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# THE SYRIAN CRISIS: POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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Conference Report

“The Syrian Crisis: Policy Options for the Trump Administration”

## The Syrian Crisis: Policy Options for the Trump Administration

In December 2016, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy hosted a panel of leading Syria experts to discuss the Syrian civil war and US policy options:

Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian  
Ambassador Ryan Crocker  
Ambassador Robert Ford  
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The following report summarizes some of the proposals made during the deliberations. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of every participant or of the Baker Institute.

## Executive Summary

The Syrian crisis has had important impacts on US national security interests. Since 2011, the war in Syria has killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and spurred crises that have affected the international community. A complex web of actors on the ground and internationally has prolonged the conflict and severely challenged policymakers. The Trump administration will have to address this issue—defining US core interests and principles and formulating specific policies to achieve them. In Syria, US interests can be defined as: 1) counterterrorism, 2) restoring stability, and 3) refugee relief. In pursuing these aims, the US relationship with international actors will be important. But while the US notionally shares some security interests with Russia, Iran, and Syria in regard to counterterrorism, the limitations of these states as potential partners are very significant.

A key first step for the Trump administration should be to reengage with traditional regional partners with which relationships have weakened in recent years. The administration's foreign policy message must be that the US is back to listen to our strategic partners' concerns and interests, to engage with the region, and to take a fresh look at ongoing problems with a renewed commitment to collaborate with partners to achieve security, stability, and good governance. The US relationship with Turkey will be important, especially in clarifying the Kurdish issue. US policy toward Iran will also play a role in how strategic partnerships are rebuilt. While US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement would bring little benefit and could have negative effects, tougher US policies on Iran outside of the agreement might reassure allies.

In negotiations, the US must consider the limitations that come with attempting to decentralize the Syrian government and calling for Bashar al-Assad to step down. The US could accept a straw man option in which the Assad regime remains as part of a longer term transition, and attempt to play a role in the negotiation and rebuilding processes, setting standards for Assad to meet on key issues. And while a grand bargain will be difficult to achieve, the prospects for multiple packages of smaller, dynamic negotiations and agreements may have a better chance for success. An important point of leverage for the US and its partners is their collective capacity to provide financial and developmental support for Syrian reconstruction, as well as their established relationships with opposition groups. However, any support to rebuild Syria would not be possible without obtaining serious concessions from the Syrian regime and its allies, lest the US be perceived as footing the bill to support the political gains of Assad, Iran, and Russia.

Finally, the US must take a hard look at immediate and long-term strategy toward the Middle East while being mindful of history. Since the conflict began, 11 million people have been displaced in one of the largest diasporas in world history. Failure to find sustainable solutions to the refugee issue in neighboring countries will breed radicalism in the future and have destabilizing effects regionally and globally. In the longer term, the reabsorption of refugees and rebuilding of Syria will be critical to stability and security. The United States and its partners must also address the region's failures in governance and socioeconomic development, while avoiding the pitfalls that accompany nation building.

## Introduction

Since 2011, the war in Syria has killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and spurred crises that have affected the international community. Fueled by longstanding domestic grievances and substantial outside intervention, Syria's civil war has become regional—pitting states and their proxies against each other, vying to tip the regional balance in their own favor at a time of almost unprecedented weakness in the Middle East state system. The result on the ground is incredibly complex and brutal, with no party strong enough to take hold of the country. Developments in Syria in 2017, influenced in part by President Donald Trump's decisions, will shape the regional order for decades and affect millions of lives.

After six years of conflict, the prospect of an end to the fighting and a peaceful transition and settlement is highly problematic. The Syrian military and its allies control the major cities and a western third of the country (excluding Idlib province), and lack the capacity to regain the eastern portions of the state. Syrian opposition groups and the Kurds control much of northern and central Syria. The Islamic State's territorial control is declining, but it is still present in the central and eastern portions of the state. Syria's opposition groups are not monolithic; they are composed of numerous factions of varying interests and ideology that compete for power and territory. Further, the viability of most groups is dependent on the support of outside benefactors whose influence over their proxies can be limited.

US strategy toward Syria has been opaque, at least partially due to the Syrian crisis' complexity and the foreign policy framework under which the Obama administration operated. The Obama administration supported political transition away from the Assad regime and aided opposition groups, but limited direct US involvement because of its strong concern of overreach or conflict with other actors. Concurrently, the Obama administration in 2014 began countering the Islamic State through airstrikes and support for groups combatting ISIS, at least theoretically working at a common cause with the Assad regime, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

President Trump has made clear that his priority for Syria is to defeat the Islamic State, potentially through increased cooperation with Russia and a reevaluation of US support for the Syrian opposition. A strategy following these tenets requires an accurate understanding of the facts on the ground, the international dynamics at work, and the long-term prospects and implications of the crisis.

