



## “The United States in Syria. Why it still matters?”

**Author: Saidbek Mamasoliev**

Graduate of California State University (BA)

and the University of Denver (MA), USA.

Current PhD student at Lincoln University, USA

Email:

[saidbekmamasoliev@gmail.com](mailto:saidbekmamasoliev@gmail.com)

[smamasoliev@lincolnucsf.edu](mailto:smamasoliev@lincolnucsf.edu)

### ABSTRACT

The US mission in Syria is hampered with numerous barriers necessitating a novel approach or change in President Joe Biden's administration strategy. The leadership of Syria is unwilling to compromise or reform. Syrian's lip service exposes United States (US) and puts them between a rock and a hard place. Syria's unwillingness to comply can lead to suspension of America, snapback sanctions and loss of European incentives. President Joe Biden has inherited Syrian Crisis, and it distresses that have lasted a decade (since 2011). The Syrian Crisis poses humanitarian and strategic hurdles for the novice US administration. The Syrian government is responsible for the loss of millions of Syrians' lives and the destruction of properties since the onset of the conflict in 2011 (Cloud 2021). However, it is not yet time to throw in the towel yet since the US has a chance to re-evaluate US policy in Syria and prioritize diplomacy to advance its interests in the region.

### ARTICLE INFO

**Received:** 11<sup>th</sup> April 2024

**Accepted:** 7<sup>th</sup> May 2024

### KEY WORDS:

US, Syria, Russia, ISIS, Kurds, SDF, Iran

### Introduction:

America is struggling to address the distasteful and harsh reality concerning the President Bashar al-Assad's future and third term of presidency. The majority of countries have advocated for the departure of Assad, who ascended to power after his father's demise. The policies of pressure from the US and other European nations such as Russia have not been fruitful (Knickmeyer 2021). The guidelines have failed to produce reforms that trigger America to establish diplomatic ties with its European allies. However, before reopening the relationship with its partners, the US needs to ascertain the implementation of concrete steps, pivot and test novel approaches and negotiate with the Syrian government to release prisoners.

The US has to monitor mechanisms that will ascertain progress to ensure that there is dignified reception for returning refugees to Syria, civilians are protected, and humanitarian access nationally is not impeded. The Syrian government needs to decentralize and reform the political and security sector. For example, Syria must exhibit good faith participation in United Nation's Geneva process. Consequentially, the US must publicly produce a negotiated menu on the table of reciprocal steps instead of perpetuating the status quo since it will not produce different outcomes. Essentially,

the US and Europe have to apply other forms of pressure on Syria to reform it has rejected in the past.

### ***US Interest in Syria***

Critics of Assad have been of different opinion about Syria's domestic and external policies. US and Syrian relationship have taken a different trajectory. The US has taken a keen interest in the regime conduct of Syria. It demands Syria to cooperate and be vigilant in monitoring the Iraqi-Syrian border to curb the infiltration of foreign fighters into Iraq. Syria is the vanguard of a couple of American policy matters in the Middle East. Opposition leaders have differed on the scope of how far Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) reforms should happen. They suggest having a blend of pressure tactics and incentives from the West would hasten the reform process (Cloud 2021).

Moreover, some opposition leaders have suggested funding groups within Syria to enhance political reform and predestine violation of human rights against reformists in SAR. Isolating Syria is a significant blunder that brews more trouble for the US. The US must provide SAR with enticements and secure cooperation, harness international terrorism and stabilize the situation in Syria. Previous studies have illustrated that Western engagement in Syrian conflict affairs will fortify the Assad regime, which can exploit set up guidelines by the US and Europe.

To some, pressure alone is adequate to change the problematic behavior of Syria. In contrast, others believe that domestic and external policies difference between the US and Syria make all the difference and catalyze the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) threat in northeast Syria (Ratney 2019). The US presence in Syria still matters, and the country continues to pursue its interest in the Islamic republic because of numerous reasons. The US intends to deter Syria from using and proliferating chemical weapons, assuaging the suffering of millions of Syrian people transformed into internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in neighboring host countries (Hof 2019). The refugee burden on the host countries and Europe has resulted in endless mass migrations fueled by the populist reaction. Additionally, the US endeavors to halt the threats posed by terrorist groups, corruption and the impact of war and sanction on the citizens.

