



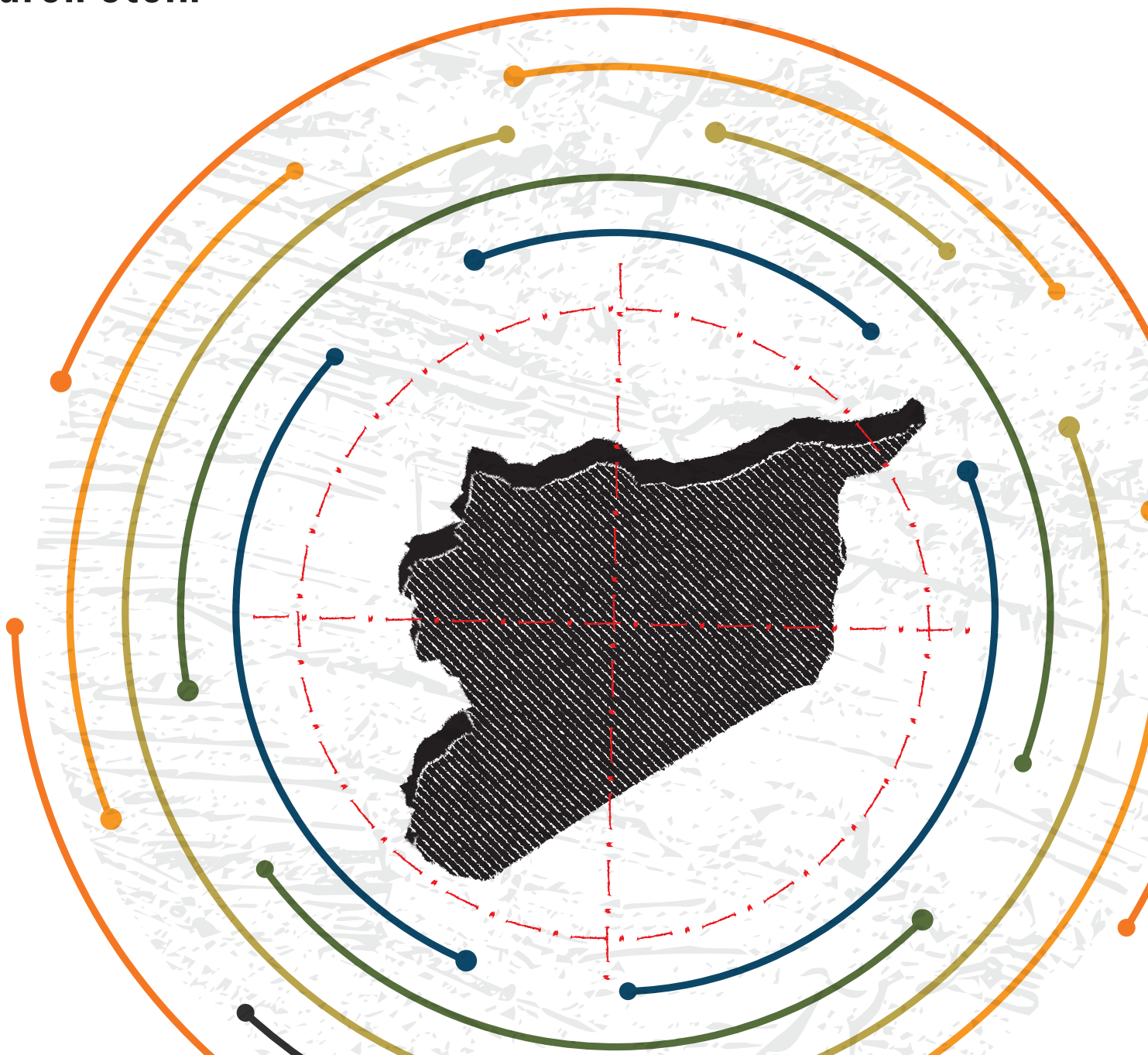
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

# ENGAGING RUSSIA OVER SYRIA:

## MANAGING PERIPHERAL CONFLICT AND NARROWING INTERESTS

Aaron Stein





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# **ENGAGING RUSSIA OVER SYRIA:**

