



# Syria, Turkey, and the Eastern Mediterranean

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*Two Eastern Mediterranean countries—Syria and Turkey—present some of the most vexing problems for U.S. foreign policy today. The Syrian civil war has become a magnet for both terrorists and U.S. adversaries. Turkey, a NATO ally, is facing terrorism and a refugee crisis. Domestically, it is increasingly turning away from democratic principles and making choices that are at odds with the United States. The United States needs to take a new strategic approach to the Eastern Mediterranean, outlined in a CSIS report forthcoming in May 2018. An urgent part of that strategy, outlined here, is recalibrating U.S. policy toward Syria and Turkey.*

U.S. strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean is long overdue for revision. Today's strategy was conceived 70 years ago, when the Soviet Union loomed large, terrorism was not an overriding concern, and the post-World War II order was

American driven. But in 2018, a seven-year war in Syria has created safe havens for jihadi-salafists, triggered the largest refugee crisis since World War II, and eroded state cohesion and control. At the same time, Turkey, Russia, China, and Iran are seeking larger footholds in the region that will undermine the arrangements that have secured the United States and its allies. U.S. interests in the region continue to be great, but the region is changing in ways that harm those interests, and U.S. influence is diminishing.

It is time for the United States to create a new strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean that builds on common transatlantic interests, ensures European unity and security, provides greater stability in the Middle East, and safeguards state capacity against a myriad of strengthening nonstate actors. This strategy hinges on two propositions.

## *How the United States addresses challenges in Syria and Turkey will shape the region's future, as well as the United States' role in it.*

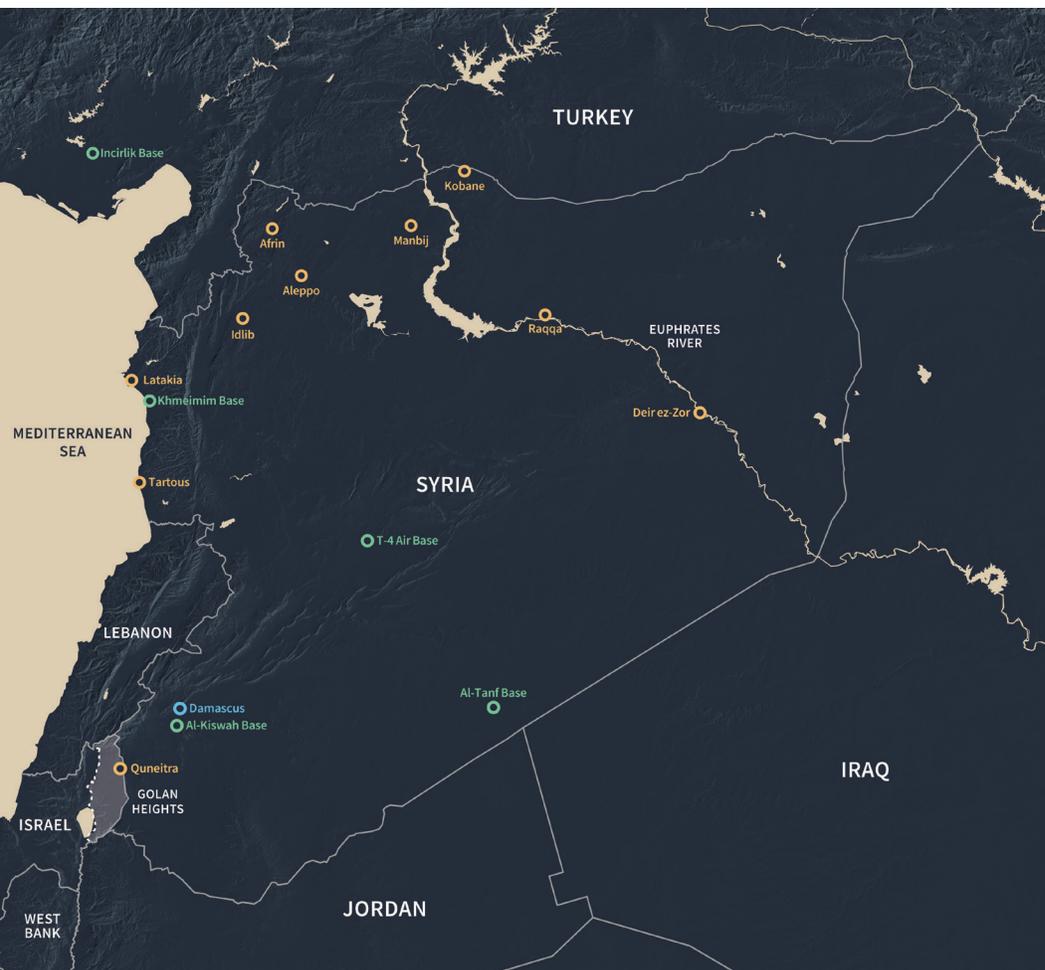
First, the United States has an interest in resolving the Syria conflict in ways that advance core U.S. interests. This requires sober acknowledgment that, despite the Bashar al-Assad regime's extraordinary brutality, a unified Syrian state is preferable to chaos. An unending civil war would spur greater regional destabilization, further weaken U.S. allies, and more deeply entrench the Iranian and Russian presence in the region. U.S. military operations against jihadi-salafists are important, but they must be part of a broader political strategy that seeks stability in Syria. We do not take this decision lightly, as there are wider U.S. policy and moral consequences to support the position that a murderous regime should regain control over Syria.

