Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition

A Case Study of Eastern Syria

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THE ISSUE

■ For the United States, civilian stabilization assistance in fragile states represents a potentially significant tool in the context of geopolitical competition because supporting locally legitimate political actors helps them stand up against external meddling.

■ In eastern Syria, U.S. policymakers have sought to leverage stabilization efforts to counter Iranian and Russian influence, which resulted in limited success and moral dilemmas.

■ In order for stabilization aid to be an effective means of advancing U.S. interests amid geopolitical competition, the United States needs to develop a stabilization strategy tied to a viable political end state and commit to more reliable, longer-term engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The United States must increasingly pursue its national interests in a geopolitical environment marked by competition with rival powers. As the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) underscores, “[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is the primary concern in U.S. National Security.” To be sure, debates are ongoing as to whether “great power competition” should be the organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy, and the incoming Biden administration will likely not view international relations solely through a zero-sum prism as the Trump administration did. However, there is little doubt that the United States now faces a transition to a multipolar world marked by increased contestation with rival states.

Although the overriding concern with such competition is the increased risk of direct confrontation with geopolitical or regional rivals, the United States also increasingly competes with nation-state adversaries in the “gray zone,” using tools in the “contested arena somewhere between routine statecraft and open warfare.” This competition, in turn, is often waged in fragile or conflict-affected states where external actors are able to exploit power vacuums to expand influence with little accountability. To respond to these threats, the U.S. National Security Strategy proclaims that the United States will “compete with all tools of national power” against competitors, not just high-end military tools.

The United States already has one such tool to advance this objective: civilian stabilization assistance. Though U.S. policymakers have largely discussed stabilization policy separately from deliberations about competition with rival powers, in reality, these two imperatives are linked. Supporting locally legitimate political actors helps them stand up against external meddling and influence.

Yet much more needs to be known about whether and how, in practice, stabilization assistance can advance U.S. interests in the context of geopolitical competition.
stabilization efforts in eastern Syria provide an informative case study to begin to answer this question. While the U.S. stabilization strategy in Syria has focused primarily on achieving an enduring defeat of the Islamic State, senior U.S. policymakers and official communications from early in the Trump administration suggested that such assistance could also serve as an effective tool to counter Iranian and Russian influence. (Although Iran is not a great power by any conventional definition—and some would argue that a U.S. preoccupation with Iran comes at the expense of effectively countering genuine great powers—the NDS has identified Iran as a regional competitor that “is competing across all dimensions of power.” Further, Iran’s close cooperation with Russia and the two countries’ overlapping, though not identical, goals in Syria mean that examining Syria’s stabilization through the prism of nation-state competition can be informative.)

The record in eastern Syria indicates some preliminary lessons on the opportunities, challenges, and complexities of using stabilization assistance as a tool for advancing U.S. interests in the context of geopolitical competition.

**U.S. Stabilization Assistance in Syria**

As part of the U.S.-led military campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (D-ISIS), U.S. stabilization assistance has followed in the wake of military operations to fill the power vacuum and help liberated communities recover after years of brutal Islamic State rule. In the summer of 2017, with the offensive to retake Raqqa—the capital of the Islamic State’s caliphate—in full swing, the United States deployed a small group of State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) civilians alongside the U.S. military to oversee this programming. Former Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State Brett McGurk explained the stabilization strategy as an effort to “get people back into their homes, retaining a permissive environment.”

While the primary goal of stabilization efforts has been to prevent the return of the Islamic State, U.S. officials subsequently noted that a second-order objective of U.S. assistance programs has been to deter the Assad regime and its patrons, Russia and Iran. As former U.S. Special representative for Syria engagement James Jeffrey recently noted, “[t]he United States has readjusted its focus in the Middle East from counterterrorism and combat reconstruction to great power competition . . . [because] the Middle East is one of the major theaters for such competition.” Recent official documents from USAID and the State Department, launching new stabilization programs, cite “countering malign actors” or “end[ing] the presence of Iranian forces and proxies in Syria” as objectives. By coupling U.S. troop presence—albeit one that is legally authorized only for a D-ISIS mission—with soft-power engagement, the United States has in effect denied its adversaries territory and potentially blocked them from projecting influence in large swathes of Syria.

The U.S. stabilization approach in eastern Syria has rested on three key pillars:

**Service Delivery:** The bulk of U.S. assistance focuses on restoring essential services. Programs aim to first clear mines and rubble from violence-affected areas and then repair basic infrastructure such as water stations, electrical networks, and irrigation systems. Projects have also invested heavily in refurbishing schools and providing psycho-social support, as local residents cite education as a key priority.