MANAGING PERIPHERAL CONFLICT  
AND NARROWING INTERESTS

**Aaron Stein**

# Executive Summary

**T**he United States is examining how to narrow core objectives in the Middle East to focus on improving military readiness and increasing the number of low-density, high-demand assets available for deployment in Asia and Europe. To free up more forces and to help improve readiness, Washington should explore selective engagement with Moscow about securing a formal ceasefire in Syria's northwest and reaching agreement on a "no-foreign forces zone" in Syria's south. This policy would not alter the status quo in Syria, but seek to use diplomatic tools to allow for the reallocation of certain resources now tasked with protecting U.S. ground forces. This engagement with the Russian Federation would elevate a key U.S. interest and use counter-terrorism capabilities based in Jordan to disrupt plots against the homeland. It would also seek to use diplomatic tools to create conditions to remove forces that do not directly support this counter-terrorism effort. This approach would retain U.S. forces in the Middle East, but in a way that allows for certain assets to be repositioned in either the United States, Indo-Pacific, or Europe.







# Introduction

**A**fter years of strategic malaise in the Middle East following al Qaeda's terror attacks in September 2001, the United States has prioritized planning to defeat a peer adversary and is less focused on counterterrorism.<sup>1</sup> The top-line concern is Beijing, and its military developments are driving debates about how to allocate finite resources to equip and fund the U.S. military. As part of this effort, the United States is seeking to wind down its allocation of in-demand and low-density assets from Central Command's area of operations and to extract U.S. forces from conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia. This move will free up forces, recoup readiness, and save money to invest in modernization. The United States has an incentive to "right-size" its commitments in the Middle East, balancing continued concerns about terrorism with the need to increase capabilities to counter peers like Beijing and Moscow.<sup>2</sup> Reducing U.S. assets committed to the war in Syria is one way to continue the trend of focusing less on threats from the Middle East and more on threats from the Russian Federation

and People's Republic of China.

The American role in Syria has shifted from a fight for territory with a local partner force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), to a smaller special operations forces-led training and counter-terrorism effort.<sup>3</sup> This is complemented by the Air Force flying defensive counter air missions to protect U.S. forces.<sup>4</sup> There is a pathway to do more with less in Syria and to explore how engaging with an adversary could enable the United States to achieve its goal of preparing for large-power conflict and to shift assets away from lower-priority missions in peripheral conflicts. This approach would elevate a core national security priority—the defense of the homeland by monitoring and striking terrorist groups abroad—without having to deploy assets that are required to sustain the more expansive mission that U.S. forces are now tasked with.

The Biden administration should consider a narrow counter-terrorism mission, dependent on assets in Iraq and Jordan,

1 "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," The White House, March 3, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>.

2 Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "How to do more with less in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-09-15/how-do-more-less-middle-east>.

3 Aaron Stein, "Partner Force Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward," Atlantic Council, July 10, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/partner-operations-in-syria/>.

4 Becca Wasser, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jeffrey Martini, Alexandra T. Evans, Karl P. Mueller, Nathaniel Edenfield, Gabrielle Tarini, Ryan Haberman, and Jalen Zeman, "The Air War Against the Islamic State The Role of Airpower in Operation Inherent Resolve," RAND Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA388-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA388-1.html).

linked only to protecting the homeland and pressuring the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>5</sup> To pursue such a narrow mission, Washington should consider engaging with Moscow on a “status-quo deal” that locks in the Syrian war’s current situation in exchange for mechanisms to allow for continued U.S. overflight and a slimmed down military presence to enable counter-terrorism efforts. This shift in policy need not alter any facts on the ground and could, ideally, enable more critical U.S. interests. The Russian and Syrian regime presence east of the Euphrates River came about after the Turkish military invaded in October 2019, forcing a U.S. withdrawal from along the border.<sup>6</sup> Further, the Bashar al-Assad regime is present on the border with Jordan, and both countries have expressed a willingness to expand cross-border trade. The Jordanian government retains an interest in pressuring Iranian networks that operate in Syria and Iraq. A U.S.-Russian agreement could lessen the burden on U.S. forces in Syria, protect American partner forces, and allow for finite assets now being used for less strategic tasks to be redeployed to support broader goals linked to increased readiness and maintaining force levels in the Pacific and European areas of operations without having to syphon them off for operations in the Middle East.