## On the Ground

In the months ahead, developments in Syria will depend heavily on the capacity and will of the Syrian regime to regain and hold territory, as well as the actions of the regime's backers. After retaking Aleppo, loyalist forces have gained momentum, but limited capacity will hinder the regime's progress as it seeks to take key areas around Damascus and northern Syria. Armed opposition groups have been dealt a serious blow and are consolidating in key territories, notably Idlib province. US- and Turkish-backed forces are competing for territory in northern Syria. The strength of all parties is considerably influenced by support and decisions of outside actors, and will be central during the next year of the conflict. Finally, actions on the ground will be partially shaped by decisions made between outside powers, particularly through discussions in Astana and Geneva.

### *Actors and Benefactors*

By early 2017, it seems likely that there will be four major combatant coalitions in Syria: 1) Assad loyalist forces, backed by Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia; 2) the Syrian Democratic Forces, aligned with the US and Gulf States; 3) "Euphrates Shield" forces aligned with Turkey; and 4) a loose coalition of opposition forces, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and others, which control Idlib, western Aleppo, northern Hama, northern Homs, and other strategic territories. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey strongly opposes, controls a significant portion of northern Syria and is largely aligned with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These groups are in addition to the Islamic State and other jihadist militant groups fighting the regime and secular forces.

In the months ahead, combat could go in a number of directions, largely shaped by the decisions of the Assad regime and agreements among outside actors. The Assad regime views the rebel coalitions as a more existential threat than ISIS, and will have to prioritize between the groups currently holding territory, particularly the SDF, Euphrates Shield forces, and opposition militias. How the Syrian military weighs these opponents, and their intentions, is debated. However, given that Euphrates Shield and the SDF seem to have prioritized ISIS as the primary threat, combat with these groups may be less likely than competition between the regime and these groups over ISIS-held territory, as the regime also attempts to degrade rebel strongholds.

Since the summer of 2016, Turkey's Euphrates Shield offensive has been an important development in changing the conflict dynamics and broadening Turkish President Recep Erdogan's options. Moderate rebels trained by Turkey are poised to take strategic positions and could be seen as a threat to the regime's aims and, to some degree, operate with Russia's backing. However, Euphrates Shield has prioritized the YPG and ISIS as primary targets. Especially given the fragile ceasefire negotiated in late December, and Turkey's strengthening relationship with Russia, it seems likely that Euphrates Shield forces may hold more potential for negotiation with the regime, particularly in light of Erdogan and Assad's shared views of Kurdish autonomy. Russian air support for Turkish combat in al-Bab in January 2017 seems to support this theory. However, support for cooperation with

Assad among the Euphrates Shield militias on the ground is very problematic. Further, Euphrates Shield, and Turkish support, have limits in retaking ISIS-held territory.

SDF and its Kurdish allies also seem to be prioritizing ISIS as the most opportune enemy in the short term. The result is an apparent competition for ISIS territory in northern Syria, the outcome of which will be highly influenced by international support. Assad and the loyalist coalition are likely to focus on opposition forces in Idlib and important areas outside of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, but will also compete with SDF or Euphrates Shield forces for ISIS-held territory in northern Syria.

### *Capacities*

Since the civil war began, a central political-military challenge in Syria for all parties has been “catastrophic success.” Winning the battle is one thing; holding and successfully governing new territory has been another. A limited capacity on the ground and the limited commitment of benefactors mean that success on the battlefield may lead to unsustainable overreach. While the actors are many, strength is limited.

This reality has challenged both loyalist and rebel groups, almost all of which face severe security, financial, and organizational constraints. By some estimates, the Assad regime’s offensively deployable troop strength may be as low as 20,000 to 25,000, critically bolstered by Iran-sponsored militias and Russian airpower. Opposition forces—FSA, independent Islamists, SDF, Euphrates Shield, ISIS, or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, among others—also lack the capacity to take and hold strategic new territory. The insufficient strength of all parties likely points to a prolonged conflict in which the newly bolstered regime may retake parts of the country, but will struggle to regain control of the full territory quickly.