**Governance and “Soft” Stabilization:** The United States also aims to cultivate governance in liberated areas, taking both a bottom-up and top-down approach. Some programs have sought to build the capacity of newly formed local councils and inculcate them with principles of good governance in an effort to effectively serve their communities, while other projects have aimed to empower grassroots community-based organizations to ensure that local civil society is engaged in the recovery process. As part of this effort, the United States has focused on diluting the political influence of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has links to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the group that controls the area. This represents an effort to both foster inclusive governance and assuage the concerns of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partner Turkey, which has fought a decades-long conflict with the PKK.

**Tribal Engagement:** Because of the outsized role that tribes play in this region, the United States has also sought
to incorporate key tribal leaders into local governance structures, broker negotiations between them and the SDF—the coalition’s local partner—and solicit tribal input on strategic decisions.

**IRANIAN AND RUSSIAN STABILIZATION-TYPE ACTIVITIES**

While Russia and Iran’s military activities in Syria have attracted overwhelming attention, both countries also seek to promote their soft power through stabilization-type projects in the gray zone. Unlike the United States, whose military and stabilization presence is limited to northeast Syria, Russia and Iran’s efforts span the entire country. Understanding the ways in which they wield influence on the ground in areas where they contend with the United States directly, and how those relate to their nationwide efforts, is informative for U.S. policymakers seeking to determine whether stabilization assistance can serve as an effective tool in the context of geopolitical competition.

**IRAN**

Iran has a robust presence on the ground, including in the key region of Deir Ezzour, which is divided between regime-held territory and SDF-held territory, putting it in close proximity to U.S. forces. Although Iran does not utilize the term “stabilization,” in fact, many of its gray-zone activities fall into similar categories as U.S. efforts: service delivery, soft stabilization, and tribal engagement. Moreover, given its long-standing alliance with the Syrian regime and historical ties to the country, Iran’s efforts in this realm significantly predate and exceed that of the United States.

**Service Delivery and Relief:** Iran presents itself as a champion for the downtrodden in Syria. Iranian-affiliated social organizations such as Jihad al-Bina, the social service and development arm of Hezbollah, as well as other charities, such as the Hussein Organization, carry out relief work in regime-held areas of Deir Ezzour with activities that in many ways parallel those of the United States. These organizations provide food baskets to needy residents, fund private home repairs, rehabilitate water pipes, and supply generators to provide electricity for critical infrastructure. More recently, to help with the Covid-19 response, Iran set up several medical stations in Deir Ezzour. (Although some of these activities could be classified as humanitarian aid rather than stabilization, according to U.S. definitions, they are stabilization because they are delivered to advance political objectives and do not adhere to humanitarian principles.)

**Soft Stabilization:** Iran also projects its influence by cultural and religious means. Both the Iranian government and Iranian civil society provide financial support for needy Syrian students to enroll in Iranian-funded schools, including for Persian language study, and pay for them to travel to and study in Iran. Iran also offers more explicitly religious education across the country, including in regime-held territory in the east. This includes dozens of religious seminaries, several faculties of religious education, and the country’s first Shiite university since the early-2000s.

More broadly, Iran, both directly and through its proxies, relies on Shia proselytization to expand its influence throughout Syria. Iranian actors project the Shiite call to prayer from minarets of mosques in areas where it has gained control, set up shrines in places with religious, historical significance, and have
established Husseiniyya—congregation halls for Shia ceremonies—throughout Deir Ezzour province. In addition, Iran purchased large swathes of Syrian real estate under a controversial property law, thus allowing it to offer guaranteed housing to hundreds of Shia recruits and their families.

**Tribal Engagement:** Iran has capitalized on the power vacuum in eastern Syria to garner support from tribal leaders, many of whom have sought to resurrect their status after suffering at the hands of Islamic State or Syrian opposition forces. In particular, Iran has parlayed its decades-long relationship with the Baggara tribe into current collaboration on religious centers and schools.

**RUSSIA**

Russia’s stabilization strategy is focused on facilitating the Assad regime’s steady incorporation of territory and reinstatement of central administrative control following successful counterinsurgency operations. While Russia’s stabilization-type activities on the ground are limited, it couples these efforts with disinformation campaigns in the digital space and diplomatic leverage as a permanent member of the UN Security Council—both of which are beyond the scope of this paper—to project outsized influence.