To achieve this outcome, this report

argues that Washington should consider selective engagement with Moscow in Syria to oversee an official ceasefire between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Assad regime in the northeast and to engage with Russia on a “no-foreign forces zone” along the Jordanian-Syrian border in the southwest, monitored indirectly by U.S. and Russian aircraft with a mechanism to share data if a dispute arises. These mechanisms would resemble deconfliction arrangements already in place and delineate procedures to inform the other party of overflight in certain areas, where each side has deployed ground forces. The current American presence could, eventually, be scaled down to a small contingent of air and ground forces in Jordan and Iraq. The contingent in Iraq would simply be an extension of the status quo, while a more durable presence in Jordan could enable broader U.S. military goals of developing smaller bases to disrupt adversaries from targeting U.S. facilities with precision-guided munitions and support a more concerted effort to reduce the U.S. footprint in the Persian Gulf area. This approach would subordinate U.S. interests in Syria to broader concerns about the Eastern Mediterranean, where Russia’s presence has implications for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) southern periphery and European security.

5 See: Aaron Stein, “A Plan to End the War in Syria: Competing with Russia in the Levant,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 19, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/11/a-plan-to-end-the-war-in-syria-competing-with-russia-in-the-levant/>.

6 Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, “Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Northern Syria,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mark-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>.

# Narrowing the Focus in Syria

The Biden administration has sought to recalibrate the U.S. Syria policy. The American involvement in Syria began in 2014 and has focused on enabling local partner forces, backed by U.S. special operations forces, to take and hold territory once held by the Islamic State. The war began under President Barack Obama, continued under President Donald Trump, and is now overseen by President Joseph Biden. The Biden administration has sought to focus only on what is achievable and concentrate efforts on increasing humanitarian assistance in Syria's northwest and stabilization assistance in Syria's northeast.<sup>7</sup> To achieve these aims, the United States has an overwhelming interest in seriously negotiating with Russia, the other great power involved in the conflict. As the most powerful backer of the Syrian regime, Moscow has used its diplomatic weight at the United Nations to protect the regime and, as such, requires U.S. engagement.

The Biden administration has signaled that its core interests in Syria are to prevent further regime offensives in Syria's northwest, where Ankara has deployed troops to protect opposition-held Idlib; retain humanitarian access for the United Nations to manage the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe; and pressure

the Islamic State in the northeast while pressuring al Qaeda-linked elements in Syria's northwest. These narrow goals are backed by an array of sanctions, imposed on the Syria regime for its war crimes and the prosecution of the civil war. The Russian demands of the United States are threefold: (1) end the sanctions regime; (2) withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, as part of a broader withdrawal of all uninvited forces, thereby excluding Russian and Iranian forces deployed with the consent of Damascus; and (3) normalize Assad's government and re-integrate it with other governments.

## THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION HAS SOUGHT TO RECALIBRATE THE U.S. SYRIA POLICY.

The United States has pledged to not normalize relations with the Assad regime and remains committed to the terms of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (UNSCR 2254), which

<sup>7</sup> Aaron Stein, "Assessing the Biden Administration's Interim Syria Strategy," Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 15, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/06/assessing-the-biden-administrations-interim-syria-strategy/>.



U.S. Soldiers in Syria to support the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve mission in January of 2021. (Wikimedia / U.S. Army photo Spc. Jensen Guillory)

passed unanimously in December 2015. The resolution called for a ceasefire and facilitated negotiations to end the conflict. The ceasefire excluded designated terrorist groups, including the Islamic State and al Qaeda.<sup>8</sup> The disagreement about UNSCR 2254 centers on interpretations of the resolution's text and the meaning of the demand to create an "inclusive transitional governing council with full executive powers." The Russians view this language as an effort to change the regime and instead focus on making changes to the Syrian constitution and

pushing for new elections.<sup>9</sup>

As the war dragged on, the American insistence on a transitional governing body has waned, even though resistance to normalization with Assad remains strong in much of the West.<sup>10</sup> The Russian efforts on the constitutional process, too, have shifted to a different format and have yielded few tangible outcomes. This political effort has been dubbed the Astana Process and includes Turkey and Iran as co-negotiators.<sup>11</sup> The Russian-Turkish negotiations have stalled, and the

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> UNSC Resolution 2254.

<sup>10</sup> Author Interview, senior U.S. government official, July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Thepaut, "The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia," Washington Institute, April 28, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/astana-process-flexible-fragile-showcase-russia>.

trilateral track has devolved into a bilateral mechanism for Moscow and Ankara to manage conflict, rather than to oversee serious changes to the Syrian constitution. Given the Biden administration's narrow objectives in Syria, there may be an opportunity to engage with Moscow in bilateral dialogue that sidesteps clear disagreements about the status of Assad. Instead, the two sides could focus on a narrower goal: an official ceasefire in the northeast and a "no-foreign force" zone in the southwest.