## **The International Landscape**

Since 2011 and the Arab uprisings, the Middle East seems to be trending toward a “sphere of influence” system. As they did in Libya, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain, American partners in the Arab Gulf—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait—have supported a diverse group of proxies in Syria with varying effectiveness and concern over consequences.

In parallel, Iran and Russia have significantly increased their own regional influence, and Turkey, a NATO member and nominal partner to the Gulf States in Syria, appears to be increasingly drawn toward cooperation with Russia, despite Erdogan’s continued opposition to the Assad regime. However, while the interests of these actors have converged on some issues, on other issues agreement varies. The increased role of Russia, Iran, and Turkey (and the relationship between them) is an important development that will shape the country, regional landscape, and US policy options in the Middle East.

### *Russia*

Since September 2015, Russia has increased its role in the conflict, providing material and air support for the Syrian military. Russia's primary interests in Syria are the survival of its client regime in Damascus as it also trumpets the principle of state sovereignty and counterterrorism. But while Russian support has been critical to the regime's survival, there are likely limits to Russian engagement. The commitment required to support the Assad regime in regaining the full Syrian territory is likely more than Putin is willing or able to invest, especially economically. As a result, Russia may be inclined to seek a negotiated agreement. Putin will also seek Western support to fund Syrian reconstruction after any settlement.

Unlike Iran, a more direct regional power whose influence in the Levant is tied directly to Assad and Hezbollah, Russia may consider an alternative that meets its strategic goals in the Middle East. In a negotiation, Assad's own aims would be part of a Russian negotiating position, but would not supersede Russian interests. However, while Putin may not equate Assad's continued role as president as a requirement to meet its strategic aims, Russia likely views Assad's continued role as necessary due to the effects his removal might have on the viability of Syria's state institutions. Russia may also be on track to negotiate with Turkey to address Turkish concerns, largely over the Kurds, in exchange for Erdogan's recognition of Syrian state sovereignty.

### *Iran*

Iran has a more direct stake in Syria than Russia. Iran's objectives in Syria are the continuation of the Assad regime as a strategic asset in the region, especially for pressuring Israel (through Hezbollah), and, in its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, the expansion of Iran's regional influence. Over the past five years, the relationship between Iran and the Assad regime has deepened, with Assad becoming heavily reliant on Shia militias, led by Iran and Hezbollah, for much of its security operations. Iran has a major interest in the continuation of the Assad regime and is not interested in an independent Assad. Iran also has considerable economic interests in Syria, particularly through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Unlike its powerful influence in Iraq, Iran's options in Syria are heavily reliant on Assad and Hezbollah. The alternatives Iran would face with the fall of the Assad regime would constitute a significant loss.

Since the 2003 Iraq War, and more recent shifts in the regional order that have come with the Arab uprisings, there has been a trend toward a security arc, led by Iran, spanning from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In some ways, Russia has worked alongside this arc. However, Russian and Iranian objectives and commitment in the Middle East differ, and there remains a distrust of Russia among many Iranian power brokers and the broader public, which may limit deep strategic cooperation. Further, Iran is much more strategically invested in Syria than Russia, offering a level of manpower and support to which Russia has not committed.



### *Turkey*

Turkey is one of the most important actors in Syria. Since late 2011, Turkish President Erdogan has been a major opponent of the Assad regime. However, while Turkey's official policy remains that Assad must step down, the empowered Kurdish presence along Syria's northern border and an increased threat from ISIS have affected Erdogan's calculations. Turkish security actions are driven largely by the Kurdish issue, and Turkey rejects a continuous Kurdish belt along its southern border, which Erdogan fears will empower the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Beginning in the summer of 2016, weeks after the failed coup attempt, Turkish forces launched "Euphrates Shield," working with Syrian rebel groups to take control of an area of northern Syria. Much of this action may have been spurred by the August 9 understanding between Putin and Erdogan (the details of which remain murky) as well as Erdogan's post-coup adjustment of the Turkish military's leadership, which has become more anti-Kurdish and skeptical of Turkey's Western alliances.

A major question remains about Turkey's commitment and intentions in Syria. While Euphrates Shield forces are seeking to contain the Islamic State and the Kurds, and have carved out a position along Syria's northern border, an offensive to force ISIS from al-Bab or Raqqa would require a heavy commitment, the sustainability or scalability of which remains questioned. Given Turkey's growing relationship with Russia and, to a lesser degree, Iran, its position in Syria may be transactional—a bargaining chip to achieve its aims in regard to the Kurds. Erdogan does not want a repeat of 2003, when Turkey was denied a voice in post-war Iraq, which empowered the Kurds. The Russian and Syrian regimes share Turkey's objection to an empowered or autonomous Kurdish entity.

