



A Return to American Restraint Begins in Syria

JULY 10, 2019 – THANASSIS CAMBANIS AND MICHAEL WAHID HANNA

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U.S. troops remain in Syria—with diminishing strategic returns and obsolete legal justification—long after fulfilling their original mandate to destroy the territorial caliphate of the Islamic State.¹ Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has, rightfully, earned the opprobrium of the United States and its allies, but that is not a compelling reason to prolong a U.S. military intervention in Syria that was never intended to unseat him from power.

Washington ought to recalibrate and reposition, in line with clearly articulated strategic goals. U.S. policy should seek to contain the destabilizing impact of Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers and minimize regional spillover. Withdrawing American troops from Syria would not be a conclusive game changer for the region. It would, however, mark a symbolic shift away from an overly militarized American approach to the Middle East.²

That withdrawing from Syria is the right choice does not mean it will be easy. And the difficulties of extricating troops from Syria serve as a warning about military interventions more generally. Even an ill-conceived intervention, once underway, can create its own compelling logic; military interventions create new policy tools and the perception of leverage, and no matter how they begin there are almost

always serious strategic and human costs to ending them. Washington should be more cautious about the military missions it chooses to undertake, and more willing to end those missions after a limited time. The United States is overextended and needs to be more judicious about the use of force. Scaling down in Syria should initiate a wider return to restraint. Since 2001, the United States has intervened militarily in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen—and that's just counting acknowledged hot wars in the Middle East. Worldwide, the United States has engaged in scores of undeclared covert missions and air wars. In 2016, for example, U.S. special forces were deployed in about 140 countries.³

There will never be a moment where the costs of withdrawal from Syria are significantly lower than they are today. The troop presence is not without strategic benefits. It counters the Islamic State, Iran, and the Syrian regime; protects civilians; and supports a political alternative to Assad. (Next door in Iraq, the United States enjoys similar strategic benefits but with the key added legitimacy of being there legally, at the invitation of the Iraqi government.) The troops in Syria also, however, expose the United States to risks that are easy to ignore until they materialize and precipitate a crisis. In the context of escalating U.S.–Iranian tensions in the region, Iran or a militia connected to it could easily strike

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the vulnerable troop contingent in Syria. The projection of power absent a broader strategic rationale is insufficient cause to maintain an open-ended military deployment.

It is time to establish meaningful priorities. Not all American interests merit a military intervention. Syria offers the most opportune starting point for a wider pivot, and is also the best place to start disengaging American ground troops (just as Yemen is the obvious starting point for the United States to step away from its complicity through arms sales and indirect military support for regional militaries). A reset in Syria involves difficult tradeoffs, and walking away from important commitments that have been overtaken by events. Nevertheless, the costs and risks of U.S. forces remaining in the country far outweigh any benefits, and grow more serious by the week.

A Distorted Policy on Syria

The initial deployment of U.S. troops to Syria, in 2014, came in the context of compelling and clearly articulated policy aims. But since then, the troops' mission has expanded to include vague and unachievable goals, primarily focused on Iran—the overarching concern that has swallowed up nuanced U.S. policymaking for the rest of the Middle East. U.S. policy on Syria reflects this monomaniacal focus on Iran. The Trump administration's rationale for Syria rests on the assumption that concerted, choking pressure on the Syrian regime will force Assad to come to the negotiating table and agree to surrender power or expel all Iranian influence from his country. This thinking is worse than naive, given Assad's track record of refusing to make even the smallest concession since 2011. Syria is one of several cases around the world in which the Trump administration believes maximum pressure will yield fantastical results. Furthermore, the Trump administration has allowed a monomaniacal focus on Iran to drive the rest of its Middle East policy. To be sure, Iran is a bad actor and regional spoiler, in a region full of them, but Washington has exaggerated the threat posed by Tehran and has set unrealistic goals that condemn its Iran policy to failure.