This effort would not be new, but the war's current stalemate could ease the areas of disagreement that were present in previous American-Russian talks. These narrow goals could increase confidence between the two sides, leading to a set of conditions for the United States to consider easing certain sanctions placed on the Syrian regime and even to expand upon a deconfliction arrangement that helps to manage daily military-to-military interactions between the two external powers. In exchange, Moscow would be expected to ensure that the regime would abide by the ceasefire and the no-foreign forces buffer zone along the Jordanian-Syrian border. The stabilization of U.S.-Russian interaction in Syria could lead to clear tangible outcomes and decrease the need for assets dedicated for force protection, including at the small desert garrison near Al Tanf.

## **THERE MAY BE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE WITH MOSCOW IN BILATERAL DIALOGUE THAT SIDESTEPS CLEAR DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT THE STATUS OF ASSAD.**

This area has no direct relationship with the war against the Islamic State, but requires the Air Force to fly near-continuous air patrols to protect ground forces from Russian overflight and Iranian attack via armed drone, ground-fired rockets, and crude, one-way kamikaze drones.<sup>12</sup> This mission has no enduring value to the United States and is one area where a mechanism to manage risk without deploying military assets could be useful. As the need for force protection decreases, U.S. assets could be sent back home. The redeployment could then help to increase readiness or give planners greater flexibility to send them to other places in the world.

<sup>12</sup> Wasser, Pettyjohn, Martini, Evans, Mueller, Edenfield, Tarini, Haberman, and Zeman, "The Air War Against the Islamic State The Role of Airpower in Operation Inherent Resolve."





# Elevating Great Power Competition

The Russian Federation's direct intervention in the Syrian conflict caught the United States off-guard. The deployment in September 2015 came shortly after the Russian armed forces annexed Crimea and invaded the Donbas in Ukraine. The Russian decision to use force abroad ignited concerns about Moscow's broader intentions and how such actions could impact American interests in the Middle East, along NATO's periphery, and as far afield as North Africa.<sup>13</sup> The Obama administration sought to manage Russia's intervention in Syria by deploying U.S. ground forces to deter Russian activity in areas where the war against the Islamic State was the priority and by engaging Moscow on a series of ceasefire proposals to halt fighting in Syria's northwest. These negotiations often broke down, owing to different definitions of "extremist groups," the Russian willingness to bomb civilian infrastructure to support Assad forces on the ground, and opposing interpretations of UNSC resolutions.

The Syrian conflict has two intersecting, force-on-force issues that Moscow and Washington must manage. The civil conflict is one of the few places on earth where conventional American and Russian forces come into near-daily contact. These interactions are, for the most part, professional and tightly controlled. However, on occasion, these interactions can be intense, leading to aggressive action by each country's Air Force or through hostile actions on the ground.<sup>14</sup> These interactions are governed by two deconfliction arrangements, each of which covers operations by air and ground forces.<sup>15</sup> These measures previously used the Euphrates River as a dividing line, with carve-outs for U.S. positions at Tabqa and Tanf. The Russians had a small ground presence near Der Ezour and would often fly single aircraft across the river. The deconfliction arrangement called for pre-notification for air operations that crossed the Euphrates, but pre-notification for such action was not required.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the

13 Tyler Rogoway, "MiG-29 Fighters Were At Russia's Air Base In Syria Just Before Showing Up In Libya (Updated)," *The Drive*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/33666/mig-29-fighters-were-at-russias-air-base-in-syria-just-before-showing-up-in-libya>.

14 Wasser, Pettyjohn, Martini, Evans, Mueller, Edenfield, Tarini, Haberman, and Zeman, "The Air War Against the Islamic State The Role of Airpower in Operation Inherent Resolve."

15 Robert E. Hamilton, "Russian and American De-Confliction Efforts in Syria: What's the Endgame," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 19, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/russian-and-american-de-confliction-efforts-in-syria-whats-the-endgame-in-the-civil-war/>.

16 Aaron Stein and Ryan Fishel, "Syria Airpower, and the Future of Great Power War," *War on the Rocks*, August 13, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/syria-airpower-and-the-future-of-great-power-war/>.





