

## *Nobody Knows Why Syria Matters*

Why is the United States still struggling to figure out what to do about the Assad regime?

A few days after then-U.S. President Donald Trump announced in October 2019 that he was pulling U.S. forces from Syria, I was waiting for an early morning train to New York City. As I hovered near the gate, I pretended to scroll Twitter as I listened in on a conversation between two Amtrak police officers. They were not discussing crime at Union Station or the latest gossip within their department but rather U.S. foreign policy. They supported the president's move in Syria, agreeing with each other that the conflict many thousands of miles away had nothing to do with them or the United States. Bring the troops home; end the endless wars.

That moment reinforced for me something I had been shaking my head and muttering about for the better part of the previous seven years: the utter failure of the foreign-policy community to correctly assess what was happening in Syria, grasp how it affected U.S. interests (or not), and recommend a way forward. Trump—despite his loathsome presidency—had apparently asked a good question about Syria that was also relevant to the Middle East more generally: “Why are we doing what we are doing?” It seems he did not get a good enough answer and thus announced the withdrawal (which ended up being more of a redeployment).

Now, against the searing lamentations of Syrians on the 10th anniversary of their country's plunge into darkness, the debate—albeit not as intense as a decade ago—over what the United States should do about a conflict that has killed so many, maimed even more, pushed half the population from home, and destabilized two regions of the world remains as inconclusive as ever. Should the Biden administration come to terms with Syria President Bashar al-Assad? Hope the world turns in a way that a diplomatic opening reveals itself? Have faith that the economic crisis that has enveloped Lebanon—a Syrian lifeboat—undermines support for the regime?

Almost no one wants to do more with Syria, leaving policymakers with no good choices and no obvious answer.

Perhaps that is because, at least in the public debate over the last 3,650 days, there has not been an analysis of what is actually at stake for the United States in Syria, if anything. Since the end of World War II, the United States pursued policies in the Middle East aimed at three primary goals: guaranteeing the free flow of energy resources from the region, helping to ensure Israel's security, and maintaining U.S. power in the Middle East so no state or coalition of states could challenge those other interests. To these, analysts often add preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and counterterrorism. Assuming these remain the bases of U.S. policy, what does this tell analysts and policymakers about how Washington should approach Syria? That the current mostly hands-off approach to Syria's conflict may be morally vexing but strategically tenable? This is often the uncomfortable nexus of U.S. foreign policy—it is the burden of never being able to reconcile values and interests.

When it turned out that Trump was not exactly withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria, he declared they would remain “for the oil.” This was a head scratcher. Syria was never a major oil exporter, though what reserves it does have were used in the last decade by the Assad regime, Turkish smugglers, and the Islamic State to make money. Denying all three that opportunity made sense. Yet declaring that Americans would remain in harm's way for the oil may have been a convenient way around the awkward fact that while the president had previously attested to the defeat of the Islamic State, the Syrian Democratic Forces—primarily the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—were still combatting Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's followers with the help of U.S. soldiers. All of this is to say there is nothing about what has transpired in Syria over the last decade that threatens the free flow of energy resources from the region.

[Vocabulary list \(A\)](#)  
[Click here](#)

When it comes to Israel, there was a time when analysts believed that Syria was a potential threat to the country's security. The Syrian armed forces' poor performance over the last decade has put that concern to rest. The real threat—at least from Israel's perspective—is Iran, which seems to want to stay in Syria for the long haul, thus giving the Iranians an ability to supply Hezbollah more easily and to threaten Israel more directly. The Israelis are having none of it and have conducted a withering air campaign against Iranians and their proxies in both Syria and Iraq. Tehran has proven unable to respond effectively, leaving one to conclude that the Israelis are capable of taking care of themselves in the Syrian conflict.

As far as the maintenance of U.S. power goes, Syria is a wash. Sure, leaders in the region were impressed with Russian President Vladimir Putin's willingness to step in and rescue an ally from near defeat in contrast to what they perceived to be U.S. fecklessness when it came to former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. This has given the Russians a boost at U.S. expense, but now they are saddled with Assad and a conflict that does seem to have an end in sight. More importantly, there is nothing about the conflict in Syria that has compromised U.S. power and its ability to defend its interests.

On nonproliferation, the Israelis did the heavy lifting in 2007 when they destroyed a secret—to everyone but them—Syrian nuclear facility. There remains the problem of Syria's chemical weapons, however. They were supposed to give them up in a deal that Putin brokered in 2013, but Assad has not been fully cooperative. This is an issue that doesn't get more attention because the chemical agents Assad was supposed to give up have been and will more likely be used against Syrians than anyone else. Trump responded to a regime chemical attack on civilians not long after he was inaugurated. It did not make a difference in the trajectory of the conflict, however.

Finally, a case can be made for the United States to continue to pursue a counterextremism mission in Syria. The country became a vortex of competing militias, including extremists. Some of them may be diminished, but they nevertheless remain. Thus, the United States maintains its relationship with the YPG over the objection of NATO ally Turkey, which insists the group is hardly indistinguishable from the Kurdistan Workers' Party—a terrorist organization that has waged war on Turks and Turkish interests. Such is the nature of the conflict in Syria. For all their anger at the United States, Turkish officials coordinate with al Qaeda affiliates to advance their own anti-Kurdish agenda. Given the nature of the Syrian conflict and the large number of extremists drawn to the conflict, it is reasonable for policymakers to remain vigilant about the threat there.

For U.S. President Joe Biden, the tragedy of Syria is compounded by his public commitment to place values at the forefront of his foreign policy. If he has sought to make the Saudi crown prince a pariah, let it be known that human rights will be central to U.S.-Egypt relations, and ignore Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his crimes, where does that lead the United States on Syria? The answer is likely to be nowhere even if the Biden administration remains values-focused. That is because for all the cruelties the regime has visited on the Syrian people, Biden is likely to come to the same conclusion as the two police officers I overheard all those months ago: There is not enough at stake in terms of U.S. interests for the United States to do much more than sanction, strike at terrorists, and protest Assad's many transgressions against his fellow humans in the hope that something will change that brings an end to Syria's nightmare.

The clear-cut case for inaction in Syria outweighs the clear-cut case for action. This is morally suspect of course, but that is the tragedy of Syria the United States must finally accept.

[Vocabulary list \(B\)](#)  
[Click here](#)

**Steven A. Cook** is the Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. His latest book is *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East*.

Cook, S. A. (23 March 2021). *Nobody Knows Why Syria Matters*. Retrieved from Foreign Policy: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/23/nobody-knows-why-syria-matters/>