Especially following the ceasefire agreement reached in late December, a deal may be possible in which the Syrian and Turkish governments agree on the Kurdish question in exchange for Turkish recognition of Syrian sovereignty and retrenchment in north Syria. There have been discussions about a "safe zone" developing in the Euphrates Shield-held zone for internally displaced peoples (IDPs) and the eventual return of refugees. However, details on the operational and political feasibility of a large-scale safe zone for internally displaced peoples, supported by international cover, are problematic and would involve detailed military coordination among various interested parties.

### **US Policy Considerations**

US core interests in Syria can be characterized as: 1) counterterrorism, 2) restoring stability, and 3) refugee relief. While US policy has been in favor of political transition away from the Assad regime, the regional and security effects of the crisis have made that aim of lower importance and feasibility in the short term. However, the challenge in pursuing these interests, given current realities in Syria, is where they may lead. Despite sharing short-term interests with Assad, Russia, and Iran in countering ISIS, any potential long-term partnership with these actors has major limitations and potentially unsavory repercussions.

President Trump and his team are now charged with defining the core principles of US policy in the Middle East and the policy architecture to support them. The new administration faces a complex landscape and must understand the interwoven elements of terrorism, humanitarian disaster, political-economic failures, and geopolitics that have led to the region's turmoil. The Trump administration will be obliged to make a number of difficult decisions with long-term implications in its attempt to "right-size" the US role in the region and achieve US interests in the Middle East.

### Negotiations

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, actors on all sides have called for a political settlement to end the conflict. However, the current prospects for a successfully negotiated settlement are dim. Because of the tangled web of actors on the ground in Syria and internationally, it remains uncertain how negotiations might be successfully structured. The "Lausanne Format"—which includes the United States, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt—excludes key actors on the ground, notably the Assad regime and a host of Syrian opposition groups whose participation in negotiations would be hotly contested, but are necessary for a lasting peace. An important question is how the results and proposals of the Astana negotiations will proceed, and how they will affect a reconvened Geneva initiative.

A possible political solution in Syria could include some level of "administrative decentralization," with greater autonomy for local governments, less power for the central government in Damascus, and almost certainly some degree of amnesty and inclusion of opposition fighters. Such a solution would be very difficult to negotiate and execute. Assad has little incentive to negotiate away his executive authority, and while there have been various truces and discussions of "reconciliation," the regime's long-term intention remains to fully recapture the state. At the Astana conference in January, Russia reportedly proposed tenets for a new Syrian constitution, including a parliament representing ethnic and religious groups, an "Assembly of Regions," and local councils, as well as limits on presidential terms and some level of increased Kurdish autonomy. However, publicly and privately, the Syrian government and opposition forces have raised objections to the proposal. In practical terms, decentralization of governance would be very difficult to successfully achieve, as building effective local governments and security would be a major challenge, not to mention the potentially destabilizing influence outside states might play in local governments. Beyond decentralization, no major actors are interested in redrawing the map of Syria from its current borders.

However, while decentralization would be problematic, there is currently not a single party strong enough to hold and govern the full country, a reality that may last for years. And if the Assad regime's momentum continues, and if rebel forces are increasingly pushed out in favor of Syrian government control, this would not necessarily lead to stability or to the end of the insurgency, jihadist or otherwise. Indeed, there are already indications that insurgents are training in underground and guerilla-style tactics in preparation for further

regime gains. While international actors on all sides may be interested in a deal, facts on the ground make a workable negotiated settlement difficult to foresee.

### *Approaching Negotiations*

While the prospects of a comprehensive negotiated settlement are weak, a desire for negotiation may exist among outside parties, including Turkey, Russia, Qatar, and Jordan. However, the US approach to a negotiated settlement has always been built on the weak assumption that Assad would negotiate away his executive power and decentralize the Syrian government. Despite its limitations, the Assad regime has reconsolidated some of its power in Syria, while Iran and Russia lack the interest and influence to force Assad to step down.

The US could accept a straw man option in which the Assad regime remains part of a longer-term political transition, and the US attempts to play a role in the negotiation and rebuilding processes, setting acceptable standards for Assad to meet on key issues. This approach would likely have to recognize that Assad is unlikely to step down voluntarily, pursue meaningful democratic reform, or end support for Hezbollah. Domestically, lifting sanctions on the Assad regime would be difficult due to the regime's extensive human rights abuses, the potential effects on US relationships with regional partners, and the Syrian coalition's lack of alignment with US security interests. If this option were pursued, the major question facing policymakers would be to what metrics sanctions could be tied other than democratic and human rights reforms, and what the implications of such a move would be.