U.S. soldiers fire illumination rounds from a 120mm Mortar during base defense live fire training in the Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, Mar. 16, 2021. (U.S. Department of Defense)

Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) would, during times of diplomatic tension with the United States, cease cooperation on the deconfliction line and use increased air activity to signal dissatisfaction.

The status quo was upended in October 2019 after the Turkish military invaded northeastern Syria. The operation, dubbed *Peace Spring*, forced the United States to abandon positions along the border.<sup>17</sup> Turkish forces moved into a box, wedged between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, extending along the M-4 highway to the south of the border. The Russian military took advantage of the invasion, sending ground forces to Manbij, along with reinforcing Syrian regime outposts

strung along the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>18</sup> The Syrian Democratic Forces, in each of these cases, sought to bandwagon with either the Russian armed forces or the Syrian regime to install “tripwire”-type forces to stall a Turkish invasion. The SDF’s revealed preferences are not surprising, given the irreconcilable hostility between the SDF and the Turkish government. For Ankara, the SDF’s empowerment in Syria is viewed as an existential threat because its core militia, the Peoples Defense Units (YPG), is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Therefore, any territorial claim that the SDF makes in Syria risks creating a safe haven for the PKK to organize and plot attacks against the Turkish state.

<sup>17</sup> “Turkey launches ground offensive in northern Syria,” *BBC*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49983357>.

<sup>18</sup> “Russia Moves to Fill Void Left by US in Northern Syria,” *Voice of America*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/russia-moves-fill-void-left-us-northern-syria>.

The introduction of Russian forces in northeast Syria upended the deconfliction arrangement that had been in place. As a result, Russian forces crossed the river in larger numbers and began to conduct routine infantry and helicopter patrols in areas where U.S. forces were also present. These interactions have, at times, been hostile. In August 2020, Russian ground forces rammed a U.S. patrol, injuring a handful of troops.<sup>19</sup> The incident underscored the challenges inherent to daily force-on-force interaction between the Russian and American armed forces and the necessity of having in place mechanisms to defuse tensions and to share information, as needed, to increase transparency of certain patrols to manage unintended escalation.

A similar dynamic exists in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Russian military has expanded a naval facility at Tartus and signed a 50-year access agreement to expand the number of ships and submarines that can dock in Syria to support an expanded naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Russian effort in this area is to counterbalance NATO vessels deployed in the area. In tandem, the Russian Air Force has expanded its operations from Khmeimim Air Base, the facility which hosts the bulk of Russia's forward-deployed mixed aviation regiment. In 2021, the Russian

armed forces expanded the base's runway to accommodate the Tu-22M3, a strategic bomber tasked with defeating U.S. aircraft carriers with anti-ship cruise missiles. The Tu-22 and Mig-31, outfitted with the hypersonic Khinzal missile, have also been forward-deployed. The deployment coincided with the arrival of the HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, which has 18 U.S. Marine Corps and Royal Navy F-35Bs deployed on board. The Russian VKS most probably used the opportunity to simulate strikes on the British fleet, prompting air intercepts from F-35Bs.<sup>20</sup> This force-on-force interaction was reminiscent of the Cold War, but also signaled Russian intent to challenge Western naval interests in the area. The British deployment, in contrast, was intended to signal that Moscow's claim that it is the arbiter of regional security is void and that Western navies will remain present in the Mediterranean.

The Russian position in Syria is also important for its interests in North Africa, specifically its semi-official deployments of mercenaries in Libya and the Central African Republic. At times, Russian policy in Syria and in the Mediterranean are linked, as was the case with the actions taken against the British carrier. The Russians can use force-on-force pressure inside Syria to its diplomatic advantage, deliberately increasing tensions to wrest concessions from U.S. officials, who

19 Lolita Baldor and Robert Burns, "Vehicle collision with Russians injures 4 US troops in Syria," *Associated Press*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/08/26/vehicle-collision-with-russians-injures-4-us-troops-in-syria/>.