**Service Delivery and Relief:** Russia relies on at least 13 relief organizations, most linked directly to the Russian government or the Russian Orthodox Church, to deliver basic aid in Syria. The Center for Reconciliation of Conflicting Sides (CRCSS) in Syria, tied to the Ministry of Defense, delivers the bulk of assistance, primarily in the form of food baskets, according to the state-owned Russian News Agency. While many of the deliveries have occurred via one-off visits, CRCSS has focused repeated engagement on Deir Ezzour city. As with Iran, many of these activities would normally be considered humanitarian aid, but they are delivered to advance political objectives and do not adhere to humanitarian principles.

**Soft Stabilization:** Russia’s soft stabilization efforts have been more ostentatious and symbolic than meaningful and deep. Recently, Russian officials and the Russian Orthodox Church announced that they would construct a replica of the Hagia Sophia church in Homs, Syria after President Erdogan of Turkey controversially reconverted the original—an UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Istanbul—into a mosque. Russia similarly leveraged its cultural diplomacy when a Russian orchestra performed at the ruins of Palmyra in Syria, just two months after the site was recaptured from the Islamic State. Education is another vector for Russian influence. The number of Syrians studying in Russian universities and military schools on Russian government scholarships or studying the Russian language in Syrian institutions has risen, albeit slowly, since Moscow’s military intervention in 2015.

**Tribal Engagement:** As the broker of a number of “reconciliation” deals between the opposition and the regime, Russia has engaged with key tribes (as well as with other local power brokers from various ethnic and religious groups) to coordinate the terms of these agreements. In Deraa, in particular, key tribes played a critical role in negotiating a reconciliation deal with the Russian military. Much of Russian tribal engagement has taken place at Khmeimim Air Base, presumably as a reminder of Russia’s military dominance in Syria.

**SOFT POWER AS A TOOL OF GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION**

Surveying the record from eastern Syria indicates some preliminary lessons on the opportunities, challenges, and complexities of using stabilization assistance as a tool to advance U.S. interests in the context of geopolitical competition. In some cases, Russian or Iranian activity in Syria undermined or obviated U.S. stabilization efforts. In other instances, U.S. assistance programs that aimed to push back on Russian and Iranian influence fell short for their own reasons. For their part, Iranian and Russian efforts also often faced challenges. Key lessons include:

**Service delivery must go hand in hand with sustained engagement on local governance to be effective at winning support, especially in contested spaces.** In theory, the United States’ focus on service delivery could have represented a crucial means of expanding American influence. However, in practice, the experience of eastern Syria indicates that service delivery alone does not always win support for either side.

Consider the example of Hajin, a strategic crossroads dividing regime and SDF-held territory in Deir Ezzour. Although located in the latter, Hajin’s frontline location makes it a key smuggling route between the two zones. Its residents maintain familial and personal ties with those in regime-held areas, prompting the United States, Russia, and Iran to all try to project influence there. In February 2019, a Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) convoy from regime-controlled areas arrived with food baskets to the Hajin area, supported by the Russian military. Though
discontentment among locals and the lack of inclusive governance has led to widespread
where the United States has also provided services, Indeed, in other, more impoverished parts of Deir Ezzour
formation caused tensions with the local community. The success is attributable to both U.S. support for service
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For its part, the United States has provided hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of stabilization assistance to Hajin focused on clean-up campaigns and the rehabilitation of agricultural and water stations. And because Hajin remains one of the more stable towns in Deir Ezzour, and because residents reportedly have a positive relationship with the SDF there, these stabilization efforts might be viewed as successful. But upon closer examination, this success is attributable to both U.S. support for service delivery and the development of a more representative local council after the SDF’s initial unilateral attempts at council formation caused tensions with the local community. Indeed, in other, more impoverished parts of Deir Ezzour where the United States has also provided services, the lack of inclusive governance has led to widespread discontentment among locals and protests against the SDF.

The disconnect between the United States’ political strategy in the northeast and its political engagement on Syria as a whole has hindered U.S. efforts to project influence. On the other hand, Iran and Russia’s reliance on sectarianism or force may also be ineffective. Washington’s lack of a clearly stated political vision for eastern Syria has undermined its efforts to establish legitimate governance structures that can peaceably manage conflict. The United States has long been ambivalent about conferring political authority to the SDF due to its links to the PKK, so its stabilization efforts in eastern Syria have been disconnected from the broader political negotiations on Syria taking place under the auspices of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Consequently, it is unclear what end state for eastern Syria the United States is ultimately seeking. And without a desired political objective for eastern Syria to point to, the United States is limited in its ability to garner local buy-in. This disconnect puts the United States at an inherent disadvantage vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. U.S. stabilization efforts are focused exclusively on the northeast, which further compounds the challenge because Russia and Iran’s efforts encompass all of Syria. As a result, their minimal engagement in the east can take on outsized importance as one piece in a broader strategy to stabilize the country.