While a grand bargain will be difficult to achieve, the prospects for multiple packages of smaller, dynamic negotiations and agreements may have a better chance for success. A key part of these negotiations will address security guarantees for internally displaced people, and eventually refugees, to return to their homes. Negotiations may also address reconciliation committees to aid in rebuilding Syrian society.

Nevertheless, an important point of leverage for the US and its regional partners is their collective capacity to provide financial and developmental support for Syrian reconstruction, as well as their established relationships with opposition groups. However, any post-war support to rebuild Syria would not be possible without obtaining serious concessions from the Syrian regime and its allies, lest the US be perceived as footing the bill to support the political gains of Assad, Iran, and Russia. The Trump administration and Congress would have serious reservations about such an option.

In any case, it should be recognized that, especially in a scenario in which the Assad regime remains and continues to retake parts of the country, the many fractured militant groups and the devastation of Syria's institutions, social space, and economy make long-term instability and radical jihadism in Syria likely. Failure to find positive solutions in Syria will mean an increased threat and forced engagement in the future.

## Combating Terrorism and Rebuilding Partnerships

The Arab uprisings have affected the regional order and US security partnerships. While the US shares some security interests with Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, the limitations of partnering with these groups are considerable. In counterinsurgency, the Assad regime, with Russian support, has utilized barrel bombs, chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombing, and starvation to defeat those groups it defines as “terrorists”— mostly rebel groups, other than the Islamic State. These illegal actions have killed thousands of civilians, run counter to US policy and international norms, and are ultimately counterproductive. Assad’s priority, as well as Iran and Russia’s, to counter the opposition rebels over the Islamic State, and limited capacity to successfully retake and hold ground from ISIS, make Assad and Russia at times ambivalent or insufficient partners for defeating ISIS. Indeed, during and after the campaign against opposition forces in Aleppo, the regime lost ground to ISIS in Palmyra, Homs, and Deir az Zor. And finally, sentiment across the Arab world, including in American-allied states, is strongly opposed to Assad’s tactics and legitimacy, making any level of rapprochement strategically costly. In sum, the Trump administration must recognize that defeating ISIS will be more complex than a bombing campaign and will require strong strategic planning, partnerships, and the ability to fill vacuums. Russia, Iran, and Syria have serious limitations in meeting these criteria.

Combating the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq is a primary US goal. The Syrian conflict has become a multi-sided, sectarian proxy war, with major challenges for US policy. Possible solutions for combating terrorist groups, such as importing Shia militias from Iraq or an increased military role on the ground for regional militaries, stand likely to inflame sectarian violence or potentially run counter to other US interests. The question of how to achieve US interests, with whom, and with what impact, cannot be easily answered.

US policy should be careful not to exacerbate the sectarian aspects of the Syrian conflict, but should also recognize that the actions of regional actors are not entirely driven by religion, as much as religion has been a tool exploited to achieve political ends. In Syria and across the region, the political and religious have been tied together to achieve political aims. Sectarianism has vacillated based on political necessity. There is a need to rebuild ties with traditional partners to align strategy, tactics, and interests, with an eye on long-term goals for stability.

### *Rebuilding Ties with Partners*

There is a need for clear, consistent, pragmatic, and principled policies toward the Middle East and a reassertion of American leadership in the region. A key first step for the Trump administration should be to reengage with traditional regional partners such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel, with which relationships have weakened in recent years. The administration’s foreign policy message must be that the United States is back to listen to our partners’ concerns and interests, to engage with the region, and to take a fresh look at ongoing problems with a renewed commitment to collaboration with strategic partners to achieve security, stability, and good governance. A “listening tour” by the new secretary

of state may help to rebuild connections between the US and regional partners, which would be beneficial to achieving strategic goals.

US policy toward Iran will play a role in how these ties are rebuilt. The US approach to the P5+1 nuclear negotiations—and its response to Iran’s increased influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and, to some degree, in the Gulf States and Palestine—have strained relations between the US and the Gulf States. While US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement would bring little benefit, tougher US policies on Iran outside of the agreement, which the Trump administration seems to be pursuing, would reassure Gulf allies. However, a tougher stance on Iran may be difficult in some ways, with the US and Iran indirectly working at a common cause in Iraq and Syria to counter the Islamic State, albeit to different ends, and with possible implications for the P5+1 nuclear agreement.