20 David Axe, "Rival NATO And Russian Fleets Practice Sinking Each Other In The Mediterranean," *Forbes*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/06/30/rival-nato-and-russian-fleets-practice-sinking-each-other-in-the-med/?sh=1547e44d3c16>.

are determined to manage escalation pathways in a conflict that Washington wants to keep limited. The longer-term legacy, of course, will be a continued Russian presence in Syria—and how that presence can allow for Russian forces to increase anti-ship and land-attack capabilities in an area that had been relatively uncontested between 1991 and 2010.<sup>21</sup>

**THE RUSSIANS CAN  
USE FORCE-ON-FORCE  
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TO ITS DIPLOMATIC  
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TENSIONS TO WREST  
CONCESSIONS FROM  
U.S. OFFICIALS.**

The challenge for the United States is balancing its own interests in Syria, which remain tethered to a narrow counter-terrorism goal, and the broader concern about increased Russian capabilities along Europe's southern periphery and the Kremlin's naval modernization efforts. These challenges, naturally, have led to calls to challenge Russia in Syria to complicate Moscow's regional ambitions.<sup>22</sup> However, such action risks engaging in peripheral conflict to support top-line policy goals, which has negative repercussions on broader defense priorities, which are ideally informed by the top-line political objectives. Thus, making Syria the centerpiece of any effort to challenge Russia risks elevating a peripheral conflict over broader foreign policy goals and then subordinating broader defense strategy (and the financing and resource allocation that enable these efforts) to that conflict. For this reason, there is value in the United States disaggregating Syria and challenging Russia within the context of the civil war from its broader emphasis on preparing for great power war. This approach would treat the Russian power projection capabilities from bases in Syria as a broader challenge to U.S. interests in the Mediterranean and southern Europe, but not view Russian ground activities in Syria—or its support for the Assad regime—as a critical threat.

21 See: Igor Delanoe, "The Russian Navy: Lessons Learned from Syria," in *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, Chris Miller, Robert Hamilton, and Aaron Stein, eds., Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 10, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/about-the-book-russia-war-syria/>.

22 David Brennan, "U.S. Syria Representative Says His Job Is to Make the War a 'Quagmire' for Russia," *Newsweek*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-syria-representative-james-jeffrey-job-make-war-quagmire-russia-1503702>.



# Overcoming Tension and Building Confidence

**T**he United States and Russia have held direct consultations about the Syrian civil war since Moscow's intervention in late 2015. These direct, bilateral engagements were critical to the drafting and passage of UNSCR 2254 and in hammering out the terms for the pre-2019 deconfliction arrangement. The negotiations sought to reach agreement on a nationwide cessation of hostilities and, in tandem, a military-to-military arrangement to define terrorist groups, carve-out zones where these defined groups were not present (thereby creating a series of no-bomb-zones), and strike areas where terrorists were known to be present. This effort was controversial in the United States, given the Russian willingness to bomb civilian infrastructure, and was bogged down by divergences over how to define terrorist groups and how to carve-out no bomb areas. The challenge centered on the presence of Jabhat al Nusra in Idlib and how the group had enmeshed itself with a bevy of other anti-Assad groups committed to revolution. Jabhat al Nusra's links to al Qaeda enabled Moscow to credibly claim that the insurgency was riven with radical elements, even if this effort was part of a cynical campaign to taint all opposition groups as extremists. In a different instance, the United States,

Russia, and Jordan all agreed to a ceasefire in Syria's southwest.<sup>23</sup>

There may be opportunities to engage on a narrower set of ceasefires and sub-national discussions for a formal reconciliation process. In Syria's northeast, the Assad regime and the SDF have informal ties, involving economic links and daily management of force-on-force interactions. The SDF and regime have also engaged in direct talks on a broader political settlement, but have struggled to overcome vast divergences about decentralized governance and security models. On the bilateral level, the Turkish invasion in October 2019 may have removed a key hindrance to U.S.-Russian talks about the regime presence in the northeast. From the outset of the conflict, the Assad regime has demanded that it retain control over its borders and that its security forces return areas lost during the civil war. The Turkish invasion hastened the return of a small number of regime forces to the northeast and forced changes to how the United States and Russia interacted in the conflict.

The United States can take advantage of the lower likelihood of any further Turkish action in the northeast. The Turkish

<sup>23</sup> "US-Russia ceasefire holding in southwest Syria, say rebel sources," *Reuters*, July 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/09/us-russian-ceasefire-holding-in-southwest-syria-say-rebel-sources>.