Syria is the crossroads for conflict between the US, Russia, Israel, Iran and Turkey (Feltman and Balian 2021). Despite the US effort to bring sanity to Syria, the American policies since 2011 have failed. America has goofed, and the presented policies have succeeded in making the situation in Syria even worse. The sanctioning policies that concentrate on isolating the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) have ravaged an already torn economy, and the government is stubborn with no intentions of transmuting its conduct. Initially, the US endeavored to train, equip and arm rival groups to pressure Assad to resign or alter misconstrued leadership in the government. The Assad family has reigned and domineered over SAR for 30 years (Khatib 2020). The Syrian political system faces looming rupture due to Syria's loss of economic power amid Assad's leadership. The financial pressures imposed on the State have led to the loss of oil revenues and negatively impacted Syrian politics. The future of Syria is bleak and faces uncertainty since nobody is sure whether Syrian government can control the reform process. Syria's energies to reform the political and economic system is mired.

Further, the independence of Iraqi Kurds can bolster Syria's Kurdish population that is approximately 2M, to demand more political participation in Syrian political process. On the down-low, the ongoing events in Iraq will impact the domestic stability of the SAR. The conflicts in Iraq can radicalize the native Syrian Islamists who can target the secular government of Syria or lead to the exportation of radicalism to Iraq. Unfortunately, the president has failed to bow down to pressure and instead, Syria turned its back on the US. Therefore, Syria has become more dependent on Iran and Russia (Cook 2021).

Moreover, the US and European sanctions have culminated in acute shortages and depreciation of the Syrian currency. The sanctions have pushed America on the sideline as Russia and Iran become the foremost intermediaries of Syria's future. What's more, the punitive sanctions of SAR have resulted in unintentional harmful humanitarian repercussions that have aggravated the

miseries of ordinary Syrians, such as early marriages and rape among young females. The adverse effect of US and EU unilateral measures imposed on SAR's economy has affected agricultural, banking sectors that affect the economic sectors of Syria. The unintended harmful humanitarian outcomes have decimated the Middle-class persons in Syria, which would have been a potential conduit for stability and long-term reforms. The current approach of imposing sanctions has contributed to the country negatively and has festered a failed nation. In addition, the UN-led diplomatic efforts in Geneva that focused on constitutional reforms also failed.

The US and Biden's administration ought to adopt a reconceived diplomatic approach procedure whose objectives are to nurture a detailed framework that engages the Syrian administration on limited verifiable phases. The measure ensures that targeted help and sanction adjustment from the US and EU are implemented at the helm of Assad's core domestic constituency and behaviors of the ruling elites. For the US to avoid the downward spiral in Syria, it must revamp diplomacy that will enhance progress on distinct issues (Al-Masri 2020). The US and the EU should give the Syrian government and its supporters a vivid trail of the economic and humanitarian crisis.

The present policies do not address the strategic predicament of Syria's alignment with Iran and Russia, which is obnoxious from the standpoint of America. There is no accountability for the deaths of Syrians and the destruction caused by the conflict. The US should reconsider and facilitate the building of civilian infrastructure. The infrastructure such as schools and hospitals were destroyed during the war. A procedural and reversible approach would ease US and European sanctions. The US should exempt humanitarian efforts to fight the pandemic in Syria. The diplomatic ties between the US and Syria is very critical because the relations have not been stable since 1944. Since 1979, Syria is on the list of state sponsors of terrorism and continued support of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Syria is adamant and continues to undermine the US and any global stabilization activities in Iraq and within (Muller 2020). Syria has incessantly continued to support terrorism and the production of armaments of mass destruction and missile programs. Unfortunately, Syria cannot enjoy the backing of America or buy missile weaponry from the US. According to the Syrian Accountability Act (PL 108-175), SAR is subject to legislatively authorized penalties exclusive of export sanctions.

Syria is strategically positioned, as indicated in the diagram below. With its pivotal position in the Middle East and its untested leadership (Miller 2020), Syria is constantly reviewing and evaluating its internal and regional policies. The Syrian policymakers have attempted to maintain open lines of communication with the US as they pursue what they believe is their national interests. On rare occasion, Syria has collaborated with the US to chase after some terrorist militias that both US and Syria oppose. Otherwise, SAR has conflicted with America concerning the military campaign in Iraq since 2003 (Aita 2020).