Recalibrating Washington's approach on Iran will be a complex process, but some of the contours of a new U.S. policy for Syria, at least, are clear. First, the United States needs to pull its military out of Syria. Then it can pursue a regional strategy that could be summarized as “containment without complicity,” which seeks to limit the most destabilizing moves of Assad and his supporters, while seeking to isolate the noxious Assad regime. In line with those aims, Washington should avoid any support for Syria's reconstruction, because of the certainty that such aid would flow only to regime cronies, and would indirectly support the renewed persecution of dissidents. Reconstruction aid amounts to an elective reward for the Syrian regime, one which Washington should encourage its allies to withhold. Sanctions are a different story altogether—they are a coercive tool that should only be applied selectively and in service of limited policy goals. It is fine for the United States to sanction Assad's cronies, but it should avoid broad sectoral sanctions that hamstring Syria's ability to function as a country and which are broadly punitive in intent and impact. The United States should continue to condemn Assad's ongoing crimes against humanity, and avoid any active support for the regime in Damascus. It should pressure the United Nations to limit the ways in which its humanitarian and political efforts are co-opted by the Assad regime.

The United States should continue to support Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. For example, it should pressure Beirut to let Syrian refugees stay in Lebanon, rather than forcing them to return to Syria—in violation of international law—where they may face detention, torture, or death at the hands of the regime. It should encourage Turkey to admit civilians who are threatened by the Syrian regime in the border province of Idlib, one of the last areas in the country to remain in the control of rebels. And it should continue to help fund programs that support the refugees who have been welcomed in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon.

Finally, the United States and its allies should continue to use military means to limit the toxic spillover of the

conflict beyond Syria—interdicting weapons flows and preventing transnational militias from exporting capacities acquired inside Syria. All of these limited goals amount to a climbdown from the de facto preference for regime change that animated U.S. policy in the early years of the Syrian conflict and colored U.S. actions even after ambitions for decisive change diminished.

Some of these recommended policies, like public criticism of Assad's crimes against humanity, would be largely symbolic and unlikely to change outcomes. Others, like support for refugees and withholding reconstruction funds, would have a direct impact. The United States and the region would benefit if Washington conclusively abandoned delusional all-or-nothing goals like removing Assad or entirely expelling Iranian influence from Syria. And a change in American policy should not in any way support normalization or welcome Assad back into the international community. Syria's leader sustained his rule through indiscriminate and systematic violence, and proved the international community incapable of enforcing its own rules and laws.

U.S. Military Engagement in Syria

Beginning in 2011, the United States provided the Syrian opposition with nonlethal aid.⁴ In 2013, the CIA established a \$1 billion program to arm, train, and equip Syrian rebels fighting against the Assad regime.⁵ In 2014, however, in response to the territorial gains made by the Islamic State, President Obama announced his intention to intervene directly and carry out military strikes against the group in Syria, a month after similar strikes were carried out in Iraq. This marked the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve. In late 2015, the United States deployed Special Operations forces in Syria to assist local Kurdish and Arab forces as part of the United States-led coalition efforts to defeat the Islamic State.⁶ While the U.S. commitment was initially capped at fewer than fifty troops, U.S. troop numbers swelled by 2017 to approximately 2,000. In late 2015, a coalition of Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac militias in northern Syria called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established with substantial U.S. support.

After Donald Trump took office in January 2017, the United States largely abandoned support for anti-Assad forces. By July, it had decided to terminate its CIA program.⁷ Trump dramatically increased U.S.-led coalition bombing of Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq, as the multi-year campaign entered its final, most intense stage, beginning with the fight to expel the Islamic State from Raqqa. Trump ordered strikes against Syrian government targets in response to chemical weapons attacks in April 2017, and again in April 2018. These attacks marked the first time the United States directly targeted Syrian regime military infrastructure.

In December 2018, Trump unexpectedly announced his decision to withdraw all two thousand American troops from Syria. "We have won against ISIS," Trump declared. "Our boys, our young women, our men—they're all coming back, and they're coming back now." However, since his announcement, the withdrawal process has repeatedly stalled. In February 2019, Trump reportedly agreed to retain four hundred troops in Syria.⁸ As of July 2019, it is unclear how many of the estimated two thousand troops have been withdrawn, if any.

