations suitably low, and hope that sustained attention and engagement minimizes the future costs exacted by the regime in Damascus.



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