President Trump’s abrupt withdrawal announcements from Syria have further diminished U.S. efforts to project influence. Locals are hesitant to unequivocally side with a foreign patron whose commitment is so uncertain and whose decision in October 2019, in particular, enabled a Turkish incursion that led to over 100,000 displaced and was widely seen as a betrayal of its partners. Indeed, Russia capitalized on the U.S. withdrawal at that time to further project its own soft power. Between October 2019 and April 2020, over 77 percent of Ministry of Defense-linked CRCSS assistance was delivered to the Raqqa and Hassakeh governorates, in the vicinity of the U.S. withdrawal. While Biden will likely bring a more coherent and stable U.S. policy, the capricious decisionmaking of his predecessor, coupled with limited domestic U.S. appetite to engage in Syria, will complicate efforts to fully reverse the damage to U.S. credibility.

Iran, and to a lesser extent Russia, may have the opposite problem when compared to the United States: rather than a muddled approach, they are too forceful in projecting their political intentions onto the area. Even when aiming to project soft power, Iran often relies on local and foreign fighters. Because service provision is effectively
an extension of Iran’s military presence, oftentimes, local residents are coerced or threatened into accepting the assistance lest they face retribution. Similarly, the bulk of Russian assistance is delivered through the military police or the CRCSS. Residents in areas previously held by the opposition that were retaken by the regime through Russian-brokered “reconciliation” agreements are often nervous to accept Russian assistance for fear that they will be arrested or otherwise punished when they show up for aid deliveries. This highlights the challenges of reimposing an unpopular regime, even when it provides services.

Moreover, Iran employs an overtly sectarian approach to project influence—so much so that within the Iranian security apparatus, itself there is a divide in opinion regarding the degree to which Iran should be ostentatiously employing sectarian tactics abroad. Unsurprisingly, many Syrians bristle at these heavy-handed sectarian approaches.

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Russia and Iran’s reliance on these blunt tools of influence could potentially provide an opening for the United States. Rather than tackle Iranian and Russian efforts head on, the United States could step aside and let their overreach lead to inevitable backlash. Alternatively, the United States could offer non-sectarian alternative programs such as building non-religious community centers or offering non-sectarian education services. Again, however, this would require the United States to provide a more consistent and clear commitment than it has up to this point.

Successful tribal engagement requires a long-term, robust approach. For the United States, supporting tribal reconciliation efforts and engaging key tribal leaders in local governance have theoretically been key modes of stabilization assistance, at least in part to dilute PKK influence and avoid imposing Kurdish rule in non-Kurdish areas. In practice, however, using these approaches effectively would require playing a longer game, with more consistent civilian engagement, than the United States has been willing to pursue.

Tribal dynamics in Syria are nuanced and complicated. Years of conflict and co-option by the Islamic State and the regime have divided already fragmented tribes—clan leaders within the same broader tribe have adopted different allegiances—and have sometimes led to frictions or retributive violence. Thus, tribal engagement as a means to push back against Iranian influence would require delicate handling and a sophisticated understanding of the relationships, or risk further destabilizing the environment. Yet, the United States has had a limited civilian presence on the ground and short deployment rotations for both civilians and military civil affairs teams, precluding the ability to develop long-term relationships and deep local knowledge and rendering most U.S. tribal engagement episodic and superficial.

By contrast, Iran has leveraged long-standing, persistent relationships with certain tribes. Tehran has parlayed its decades-long affiliation with the (Sunni) Baggara tribe into current collaboration on religious schools and centers and offered financial incentives that have led to the Baggara now constituting the majority of Iran’s Baqir Brigade—a loyalist militia—in Aleppo and Hasakah. Beyond military and civilian collaboration inside Syria, Iran has also been willing to provide unfettered support outside the country, such as sending tribal leaders to Iran to meet with Iranian dignitaries and even Supreme Leader Khamenei.

In short, the United States is at a natural disadvantage vis-à-vis Iran when it comes to tribal engagement, given the latter’s geographical proximity and long historical and cultural links to Syria. This asymmetry has been exacerbated by the erratic policies of the Trump presidency but will likely not be overcome by President-elect Biden. As a result, the United States should be humble about its ability to harness tribal engagement as a tool in geopolitical competition.