After the failure of both the covert CIA program to arm Syrian rebels and another Pentagon program to train Syrian Arab fighters, the U.S. military eventually settled on a partnership with a Kurdish faction, the People's Protection Units, known by their Kurdish acronym, YPG. A doctrinaire and disciplined movement tied to Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), YPG fighters were entrusted with the leadership of a broad, multiethnic coalition, and given direct air support. The United States had previously experimented with close air support for other Syrian rebel groups, but it had never developed a consistent or effective partnership. The YPG partnership, however, was built to be fleeting. Ankara views Ocalan's followers, with justification, as Turkey's top terrorist threat; they have been linked to attacks in Turkey against civilians as well as against the government. YPG forces in Syria maintain that they have no direct connection to the PKK in Turkey, a claim that strains credulity and was undermined when uniformed SDF Kurds displayed PKK flags and images of Ocalan.⁹ Turkey is an important regional power and a NATO ally,

and hosts critical American military installations. The United States could not indefinitely balance its treaty commitment to Turkey against its expedient partnership with the YPG.

Pulling out of Syria

The original rationale for the U.S. military deployment in Syria no longer exists. Along with a wide coalition of allies and partners, the United States sent troops to Syria to fight the Islamic State; the campaign against the territorial caliphate began to wind down in 2018 and concluded with the fall of Baghouz in March 2019. Despite the change in circumstances, U.S. troops remain on the ground. While the war in Syria is not yet fully resolved—Iдлиb and other pockets remain in rebel hands, and the central government is still reestablishing some capacities—Assad has won. The United States must decide what it hopes to achieve in Syria, and face the fact that an open-ended military deployment in northeastern Syria accomplishes none of Washington's strategic aims, while sustaining a tremendous strategic vulnerability. U.S. troops could be targeted by Iran or by an Iranian ally or proxy. The U.S. presence creates an additional point of friction with Iran at a time when regional tensions are at a peak. And the U.S. mission in Syria hampers an already-fraught relationship with Turkey, a critical NATO ally on whom the U.S. relies for support in many policy areas, not just Syria and Iran. The U.S. intervention has effectively reached the limits of what it can hope to attain. The question is not whether, but when, to face the tradeoffs of withdrawal. Washington and its closest partners are only bit players in the final chapters of Syria's war.¹⁰

In order for the United States to reap benefits from its withdrawal, it will have to manage it in an orderly manner. That is the opposite of what Trump did in 2018 when he announced a sudden, unplanned pullout from Syria. Half a year later, the timeframe and details of the U.S. drawdown remain unclear. There are no concrete measures in place to protect America's erstwhile allies, the Kurdish-led fighters who anchored the ground battle against the Islamic State.

Turkey has shown no interest in taking over the U.S. role in eastern Syria. Turkey's priorities are different: it wants to

eliminate Kurdish-led militias it considers terrorists and their related local governance structures, and replace them with Syrians willing to work with Turkey. That, in fact, is exactly what Turkey did when it dispatched troops to Afrin. Turkey already has its hands full managing Idlib's suite of Syrian proxies, which are involved in an escalating battle with Assad's forces. Turkey has also had a mixed (and sometimes troubling) record fighting the Islamic State.¹¹

At the same time, it does not make sense for the United States to subordinate all its other concerns to the preservation of the SDF. Doing so carries higher strategic costs than benefits. There are indications that the United States has already recognized this reality, and is taking steps to downgrade its relationship with its Kurdish partners. To the extent possible, the U.S. government should avoid leaving these loyal partners subject to the whims of the Assad regime, or to the retribution of the Turkish government. But the United States must also be realistic about the limits of its leverage. Before completing a withdrawal, Washington can try to broker a deal in which Kurds retain some degree of political autonomy and Kurdish forces are absorbed into the Syrian military, perhaps with Russian guarantees. But Russia has to manage its own conflicting partnerships in Syria and has limited influence over Assad. If a deal proves impossible, the United States cannot simply remain in Syria indefinitely.

The Islamic State has lost its territory but remains a going concern. Even at current levels, the U.S. presence has not sufficed to entirely wipe out the Islamic State. The extremist group's fighters continue to pose a threat in both Syria and Iraq, where they are able to mount insurgent bombings, assassinations, and hit-and-run guerilla raids.¹² There is a real risk that the Islamic State will take advantage of a U.S. pullout to regroup in northeastern Syria. The SDF has proven one of the most effective ground forces willing to take on the Islamic State. Turkey has been less consistent and reliable in using its considerable powers to curtail the Islamic State, preferring to focus on quashing Kurdish aspirations and cultivating its own proxy forces. Without troops on the ground, the United States will lose some of its capability to counter the Islamic State in Syria. However, it will retain its capability across the border in Iraq, and it will have to deftly use inducements

to encourage Turkey to do a more robust job against the Islamic State. Still, after a U.S. withdrawal there might be a rise in Islamic State operations inside Syria—but again, the United States cannot indefinitely deploy ground troops in every foreign country that contains a terrorist threat.