Turkish and U.S. military forces conducting joint ground patrol in northeast Syria, during September of 2019. (Wikimedia Commons)

military could still invade areas along the border—particularly, the border town of Kobane<sup>24</sup>—but any such action would require Turkish-Russian deconfliction. This creates an incentive for the United States to prevent a Russian-Turkish deal. To do so, the United States could discreetly propose pushing each side's partner to engage in direct, sponsored talks for a ceasefire in the northeast. This ceasefire would be in the spirit of UNSCR 2254 and, in essence, formalize the status quo. This process would, in all likelihood, require recognizing the regime's presence in areas along the border as legitimate, and therefore include terms on prosaic things like the flying of regime flags. This process, then, could lead to mediated talks on reconciliation, based around American

demands of Russia to ensure that the SDF is not targeted by regime forces and that there is a modicum of political decentralization in the northeast codified in an updated constitution. If this process were to bear fruit, then the United States could consider granting humanitarian exemptions to certain sanction provisions to increase aid for all territory in Syria.

To monitor this ceasefire, the United States should not be overly ambitious. However, it should continue its presence in Syria, offering a shared definition of "extremist" as a pretext to continue counter-terrorism activities. In the northeast, the only extremist group of note that threatens either Russia or the United States is the Islamic State, so the

24 "Turkey threatens new military operation into Syria," *Associated Press*, October 28, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-moscow-recep-tayyip-erdogan-ankara-syria-a8ece0a3142a630df30073837b43f94c>.

issues that hindered discussions about Idlib are not as acute. The Russians remain engaged in combating Islamic State remnants in the Syrian desert, and the United States continues to strike Islamic State leadership targets throughout Syria. In the northeast, a delineation of Islamic State areas is straightforward, and air actions could be managed by the existing deconfliction arrangement, with potential further agreement on no-overflight of declared military positions.

## THE UNITED STATES AND JORDAN HAVE A CONTINUED INCENTIVE TO PUSH MOSCOW TO AGREE TO A “NO- FOREIGN FORCE” ZONE.

This mechanism could also serve as a model for the southwest, where the United States could work closely with Jordan to engage with Russia in a trilateral initiative<sup>25</sup> that also includes a concurrent U.S.-Israeli path that ensures Jerusalem is kept informed about discussions. This

dialogue could be modeled on efforts undertaken by the Trump administration when the United States worked closely with Jordan on a trilateral ceasefire initiative with Russia. This effort included close U.S. consultation with the Israeli government, which retains an interest in pressuring Iranian activity inside Syria. This ceasefire would, like the one in the northeast, be a simple acknowledgment of the status quo. The regime controls this part of Syria and, in previous negotiations, Washington was prepared to accept a regime presence along the border in exchange for Russian efforts to remove Iranian-linked elements from the Jordanian-Syrian border, a task Moscow has not shown much enthusiasm for in the past.

The United States and Jordan have a continued incentive to push Moscow to agree to a “no-foreign force” zone and to use its influence with Damascus to facilitate a withdrawal of Iranian-linked forces from this area. In return, Amman has signaled its own willingness to increase cross-border trade, in coordination with a broader effort to restore Syrian sovereignty. This proposal could take a step towards managing Iranian-linked militias along the border, engaging Russia on an issue of critical importance to Jordan and Israel, and creating a pathway to address consistent Jordanian efforts to

<sup>25</sup> David Ignatius, “Jordan’s King Abdullah II has become Washington’s favorite Arab leader again,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/20/jordans-king-abdullah-ii-has-become-washingtons-favorite-arab-leader-again/>.





In 2017, U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group (A) Operation Detachment Bravo 5310 at the Landing Zone of base camp Al Tanf Garrison in southern Syria. (Wikimedia Commons/Staff Sgt. Jacob Connor)

resume cross-border trade.<sup>26</sup> To monitor this arrangement, Washington and Amman should simplify its approach. In the past, there was an effort to stand up a joint U.S.-Russian monitoring center. This has proved too ambitious. Instead, the two sides should agree to a mechanism to share data virtually, particularly on militia locations. These locations, then, would be the focus of trilateral talks to address disputes about militias operating inside the declared no-foreign forces zone. The Russians would be responsible for such action. The reward, of course, would be allowing Amman and Damascus to increase cross-border trade, which

is a goal that Jordan has pursued. This outcome, then, would contribute to a top-line Russian goal, which would be the de-facto recognition of Syrian sovereignty over a key border crossing.

In both cases, the United States would be making concessions, designed to tighten focus on its stated mission in Syria: the defeat of the Islamic State. The Russian Federation has sought its own concessions from the United States, including maximalist demands to withdraw American troops and to ease sanctions. These maximalist issues could, of course, be up for discussion

<sup>26</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jordan reopens trade gateway with Syria after month-long COVID closure," *Reuters*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-jordan-syria/jordan-reopens-trade-gateway-with-syria-after-month-long-covid-closure-idUSKBN26I0W5>.