Furthermore, Syria has enabled the intrusion of anti-U.S. fighters into Iraq. America is also concerned about Syria's intention to expand its weapon of mass destruction ability, a charge that they vehemently deny. Assad's regime affects and continues to impact America's realization of its objectives in the territory. For example, the presence of Syria in Damascus is damaging and complex concerning resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, inducting peace and prosperity in Iraq. The American administration will continue to scratch its head due to Syria's dictatorial nature of Syrian politics. The dilapidated economy of Syria operates as Russian models, and if successor regimes are led by Islamic fundamentalists, the US status in Syria shall be ill-disposed. The Islamic fundamentalists can support terrorist groups and adopt policies that pose a potential threat in Syria Conflict.

***The Strategic Position of Syria in Middle East (Source: Aita 2020)***



America is the single principal patron to the humanitarian rejoinder in Syria. Since the conflict commenced, the US has spent over \$12.2 billion in humanitarian aid for vulnerable refugees and displaced Syrians (Trucman Center 2021). The humanitarian assistance from the US spreads to 4.8M people within 14 governorates in Syria every month. From 2012 to 2018, the US offered non-humanitarian help to reinforce the opposition in Syria. For example, the US supported civil society organizations to pawn the influence of extremist allies and disenfranchise their capacity to recruit youths (US Department of State 2021). The US has supported independent media outlets to counter regime narratives, strengthen education infrastructure and non-lethal aid to the Free Syrian Army and police to protect communities resistant to terrorist groups.

The relationship between Syria and the US has deteriorated over the past several years and worsened from 2003 to 2009 (Trucman Center). The most significant concern for America's in Syria's facilitation/ act of being a transit point for foreign troops in going to Iraq. Besides, Syria has refused to deport Iraq's former president Saddam Hussein cohorts from Syria who supports Iraq's insurgency and its protection of the Palestinian leadership rejectionist groups in Damascus. America has made several attempts to revisit Syria policy in the wake of changes in the land. For example, the US engaged with Syria to generate a lasting solution and discover areas of mutual interest. The consensus would reduce tension in the country and enhance peace and prosperity in the Gulf region (Trucman Center). The countries did not get a resolution, and instead, Syria defied calls for Syrian's freedom and dignity. The outcome was rage, demonstrations and tension across SAR that sparked the armed conflict that is more than a decade old, more than a million people have perished, and a vast population (more than 12M) displaced beyond the country's borders. To date, no military solution to the Syrian war has worked successfully (Trucman Center).

The American government has partnered with independent agencies such as Global Coalition to wane terrorist power and, more so, ISIS to end terrorist operations in Syria. In March 2019, the Global Coalition and local partnership triumphantly defeated ISIS (Ivanciu 2016). The coalition has supported civilians in the liberated areas and facilitated the return of refugees and displaced persons. Also, the success of the collaborations has promoted justice and accountability efforts in Iraq and Syria.

### ***Modalities US Can Adopt to Work with Russia to Contain the Threat of Iran in Syria***

#### ***The Role and Engagement of Israel and Iran in Syrian Conflict***

The relationship between Russia and Iran is peculiar and antagonistic. The two nations have a historical relationship since World War II that saw Russia occupy northern Iran. The move aroused suspicion and mistrust among Iranians (Suchov 2017). Despite the non-trustworthy relationship and having differing interests, Russia and Iran have nurtured a multifaceted relationship in Syria. The Russian- Iranian collaboration in Syria and the meeting results between Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Vladimir Putin from Russia in June 2019 was the inception of cooperation (Davis 2021). According to Putin, the partnership between Russia and Iran is multilateral. The phobia catalyzed that the US was in arms to overthrow Assad and replace the leadership with an approachable government similar to what the US has previously done in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) (Suchov 2017). The Russian government and President Putin was also afraid of losing its role and interests in Syria since it had conceded its support in Ukraine.