Second, for the sake of U.S. interests and the future cohesion of NATO, as well as the transatlantic relationship, the United States must recalibrate its relationship with

Turkey to narrow the gap between U.S. and Turkish objectives and interests in the region, while developing complements or, if necessary, alternatives to the strategic benefits and assets Turkey provides.

Only by taking an active policy stance that confronts the region's strategic challenges can the United States rebuild its regional influence and advance its interests. The United States must not rest on what once existed, but instead it must determine what the region's future should look like. How the United States addresses challenges in Syria and Turkey will shape the region's future, as well as the United States' role in it.

## STRATEGIC GOAL 1: RESOLVE THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AND REDUCE IRANIAN AND RUSSIAN POWER PROJECTION



The prolongation of Syria's now-seven-year conflict undermines U.S. strategic interests. Waves of refugees have destabilized Europe, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon; jihadi-salafists have used Syria as a base to coordinate attacks in Europe and beyond; Russia is using conflict in Syria to

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project power and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean; and Iran is using Syria as a forward operating base and bridge to the Mediterranean Sea. The United States must engage meaningfully to end the conflict in Syria so that Syria's internal problems and divisions do not continue to threaten U.S. interests or export instability to Syria's neighbors and to Europe.

None of the options the United States faces are attractive. Conditions were different when the uprising in Syria started in

2011, but with each successive year of U.S. policy inaction, U.S. influence has declined, while that of Russia, Turkey, and Iran has increased. These countries' military interventions have reshaped Syria's political landscape in ways that have sidelined the United States. Even as the United States has committed approximately 2,000 troops to fighting the Islamic State group (ISG) and remains one of the largest donors to refugee and humanitarian aid efforts—providing \$7.4 billion in assistance since 2011—its political and diplomatic influence is dwarfed by other external actors. The United States has been largely peripheral to the UN-led Geneva process (which has produced few tangible results in any case), has been even less engaged as an observer to the Russian-Iranian-Turkish-led Astana process, and has played no role in the Russian-led Sochi talks. Expanded military operations in Syria in 2017 to combat the Islamic State group and increased diplomatic discussions with Russia (particularly

focused on deconfliction and cease-fire zones), have not increased U.S. leverage—nor have they sought to.

Part of the problem is that the United States has neither had a clear enough political strategy for Syria nor been sufficiently committed to securing it. To play a role in shaping this post-

conflict environment, the United States will have to redouble its diplomatic efforts to effect reconciliation within formerly rebellious areas, and it should encourage Kurds and the regime to agree on limited self-administration in the Kurdish region. This will require U.S. government engagement at the highest levels with numerous actors including Russia and Turkey. The parameters that former secretary of state Rex Tillerson outlined on January 17, 2018, are a practical starting point.<sup>1</sup> The United States should neither directly assist the Syrian regime nor provide reconstruction aid for regime-held territory until a post-conflict political agreement is negotiated and guarantees of compliance are enforced. A case can also be made (though Tillerson argued against it) for U.S. reconstruction assistance in areas controlled by U.S.-allied forces. An eventual return of government control should reduce the need to deploy external forces within Syria, including Russian, Turkish, Iranian, and U.S. forces.

The United States cannot solve Syria's deep internal problems, nor is it in a position to decide who governs Syria. U.S. actions in Syria should work to maximize U.S. influence in negotiations over the future of Syria. It should seek to promote greater autonomy for areas that seek it, and it should work to minimize the enduring presence of foreign forces in the country.

## STRATEGIC GOAL 2: ADDRESS GROWING POLICY DIVERGENCE WITH TURKEY



Policy differences between the United States and Turkey over Syria have brought the two NATO allies closer to conflict. They occur in a context in which disagreements between the countries have broadened and deepened over

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the last decade. These differences have reached a likely inflection point. Having facilitated the Islamic State's rise in Syria to fight the Assad regime, Turkey now prioritizes waging war against Syrian Kurds instead of fighting the ISG, and Turkey coordinates more closely with Russia and Iran over Syria than with fellow NATO members.