To be sure, the undeclared American war in Syria has advanced some U.S. interests. The U.S. troop presence irritates the Assad regime and the Russians, gives a perch to watch the Iranians, protects some Syrian civilians, and exposes the weakness of the Syrian state. All these benefits come from a comparatively small deployment of fewer than two thousand troops. These strategic benefits, however, are far from sufficient to justify U.S. troops' continued deployment in Syria. Withdrawal is still the best option, for several reasons. First and foremost, the United States sent troops to Syria to fight the Islamic State. Any impact on the Assad regime was a collateral benefit, and military planners were explicit that the deployment in Syria was not part of a regime-change policy directed against Damascus. Further, the U.S. military presence relies on outdated legal grounds. Finally, the number of troops has already dwindled into small detachments, further diminishing the value of the mission. Although precise numbers are hard to come by, there might be as few as two hundred troops in northeastern Syria and another two hundred troops at the base in Tanf, in eastern Syria. Under such circumstances, force protection requirements become onerous, and none of Washington's allies have meaningfully responded to requests that they step in to replace departing U.S. troops.¹³

Assad is likely to stay in power indefinitely, and his allies are going nowhere, regardless of outlandish pronouncements by U.S. officials that they want to see all Iranian-led forces withdrawn from Syrian territory. Minimal existing U.S. leverage won't change that—and if the United States keeps troops on the ground as a balance against Assad, it is effectively committing to stay in Syria forever. More so than the U.S. presence in Iraq, U.S. forces in Syria would be particularly exposed and vulnerable in the event of escalation.

Once the United States embarks on its final withdrawal from Syria, it should be clear to its partners and the American public about the associated political costs. The U.S.-allied SDF has been a bright spot in a desultory landscape, in its reliability as a U.S. partner and its efforts to create inclusive and effective local government. The SDF will likely lose many of the governance gains it has achieved. Assad is likely to renege on any deals he makes. Turkey will still be a recalcitrant ally. Displaced Syrians who have sheltered under the American security umbrella will be subject to the violence of the Syrian regime. Already, as a result of the waning American presence, conditions at Rukban camp have precipitously deteriorated, prompting hungry and exhausted Syrians who had earlier fled the regime to return to government-controlled territory despite their fears.¹⁴

Despite these costs, a withdrawal enables the United States to begin a sorely needed reset. American policymakers have relied, to a fault, on the U.S. military as the tool of first and last resort for all the hard-to-resolve problems in the Middle East. It simply doesn't make sense to deploy troops in every conflict zone where bad actors oppose American goals. The United States needs to right-size its military footprint and minimize risky combat deployments, and it needs to set priorities. Not every fire in the Middle East is a five-alarm fire, and not every injustice or policy setback demands an American military intervention. The most natural starting point for a course correction is in Syria.

Law Matters

There's also the question of legal authority. The initial anti-Islamic State military campaign in 2014 was triggered by the rapid territorial expansion of the extremist group in Syria and Iraq. The August 2014 air campaign initially focused on protecting Yazidis in and around the Iraqi town of Sinjar. The United States also deployed forces to Iraq in summer 2014, in what the Obama administration described as an advise-and-assist mission. President Obama was keen to maintain that there would be no U.S. "boots on the ground." In keeping with that pledge, he stated in September 2014 that he would not "commit our troops to fighting another ground war in Iraq, or in Syria."¹⁵ He went on to add that "it's

more effective to use our capabilities to help partners on the ground secure their own country's futures." But in October 2015, the Obama administration authorized the deployment of U.S. special forces to Syria to "train, advise, and assist" partner forces in the anti-Islamic State campaign.¹⁶

While Obama's rhetorical posture was perhaps politically convenient, it clearly downplayed the actual role of U.S. troops in active combat. Nonetheless, the administration sought to provide both a domestic and international legal basis for its actions. In domestic legal terms, the two deployments relied on the elastic 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF). Passed in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the AUMF authorized the president to use force "against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons." This authorization was intended to provide the president with statutory authority "to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons." Through a combination of a congressional shirking of responsibility and a highly militarized approach to national security, the AUMF continues to serve as the legal basis for the United States' nearly eighteen-year-old global war on terrorism.¹⁷ Congress passed a second AUMF in 2002, specifically authorizing the use of force in Iraq; that authorization continues to have relevance for operations in Iraq.¹⁸