### *Reengaging Turkey and Addressing the Kurdish Question*

Turkey has been an influential actor in Syria since the beginning of the crisis, and is even more so today. Turkey has the power to assist with or complicate many US goals for Syria. Despite its important status as a NATO ally, relations between Turkey and the United States are at a low point. The US relationship with the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has alienated Erdogan, who views PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, as an extension of the PKK and strengthened Kurds on either side of the border as a threat to Turkish security and territorial integrity. The Gulen issue is another complicating factor in US-Turkey relations.

The Trump administration is already evaluating the US relationship with the PYD and its benefits against the costs to the US-Turkey relationship, and early on pledged to increase coordination with Turkey in northern Syria. The US would be well-served by rebuilding the relationship with Turkey and eventually revitalizing peace talks (or at least increasing clarification) between Turkey and Kurdish groups on both sides of the border. As it stands, this is an issue pushing Turkey into the Russian-Iranian partnership. The complex dynamics of the Kurdish issue—between Kurdish parties and armed groups in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq—are not fully understood. An understanding between the Turkish government, Kurds, Russia, and the United States could clarify the picture and assist mutually beneficial cooperation. However, given recent events in Turkey, and Russian, Syrian, and Turkish interests in regard to the Kurds, successfully revitalizing a peace process may be very difficult.

### **US Strategy Today and Tomorrow**

In addressing Syria, the international community, including the United States, must find sustainable solutions for the relief and reabsorption of refugees and IDPs, and for rebuilding the country to advance stability and security. Since the conflict began in 2011, 4.9 million Syrians have become refugees and 6.1 million have become internally displaced. Ninety percent of refugees have fled to neighboring countries, including an estimated 2.8 million in Turkey, 1.2 million in Lebanon, and 655,000 in Jordan. Ten percent of Syrian refugees have fled to Europe. The United Nations estimates that half of

Syrian refugees are under the age of 18. This demographic, placed in long-term hardship, may be vulnerable to radicalization.

Syria's civil war has had global consequences, straining and destabilizing states in the region and in Europe. In the immediate term, material and political solutions must be found for refugee relief in the Middle East and Europe. Lebanon and Jordan are both heavily strained by the refugee crisis, facing fiscal challenges and stress on both states' social safety and service networks. Beyond essential humanitarian concerns, failure to relieve these stresses may breed instability and radicalism in the future.

In the longer term, Syria's economic and political systems must be able to reabsorb displaced Syrians while maintaining stability and security. The country's economic base is devastated and will require long-term sustained effort and hundreds of billions of dollars to rebuild. How a rebuilding process might work is unknown at this stage. Politically, if Assad stays, millions of refugees, particularly draft-aged men, will likely refuse to return, creating long-term refugee problems in neighboring states and Europe. But it must also be noted that, should the Assad regime fall, millions of loyalist Syrians could seek to leave the country. These are questions the Trump administration, and the international community, must grapple with in the years ahead.

### *US Options: Long-term Strategy and Security*

The primary US interests in the Middle East—stability and security—have not changed drastically since the end of the Cold War. However, the strategies and tactics the United States has employed in pursuit of these aims have shifted with each administration, often with detrimental effects. As the Trump administration enters office, there is a need for strategic thinking, mindful of history and America's own limitations, to address the immediate and longer-term challenges facing the Middle East.

In the immediate term, there is a need for an effective counterterrorism strategy—with a military component—that meaningfully utilizes American partnerships in the region. Additionally, relief for the millions of internally displaced people and refugees will directly affect regional stability and security for decades to come. Failure to resolve the refugee crisis will almost undoubtedly lead to future instability and terrorism.

In the long term, the United States and its partners must address the region's failures in governance and its socioeconomic development, while avoiding the pitfalls of nation building. The region's history of political exclusivity, failed economies, and severely limited social space has been a driver of instability and radicalism. The Trump administration should keep this in mind, not as a purely Wilsonian ideal or formula for nation building, but as a practical measure. States with growing economies, protected social and political freedoms, and effective judicial and education systems are more stable and better able to reabsorb refugees, which will be one of the great challenges of the years ahead. At present, the region's states and institutions do not lend themselves to quickly resolving issues of refugee relief, unemployment, poverty, and political alienation. How the states of the region approach political and economic inclusion will affect the Middle East

## The Syrian Crisis: Policy Options for the Trump Administration

and global security for decades. The Trump administration should utilize the full range of its foreign policy tools to work at the margins to further these aims, which will affect American security for generations.