In addition, Turkey's antidemocratic, neo-Ottoman slide also affects relations with the United States and Europe. Through constant purges, prolonged detentions, and arrests, Turkey undermines human rights and democratic institutions, and also threatens its own future political and economic stability. The announcement of snap parliamentary and presidential elections for June 24 will likely secure President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership for the next five years and will deepen Turkey's authoritarian tendencies and tensions with the West.

The Turkish government has directly accused the United States of supporting the July 2016 military coup attempt, pointing to the presence in the United States of exiled social-religious leader Fethullah Gülen as proof. In July 2016, the Turkish government temporarily closed the airspace over Incirlik and cut electricity to the air base following the failed coup<sup>2</sup>, and it publicly accused senior-ranking U.S. military officials of involvement in the coup. Meanwhile, senior Turkish government officials openly fan anti-American sentiment in Turkey. Whether President Erdoğan believes that the United

States supported the coup attempt or is exploiting the episode for political and nationalistic purposes, growing mistrust complicates ties between Turkey and other NATO members. Turkey has announced that it intends to purchase

Russia's S-400 missile defense system, which is incompatible with NATO systems, jeopardizes NATO's missile defense capabilities, and whose purchase likely violates U.S. sanctions against Russia.<sup>3</sup> Close military cooperation with Russia could greatly complicate Turkey's participation in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, as there is concern that sophisticated F-35 technology could be transferred to Russia.

Turkey's repeated military interventions into Syria have obstructed U.S. efforts to eliminate the ISG's presence in Syria, as allied Kurdish forces left the front lines of the anti-ISG battle to defend areas from Turkish and Turkish-backed forces. As those forces begin to operate in close proximity to U.S. troops, the risk of a clash grows. If that happens, it will have dire consequences.

Turkey and the United States have been at a policy stalemate for some time. Turkey is neither an adversary in the conventional sense nor completely an ally.<sup>4</sup> Ties are unlikely ever to return to the intimacy of the Cold War, and even so, a formal break in the relationship is unlikely. But by coming to terms with having a less reliable NATO partner, the United States must acknowledge that bilateral relations cannot be bound by the old shared assumptions. The United States must pursue a two-pronged strategy that attempts to reinvest in the Euro-Atlantic-Turkish relationship, while simultaneously developing complements or, if necessary, alternative assets and partnerships with other regional actors to provide strategic benefits and military assets similar to those that Turkey has provided. The United States should enhance its regional partnerships with Greece and Cyprus, while reinvigorating ties to Turkish civil society both inside and outside of Turkey. By doing so, the United States can attempt to find a new, more manageable equilibrium where Turkish hostility and actions do not undermine U.S. interests and policy, all within a broader U.S. strategy toward the Eastern Mediterranean.

## CONCLUSION

The Eastern Mediterranean is not the only region where the absence of a U.S. regional strategy has harmed U.S. interests, but it is one of the most important. Challenges there reach into core U.S. interests in Europe and in the Middle East. It is vital for the United States to diminish

current and potential activities of U.S. adversaries in the region, Russia and Iran in particular, as their actions imperil U.S. regional allies such as Israel, Jordan, and Greece.

The United States cannot resuscitate the architecture it erected at the dawn of the Cold War, and it should not seek to do so. Instead, it must articulate what the United States has at stake in the region now and in the future. It must be clear-eyed both about its enduring interests and its urgent priorities—Syria and Turkey—and it must use the tools at its disposal to engage comprehensively with allies in the region.

A clear alignment of tools and interests is what the United States did to great effect in the middle of the twentieth century. That is what it must do again with urgency in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria," U.S. Department of State, January 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm>
2. F. Brinley Bruton, Abigail Williams, and Courtney Kube, "Incirlik Air Base: Post-Coup Power Cut Remains at U.S. Site," NBC News, July 21, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/turkey-military-coup/incirlik-air-base-post-coup-power-cut-remains-u-s-n613086>.
3. "Turkey's \$2bn Arms Deal with Russia Faces Hurdles, and Possible Sanctions," *The Economist*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21731832-vladimir-putin-wants-create-rift-within-nato-does-he-really-want-hand-russian>.
4. Turkey's leadership seems to have a similar view. In discussing U.S. support for Syrian Kurds, President Erdoğan has asked, "How can a strategic partner do this to a partner?" See Ece Toksabay and Lisa Barrington, "Turkey's Erdogan Says Military Operation to Make Big Sweep East across Syria," Reuters, January 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-syria/turkeys-erdogan-says-military-operation-to-make-big-sweep-east-across-syria-idUSKBN1FF1R0>

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