The United States' anti-Islamic State campaign has required a flexible interpretation of the AUMF. The Obama administration determined that direct U.S. military action against the Islamic State, despite its 2014 split with al-Qaeda, could still be brought within the authority of the AUMF based on the group's origins in al-Qaeda in Iraq, a group with which the United States has been in conflict since 2004. Further, despite lacking a specifically tailored authorization, the Obama administration justified the new intervention by pointing to congressional support and funding for the military campaign.

In international legal terms, the campaigns in Iraq and Syria were necessarily based on different rationales. In Iraq, in addition to the obvious rationales regarding U.S. self-defense, the administration was able to rely on the request and consent of the Iraqi government, which has specifically sought, and continues to seek, military support from the United States and its coalition partners. In contrast, the United States intervened in Syria over the objections of Assad's government.

In Syria, the Obama administration argued that it was using force in the "collective self-defense of Iraq (and other states) and in U.S. national self-defense." Additionally, the Obama administration argued that "under international law, states may defend themselves, in accordance with the inherent right of individual and collective self-defense, when they face actual or imminent armed attacks by a non-state armed group and the use of force is necessary because the government of the state where the threat is located is unable or unwilling to prevent the use of its territory by the non-state actor for such attacks."¹⁹ This "unable or unwilling" test is itself a novel international legal basis—far from universally accepted—for direct military action that violates the sovereignty of a state.

Beyond the contested viability of the theory itself, the United States has failed in its attempt to update the rationale for continued or expanded operations. As Tess Bridgeman notes, "the United States has explained its reliance on the doctrine only in the context of stating the legal basis for its initial resort to force." As circumstances on the ground have evolved, the Trump administration has made no effort to "address a state's *ongoing* obligation to operate in the non-consenting state only if the 'unable or unwilling' standard continues to be met."²⁰ While precise guidelines in this context are lacking, absolute security for the United States and total defeat of the Islamic State cannot be the appropriate end-goal to justify ongoing military operations in a non-consenting state. In sum, the current situation in Syria suggests that the United States has likely reached its limit with respect to providing a cognizable legal rationale for its military deployment in Syria.

While it is unclear whether there exists a sufficient legal basis for the more limited set of aims of military intervention focused tightly on the Islamic State, it is absolutely clear that there is no legal basis for a more expansive military mission in Syria. As the current U.S. mission has strayed far from that original mandate and expanded to include a variety of goals focused on Syria and Iran, it has done so without any legal basis. Syria is just one manifestation of a wider problem. The 2001 AUMF, applied with a maximalist interpretation, would give the White House cover to dispatch the U.S. military to almost any conflict in the world without congressional approval or a new declaration of war.

A Return to Restraint

A sustainable long-term strategy in Syria must acknowledge Assad's continuing leadership, with enhanced ties to Russia and Iran. This reality makes it all the more important for Washington to maintain a healthy strategic partnership with Iraq, where the United States can continue to station military personnel so long as the Iraqis welcome it. Crucially, that partnership thrives so long as Iraq understands that Washington is working, in respectful partnership with Iraq, to fight the Islamic State. The partnership comes under strain if Iraq is pressured to play a subsidiary role in a destabilizing and confrontational U.S. strategy of maximum pressure against Iran.

Syria's postwar reconstruction provides a low-hanging opportunity for the United States to assert its strategic priorities without militarily extending itself. The Assad regime desperately needs Syrian reconstruction aid. The United States should stand as far away as it can from funding reconstruction; Washington won't win any influence or goodwill from Assad even if it funds his government. The United States should also push its allies not to support reconstruction, which ultimately won't be directed to needy Syrians, but will instead feed Assad's vast machinery of corruption and regime patronage. In areas where the regime has regained control, it has helped loyalists while withholding all assistance from other Syrians, including food, medicine, and housing. There is no need for the United States to

force its allies to follow its position on reconstruction, which is a secondary policy aim and in any event is not intended as a punishment for Syria but rather to minimize American complicity with Assad's regime. The victors in the war—Russia, Iran, and Assad's cronies—can pay to rebuild that which they destroyed. Meanwhile, any help to the government indirectly supports its machinery of repression and the gulag in which it continues to incarcerate tens of thousands of Syrians, many of whom face torture and murder. Washington must keep its distance from these atrocities.