For the United States, the objectives of pursuing stabilization and competing against geopolitical rivals are sometimes in tension, and a lack of prioritization undermined both goals.

The case of eastern Syria demonstrates that excessive focus on geopolitical competition can distort engagement with local counterparts, often undermining stabilization objectives. For the United States, pushing back against Iranian and Russian influence has never been more than
a secondary goal of stabilization programs. Yet the broader shift in U.S. policy toward a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, and the Trump administration’s very public ratcheting up of anti-Iranian rhetoric, shaped local perceptions of U.S. priorities. Some residents of eastern Syria reported discomfort about inadvertently becoming pawns in a great power game and feared aligning too closely with the United States due to the risk of retribution. Others played up the Iranian threat to encourage further U.S. support, which also potentially distorted the effectiveness of U.S. stabilization efforts by obfuscating important drivers of instability that were not related to the Iranian role. Either way, the emphasis on geopolitical competition risked distracting U.S. assistance providers from the predominant goal of stabilization: promoting conditions in which locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.

Furthermore, the case study shows that, in practice, the dual U.S. policy priorities of advancing its position in geopolitical competition and achieving stabilization objectives are not always mutually reinforcing—at least in the immediate term. Under the stabilization heading, the United States has aimed to prevent an Islamic State resurgence and push for a political transition with a modicum of inclusive governance and human rights protection. Under a geopolitical competition rubric, it aimed to marginalize Russian and Iranian influence. But achieving this second goal has been challenging because both Iran and Russia often rely on ruthless means to advance their narrower goal of keeping Assad in power. Counteracting these Russian and Iranian inroads could potentially tempt U.S. policymakers to employ overly aggressive approaches that inadvertently undermine efforts to expand locally legitimate governance under a stabilization heading.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR UNITED STATES: STABILIZATION AS A TOOL IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION**

This brief examination of eastern Syria also indicates broader lessons for the United States as the incoming Biden administration considers how stabilization aid may fit into its foreign policy toolbox. In principle, U.S. stabilization activities potentially could have counteracted Iranian and Russian influence, thus demonstrating how stabilization represents a valuable, under-appreciated tool for American policymakers grappling with gray-zone competition. But in practice, the record has been mixed. Oftentimes, the Trump administration’s own overarching policy ambiguity, bellicose messaging vis-à-vis its adversaries, or specific modes of deploying stabilization assistance undermined its own objectives.

As policymakers look ahead to the future and consider positioning for gray-zone competition elsewhere, the eastern Syria case study suggests five preliminary implications for U.S. foreign policy.

1. **Effectively harnessing stabilization assistance in the context of geopolitical competition would require a persistent and dependable on-the-ground U.S. civilian presence.** Episodic engagement with local counterparts can only allow for limited inroads for increasing U.S. influence—the United States needs civilians who can build relationships with local counterparts and develop institutional memory about local dynamics. Attempting local reconciliation projects without a deep understanding of relevant dynamics often yields only perfunctory gains and can even backfire. This presence is especially important in contexts where the United States is up against adversaries with long-standing historical or cultural ties to the area, which puts the United States at a disadvantage from the outset. The United States’ on-the-ground presence in eastern Syria was always limited to a handful of rotating civilians, and this cohort’s engagement was upended by President Trump’s troop withdrawal announcements in December 2018 and October 2019.

2. **For stabilization assistance to be effective in achieving gray-zone competition objectives, a long-term, seriously conveyed U.S. commitment to supporting legitimate governing authorities is necessary.** For the United States and adversaries alike, discrete service delivery did not necessarily win hearts, minds, or enduring influence. Instead, service delivery would have needed to be embedded in a longer-term objective to support a politically legitimate governing arrangement. Although the Stabilization Assistance Review notes the importance of a long-term commitment, in practice, the vacillating U.S. commitment to Syria, including the president’s very public flip-flops on presence, undermined any effort to build influence through stabilization.
3. **Using civilian stabilization assistance for geopolitical competition ushers in deep moral dilemmas.** The Syria case raises real questions about whether civilian assistance should be used in contested space when there is a lack of clarity about security support. In eastern Syria, U.S. policymakers have pushed for assistance to be provided near the front lines of great power military confrontation and without clear guidance as to the rules of engagement with sovereign states, since the formal mission of the U.S. military is solely focused on defeating the Islamic State. Providing civilian aid that is directly aligned with U.S. interests in contested areas unquestionably puts local implementing partners at risk; therefore, adequate and clear U.S. security support is essential. The backdrop of geopolitics heightens these risks even more than utilizing stabilization programs to counter extremists because nation-states have even more tools at their disposal to inflict harm, from mercenaries, such as Russia’s Wagner Group, to paramilitary units, such as Iran’s Basij volunteers. Moreover, the ambiguity often accompanies gray-zone environments—from differing threat perceptions and thresholds as far as what constitutes a hostile act, to a lack of clarity as to the motivations and identities behind attacks—can lead to inadvertent escalation.