President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet at a June 16, 2021 meeting in Geneva. (share.america.gov)

in an iterative and mutually reinforcing dialogue with Moscow. However, any movement on such issues would require reciprocal Russian actions, ranging from cooperation on removing chemical weapons from Syria (as is required under the Chemical Weapons Convention) to implementing real political changes that would hold Syrian leaders to account for obvious war crimes. In the absence of such a grand bargain, these small and incremental measures could build confidence and ease tension between Russia and the United States and entail some limited sanctions waivers if there is demonstrated goodwill on the part of

Moscow and Damascus. Moscow, too, would be ensnared in an effort to pressure Iran and to act in good faith when dealing with the SDF. The U.S. concessions would undermine Russian coercive leverage over the SDF, either through the potential to use force in Kurdish-majority areas or to let Turkey expand military operations. This overt U.S. effort to shield the SDF from coercive leverage, then, could strengthen the SDF's hand in broader discussions with the regime about the future of Syrian governance.



# A Pathway to Withdrawal

The war in Syria is a lower priority to U.S. strategic interests than its competition with China or Russia on Europe's periphery. To effectively compete with both Russia and China, the United States has to be more diligent in how finite resources are allocated. However, given the necessity of U.S. troops to continue counter-terrorism operations, the Biden administration has an incentive to retain a presence in the near term and work with regional allies and partners to enable core U.S. interests. However, the operation should not continue forever, and, eventually, the dollars used to support this operation will be invested elsewhere, along with the personnel and equipment.

This report's proposed twin ceasefires could allow for certain changes to the U.S. posture that could, in the short term, split the difference and re-think how to use force in the region. In the Middle East more broadly, the rising prevalence of accurate ballistic missiles has increased risks to massed U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf at large bases like Al Udeid in Qatar and Al Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>27</sup> These air bases were critical to support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they are less critical now after the Afghanistan withdrawal and since there are so few

forces in Iraq. The main hub for U.S. air operations in Syria is now Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan, but the American presence is unacknowledged because of host country sensitivities. If the United States were to reach agreement with Russia on these two narrow agreements, then Washington could still use assets at this base to support a counter-terrorism operation and leave behind a smaller and more distributed basing architecture to support a slimmed down regional presence and keep flexible arrangements to support deployments.

This approach would deprioritize competition with Russia in Syria as a means to implement the Biden administration's national security priorities and, instead, use tactical cooperation with Moscow to manage interactions in a peripheral conflict. This strategy would reaffirm the status quo, albeit in a way that is designed to sustain U.S. counter-terrorism commitments. As these threats decrease, so, too, could the U.S. military presence inside Syria to fulfill the most important U.S. interest: the protection of the homeland through stability abroad. This eventual withdrawal could, again, be used as means to wrangle concessions from Moscow to protect local partner

<sup>27</sup> Becca Wasser and Aaron Stein, "Small, Distributed, And Secure: A New Basing Architecture for the Middle East," *War on the Rocks*, December 16, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/small-distributed-and-secure-a-new-basing-architecture-for-the-middle-east/>.

forces that were critical to the fight against the Islamic State and integrate them into a political process with the regime that addresses some of the SDF's key political demands. The built up and expanded bases from *Operation Inherent Resolve*, particularly Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, should continue to host U.S. and allied forces for operations in the Middle East and a latent counter-terrorism force, focused on operations in Syria.

Engagement with an adversary is not always straightforward or easy. For the United States, the challenge is having to prioritize global commitments, while adversaries do not share the same type of global interests that require the forward deployment of finite, in-demand military assets. The Russian Federation, however, has made Syria a priority. Moscow has successfully defended the Assad regime from collapse and remains politically and militarily committed to Damascus. The United States, in contrast, has defined its goals in Syria far more narrowly, focusing just on the Islamic State. To match ends with means, Washington should consider narrowing its goals and engaging with an adversary to pursue its core interests. 🦅





# About the Author

**Aaron Stein** is the Director of Research at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). He is also the Director of the Middle East Program and Acting Director of the National Security Program. Previously, Dr. Stein was a resident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council, where he managed their Turkey-related research program, oversaw work on nonproliferation in the Middle East with a focus on Iran, and researched non-state actors in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. He also hosts the Arms Control Wonk and the Chain Reaction podcasts.

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