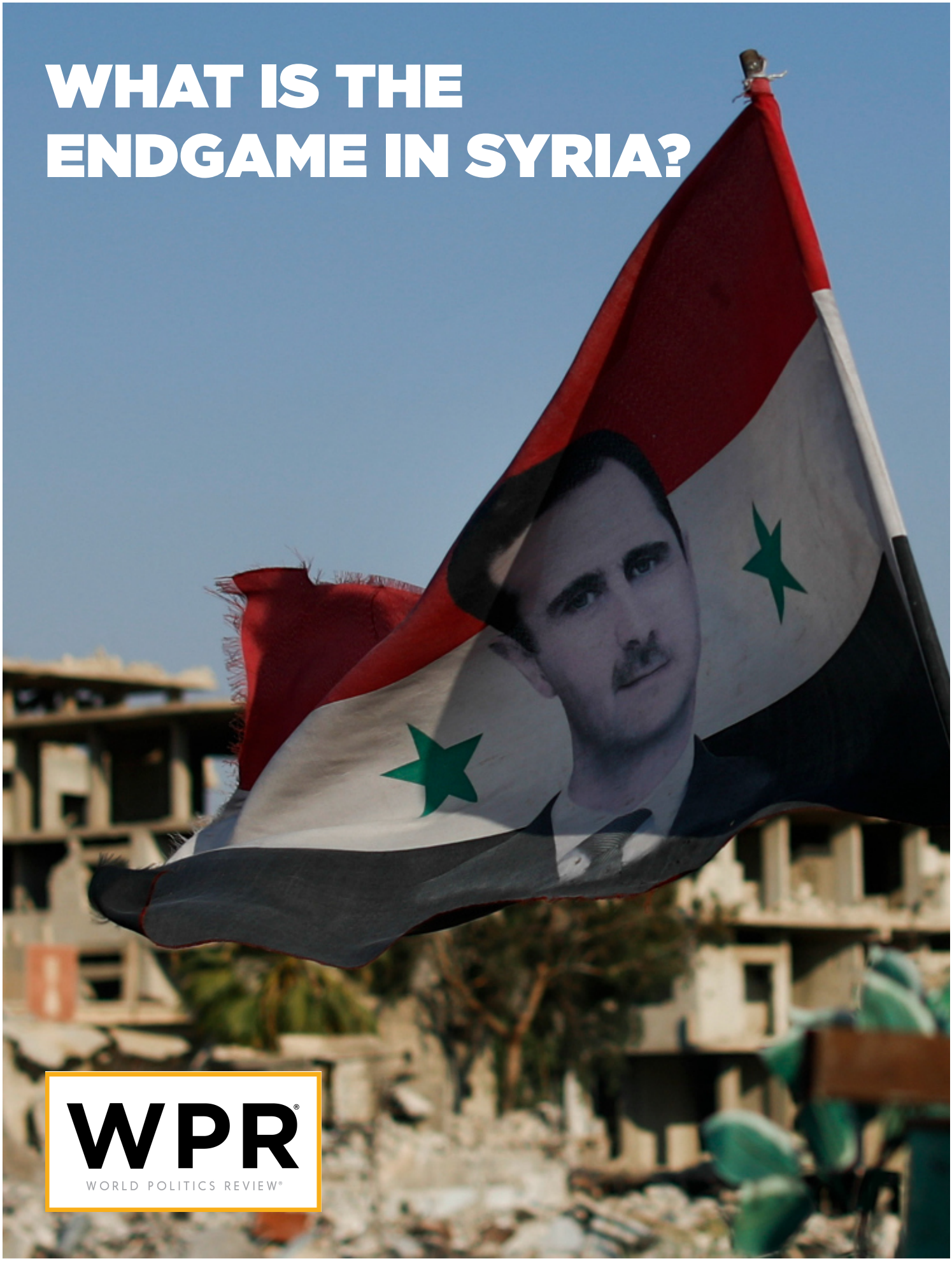
WHAT IS THE ENDGAME IN SYRIA?



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WHAT IS THE ENDGAME IN SYRIA?

A WPR REPORT | OCTOBER 2019

After more than seven years of civil war that gutted Syria, the endgame is here. But there are more questions than ever. What does victory on President Bashar al-Assad's brutal terms look like? How has the rise and fall of the Islamic State changed Syria's political map? How will U.S. President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria and the subsequent Turkish invasion of the area change the situation? And what about reconstruction, let alone reconciliation? This WPR report provides a comprehensive look at those questions and several others that will determine what's to come in Syria, with impacts far beyond the Middle East.