Further, the revolution of Ukraine in 2014 paved the way for pro-Western leadership in Kiev. The loss fueled Russian fear of US activities in Syria. In addition, Syria and Russia have a historical relationship since Cold War. Russia supported Syria's independence in 1946 and offered military help to Syrian Arab Army ties that exist until today (Khatib 2020). Another factor contributing to strengthening relations between Russia and Iran was the general concern that the dethroning of Assad would permit Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to use Syrian and Iranian land to fascinate more fighters and spread terrorism in Russia.

On the other hand, because of the Syrian civil war, Iranian leaders were shaken by the escalating number of extremist groups such as the Islamic State and the Support the US and Europe accorded the rebel groups. Furthermore, the US and European Union offered the Syrian regime and militia weaponry. For example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force partnered forcefully with the Russian military and Syrian rule and executed strikes from a Russian combat aircraft in the Mediterranean Sea (Cloud 2021). Contrary, Iranian leaders have optimized their presence and activity in Syria to counter Israel. For instance, Iran supported the expansion and development of Hezbollah from Lebanon in Syria who increased its cache of armory from Syria. Hezbollah empowered and advised non-state cohorts in Syria (Somin 2021). The militia groups possess advanced weapons and a broad workforce due to frequent recruitment of militias which poses a threat to striking Israel targets. Russia and Iran have worked jointly in Syria to serve their self-interests.

### ***The Role of Future Kurds and Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria***

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was born in 2015, and its objective was to fight ISIS in northwest Syria. The US still needs the input of SDF since it has helped to recapture City of Raqqa, the de facto capital city of ISIS (Williams 2021). To achieve its mission, the US has invested in training more Syrian Kurdish fighters as an entity of Syria's border force in northern Syria. American troops and SDF have dissuaded nations such as Turkey from trespassing Syrian borders (Yacubian 2020). Conversely, Kurds continue to push for democracy and self-rule in Syria since they are victims of historical discrimination in Syria.

SAR perceives itself as an Arab state, but the country is ethnically distinct from the Kurdish population in Damascus and other regions along the Syrian borders with Iraq and Turkey.

Syrian Kurds form approximately 10 percent of the entire population (They demand greater autonomy in the government but face the handicap of being denied Syrian citizenship). Previous Syrian regimes have oppressed Kurdish political leaders and confiscated their land, distributed to Syrian Arabs to assimilate them and foster division among various Kurdish groups (Anderson 2021). Unlike the Iraqi Kurds, who aim at acquiring a state of their own, the Syrian Kurds demand their freedom and aspire to preserve their culture and ethnicity in the country.

### The Role of EU in Syrian Conflict Resolution

The EU underrated the pivotal role of justice and accountability in the political and social realms in the Syria conflict. It has not played a fundamental role in curbing the dissent but extended its relations with Syria via European neighborhood policy and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to cause political and financial reforms (McCurdy 2020). EU is harshly affected by the war in Syria and lost the battle by focusing on issuing sanctions and implementing stringent political procedures that have resulted in the loss of political leverage. The sanctions jeopardized the livelihoods of Syrians and quickened the growth of a rapacious war economy.

### **Conclusion**

Syria still remains as a heaven for radical groups, which is against the memorandum of understanding between the US and Syria in the lens of former US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Syria was expected to wind up the issue of harboring terrorists permanently. America should not deter its effort to contain the Syria conflict. The impact of the war not only affects Syria and but also spills over to the neighboring nations and internationally. The Syrian refugee influx in host countries is overwhelming and burdening their economies. Worse still, the conflict has culminated in a political crisis that lurks the basis of European cooperation. The dispute threatens the stability of the US and its allies. The Syrian stalemate is not a significant threat to Israel's security but fulfills Israel's short-term interest. The US has to change tactic and weaken Assad's regime to affect the outcome of the war (McCurdy 2020). Israel, unlike the US, is a passive partaker in conflict resolution, and its strategy will entail monitoring events closely to protect its territory and its people. A weakened Syria regime will be a gateway to enhanced security and inspire less dramatic terrorist attacks globally.