4. **Senior policymakers must acknowledge and adjudicate tensions between geopolitical competition and stabilization objectives when they arise.** As described above, the U.S. policy priorities of improving the U.S. position vis-à-vis rival powers in a given country, and achieving stabilization objectives in that same place, can sometimes be at loggerheads, at least in the short term. Senior policymakers must weigh the trade-offs and provide guidance on the higher immediate policy priority for a country in question. Where the stabilization objective of promoting locally legitimate conflict resolution mechanisms takes priority, stabilization aid should only be employed as a tool to further the U.S. position in geopolitical competition when it aligns with stabilization goals. This is especially important since some adversaries play dirty, relying on ruthless means to project their influence in ways that often undermine local stability. Instead of playing by their rules, the United States should recall that its primary source of strength lies in its values and its ability to support a more just and prosperous local governance arrangement.

5. **Partnering with non-state actors presents new complications to pursuing a viable political end state, which is critical for stabilization assistance to be effective.** In part, geopolitical competition is a battle of narratives regarding who can offer local counterparts the more attractive vision for the future. For the United States, stabilization assistance can strengthen that narrative by creating a tangible manifestation of that vision. However, in Syria, the United States’ ability to shape political outcomes and claims to legitimacy was hindered by the decision to partner with the SDF, a non-state actor to whom the United States was unwilling to confer political authority, while Russia and Iran supported the sovereign government. As a result, the United States was unable to offer local counterparts a longer-term vision, which put U.S. efforts at a disadvantage.

Of course, the United States’ choice to partner militarily with the SDF offered other major benefits: it slowed Russia and Iran’s ability to help the Assad regime reconquer all of Syria. But while this presents a short-term victory for the United States, in the medium to long term, a military strategy that is not aligned with a political one is insufficient and risks being upended the moment U.S. troops withdraw. This is not to suggest that the United States should never partner with non-state actors. But if it chooses to do so and also aims to win the great power game, it is crucial that stabilization assistance be geared toward cultivating a viable and legitimate alternative to the sovereign government.

**CONCLUSION**

In principle, U.S. stabilization aid could potentially represent a valuable, under-appreciated tool for American policymakers grappling with gray-zone competition. But in practice, the record of its effectiveness in eastern Syria has been ambiguous. Furthermore, using stabilization aid in the context of geopolitical competition can generate deep moral dilemmas and policy tensions that must be adjudicated.

To be sure, U.S. policy in Syria has been plagued by myriad contradictions and obstacles. To draw conclusive lessons from this case alone would be to overlook the many barriers to effective stabilization assistance that
were present from the start. But the next place where the United States aims to use stabilization aid will also likely feature a backdrop of geopolitical competition and also likely be deeply complex and challenging in its own way—there are few “easy” cases. For U.S. policymakers looking to the future, and positioning for gray-zone competition elsewhere, reconciling the lessons of stabilization in eastern Syria, alongside other case studies, is imperative.

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ENDNOTES


2. U.S. civilian stabilization assistance to Syria pre-dated the D-ISIS campaign. Programs in northeast Syria were hastily adapted from those in opposition areas in the south and northwest of the country that had been newly liberated from the regime.

3. By “soft stabilization,” we mean the intangible ways in which the U.S. supports authorities to gain legitimacy, such as by fostering good governance and inclusive, vibrant societies. “Soft power,” by contrast, we view as a broader term that encompasses any mode of projecting influence through non-military means.

4. Iran and Russia are also in competition over access to Syria’s economy, especially in key sectors such as oil and gas, electricity, and real estate. While these economic investments are certainly part of both countries’ soft power, they do not constitute stabilization-type activities.

5. According to the Russian News Agency, CRCSS carried out a total of 2,052 humanitarian missions between 2015 and early 2019, and over half of the CRCSS’s 443 missions were focused around Deir Ezzor City from November 2018 to October 2019.

6. In addition, Hajin notably was not the site of as much fighting or military recruitment as other parts of the region prior to liberation, meaning it was already more stable.