Sanctions policy demands a different calculus. First, the U.S. policy toward Syria (and Iraq) cannot be contorted to serve a dysfunctional Iran policy. Second, sanctions must avoid widespread harm to civilians; they cannot appear limitless and punitive. Third, sanctions ought to serve a clearly articulated policy of isolating the worst offenders in Assad's inner circle. This more limited sanctions policy would mark a clear shift away from current Trump administration policy.

Some of the other messy aspects of Syria policy will continue to escape clean resolution. The international community has failed to effectively enforce its ban on the use of chemical weapons.²¹ At a minimum, the United States should seek to maintain the status quo, in which Trump's limited strikes suggested Washington would retaliate for particularly egregious violations of the chemical weapons ban. Other open questions involve managing the aftermath of the Islamic State's territorial defeat. For example, there is no satisfying resolution in sight for Al-Hawl camp in northeastern Syria, which has housed at least 74,000 displaced people, many of them members or supporters of the Islamic State. There is a humanitarian crisis at the camp, where displaced people and children live in conditions that are often appalling. There is also a harder-to-solve legal and political challenge of what to do with the genuinely dangerous foreign fighters currently detained in Al-Hawl. Some of the camp's inhabitants have been resettled to their countries of origin, or sent to Iraq for trial. But many of the camp's inhabitants are likely to remain in limbo. At a minimum, the United States should support repatriating foreign minors, and should seek fair judicial process for the detained adults, whether in their country of origin or in Iraq.

Wishful thinking cannot drive Western policy toward Syria. Despite their differences, Russia and Iran are unlikely to clash in Syria. Although Assad is weakened, there is no visible alternative to his rule. The state and its institutions have deteriorated, making bad governance even worse, but without threatening the regime's grip on power.²²

Syria is not a prize for the United States. Damascus has always charted an independent course within the Arab State system. Its close relationship with Moscow dates back to the Cold War. It has cultivated ties with Iran since Ruhollah Khomeini founded the Islamic Republic. The best Washington can hope for is to balance and contain Syria's aspirations. Syria is a long-term ally of Iran, whose position in Syria is stronger because their side won the war. The United States will have to live with those consequences, which mark a significant but not transformative shift in the regional balance of power.

The military option always increases the chance of deeper military conflagration. Once forces are deployed, there is the constant temptation to use them for an ever-widening menu of secondary policy preferences. Risks can suddenly multiply. What appears cost-free today could very easily escalate into a costly and dangerous conflict if U.S. forces come under attack, especially in the context of spiraling tensions between Iran and the United States.

Withdrawing troops from Syria and recalibrating American goals there should be a first step in a wider return to restraint. The United States has core values and a raft of policy goals for the Middle East. It cannot achieve all of them. But the United States can reduce its footprint and its military engagements, so that in places like Syria, where it can't transform a foreign country for the better, it can at least hew closer to the aim of doing less harm. Wherever the United States intervenes militarily, it acquires active responsibility. In the ambiguous and frustrating case of Syria, where there is no ideal outcome, the United States may well have reached a tipping point, where its best hope might be to reduce active responsibility. In this case, sins of omission might be preferable to sins of commission.

Much of America's Syria policy grew out of specific historical moments, and might have made sense in the context of 2011 or 2012 or 2014. The situation has changed—in Syria and across the region. The threat posed by the Islamic State has abated, and the Assad regime has successfully reestablished its authority. The United States finds itself managing partnerships and interests in a region that is entering a new phase. The worst path forward for the United States is one of maximal confrontation and military overextension. In order to establish a new tone of wise restraint, America must recast its profile, as a consistent force for stability. For an entire generation, it has aggressively experimented with a risky, maximalist policy agenda in the Middle East, rarely encountering an opportunity for military intervention that it wasn't willing to entertain. Syria offers the chance for a symbolic break with that destabilizing practice. The United States has developed an unhealthy reflex to address foreign policy crises with military tools, especially in the Middle East. Beginning in Syria, it can model a new approach of restraint.

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Notes

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