### **Bibliography**

1. Al-Masri, Abdulrahman. "Limited and Constrained: The Biden Administration and the Prospects of a Syria Policy." Atlantic Council. Last modified December 3, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/limited-and-constrained-the-biden-administration-and-the-prospects-of-a-syria-policy/>.
2. Aita, Samir. 2020. "The Unintended Consequences of US and European Unilateral Measures on Syria's Economy". Georgia: The Carter Center.
3. Anderson, Kerry B. "How New US Administration Will Approach Syria Conflict." Arab News. Last modified January 25, 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1798356>.
4. Cloud, David S. "Inside US Troops' Stronghold in Syria, a Question of How Long Biden Will Keep Them There." Military.com. Last modified March 13, 2021. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/13/inside-us-troops-stronghold-syria-question-of-how-long-biden-will-keep-them-there.html>.
5. Cook, Steven A. "Top Conflicts to Watch in 2021: What's Next for Syria." Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified January 21, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/top-conflicts-watch-2021-whats-next-syria>.
6. Davis, Daniel. "There Are No Victories Left to Win for US Troops in Iraq and Syria. It Is Time for Biden To Bring Them Home." Breaking News & Top Stories | Business Insider Africa. Last modified April 12, 2021. <https://africa.businessinsider.com/politics/there-are-no-victories-left-to-win-for-us-troops-in-iraq-and-syria-its-time-for-biden>.

7. Dent, Elizabeth and Tabatai, Anane. "Iran Is in Syria to Stay." Foreign Affairs. Last modified December 14, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2020-12-14/iran-syria-stay>.
8. Feltman, Jeffrey, and Hrair Balian. "The United States Needs a New Syria Policy." Brookings. Last modified February 5, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/29/the-united-states-needs-a-new-syria-policy/>.
9. Hof, Fredric C. "The United States in Syria: Why It Still Matters." Atlantic Council. Last modified September 24, 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-united-states-in-syria-why-it-still-matters/>.
10. IVANCIU, Cosmin. "THE STATUS OF ARMED CONFLICTS. CASE STUDY: THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA." *SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND EDUCATION IN THE AIR FORCE* 18, no. 2 (2016), 583-594. doi:10.19062/2247-3173.2016.18.2.13.
11. Khatib, Lina. "Bashar Al-Assad's Hollow Victory." Foreign Affairs. Last modified January 17, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2020-01-17/bashar-al-assads-hollow-victory>.
12. Knickmeyer, Ellen. "Rivals seeking to gain as Biden mulls approach to Syrian war." Associated Press News. Last modified March 23, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-us-approach-syria-war>.
13. McCurdy, Daphne. "What America Can Learn from Its Mistakes in Syria." War on the Rocks. Last modified February 3, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/what-america-can-learn-from-its-mistakes-in-syria/>.
14. Miller, Chris. "After Five Years of Fighting in Syria, Putin Has Gotten What He Wants." Foreign Policy. Last modified October 8, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/08/after-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria-putin-has-gotten-what-he-wants/>.
15. Ratney, Michael A. "Five Conundrums: The United States and the Conflict in Syria." Institute for National Strategic Studies. Last modified July 31, 2019. <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1921848/five-conundrums-the-united-states-and-the-conflict-in-syria/>.
16. Somin, Ilya. "Our airstrikes in Syria may be legal. That doesn't mean our mission there is." The Washington Post. Last modified March 8, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/08/syria-constitution-war-powers-strikes-illegal/>.
17. Suchkov, Maksim. "Moscow's Leverage in Syria is Strong, but Limited." Russia in Global Affairs. Last modified December 11, 2017. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/moscows-leverage-in-syria-is-strong-but-limited/>.
18. Truman Center. "What IS the U.S. Interest in Syria?" Truman Center. Last modified May 5, 2021. <https://trumancenter.org/doctrine-blog/what-is-the-u-s-interest-in-syria/>.
19. US Department of State. "U.S. Relations with Syria." United States Department of State. Last modified May 6, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/>.
20. Williams, Kate B. "In Syria, US Commanders Hold the Line -And Wait for Biden." Defense One. Last modified March 21, 2021. <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/03/syria-us-commanders-hold-line-and-wait-biden/>.
21. Yacoubian, Mona. "Mona Yacoubian on Syria's Future After Nine Years of Conflict." United States Institute of Peace. Last modified March 11, 2020. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/03/mona-yacoubian-syrias-future-after-nine-years-conflict>.