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TALK OF THE ENDGAME IN SYRIA DODGES THE QUESTION OF RECOVERY

FREDERICK DEKNATEL | JANUARY 2019

An estimated 4 million children have been born in Syria since 2011, according to UNICEF, which means that half of the children in Syria today have grown up only knowing war. "Every 8-year-old in Syria has been growing up amidst danger, destruction and death," Henrietta Fore, the executive director of UNICEF, said after a five-day visit to the country in mid-December. Since the government first crushed a popular uprising and precipitated the civil war that still shows little sign of ending, a third of the schools in Syria have been destroyed or damaged, or they have been turned into shelters for displaced families.

It is details like this that are lost in most headlines about Syria, especially those generated by President Donald Trump's abrupt announcement last month to withdraw American forces, which are filling the void in a third of the country. This harsh but hardly new reality is a reminder of one of the best assessments I've heard of Syria's crisis—a view that is as relevant and arresting as ever even if it's now four years old.

In early January 2015, Peter Harling, then an analyst at the International Crisis Group, was being interviewed on France 24 about the rise of the Islamic State and the inertia of every outside actor, from the United States to Syria's neighbors, in the face of the country's descent. "We don't really measure in the West how bad the situation is," Harling said in response to a question about why the conflict was stuck in a kind of stasis, and then went on.

We tend to see the Middle East as a remote part of the world —Syria could be Sri Lanka for many people in France, for

ABOVE A Syrian army soldier outside Manbij, Aleppo Province, Syria (Sputnik photo via

instance, or in the U.K. or the U.S. And there's this perception that the region has always been in a state of turmoil and conflict between sects and tribes and so on. I don't think we measure how dangerous it is to allow a part of the world which is profoundly integrated with Europe within the Mediterranean basin, if you will... to let it slip this far.

If you take Syria, we're talking about a country where a large part of the children on the scale of a whole society have not been going to school for three years. This is something we'll pay a price for, for years to come. Half the country's urban fabric has been destroyed; a large part of its industrial base. This is not a country that's going to recover. And we're far from seeing any movement towards a solution, so it's going to be years of this. Where will that leave Syrian society, and how are we going to deal with a society traumatized to this extent, right on our borders?

Of course, some nine months after this interview, Russia intervened in Syria, but the war's overall status quo and what

fueled it still didn't really shift, even if President Bashar al-Assad got a lifeline. 2015 was also the year that Europeans were forced to reckon in some measure with the reality in Syria, given the record number of Syrians seeking refuge and asylum at Europe's borders any way they could. In response, though, many European countries put up fences or quotas and the European Union eventually cut a deal with Turkey to essentially act as the gatehouse for asylum-seekers and migrants trying to reach the continent.

Things have gotten even worse in Syria since 2015, and with another year of war and suffering ahead, the country may look to a casual observer like a never-ending story. Cities have been "liberated" from the regime and then pounded into rubble and retaken. There are intermittent peace talks in foreign cities while the fighting goes on. Cease-fires are declared and soon broken. And what exactly are "de-escalation zones"?

An entire generation of children not going to school may seem more concrete. So does being told that you've resigned yourself to never going home, as one Syrian academic told me last month. He has made his opposition to the Assad regime clear. But now that means he'll probably never return to Damascus.

Yet the uproar in Washington over Trump's decision to remove the 2,000 or so American forces currently in Syria didn't touch on any of this, which wasn't surprising. It was simply another reminder of what the U.S. has hoped to salvage in Syria as Assad and his forces—regular and irregular, Syrian and increasingly foreign—carried out a simple edict to hold on to power: "Assad, or we burn the country down."

American soldiers weren't on a humanitarian mission in Syria, although they were operating as the backstop for an increasingly assertive Kurdish proto-state in the northeast of the country, in the name of fighting the Islamic State. Abandoned by the U.S., Syria's Kurds no longer have their buffer between Assad, on one side, and Turkey on the other. Syrian Kurdish leaders have

RECONCILIATION BETWEEN ASSAD AND HIS NEIGHBORS WOULD BE THE WAR'S DENOUEMENT.

already reached out to Assad for protection, at least in some of the territories they control near the Syrian-Turkish border, fearing an impending attack from the Turks.

Retaking corners of the country that have been under Kurdish control since the war's early days would be another milestone for Assad, at a time when there is growing diplomatic outreach toward his regime from Arab states that once supported his opponents. "The rebels' former backers have not only given up on challenging his regime, they now actively want to embrace it—whether in public or in private," Hassan Hassan recently wrote in The Observer, just as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain reopened their embassies in Damascus. Seven years after being expelled from the Arab League, it looks like Syria is about to be let back in. On top of recent military advances in southern Syria, including taking back the city of Daraa, the rebel stronghold where the popular uprising began, these diplomatic overtures, according to Hassan, "leave no room for doubt: Assad has decisively won the conflict."

Reconciliation between Assad and his neighbors would be the war's denouement. Many of those neighbors are fellow autocrats who are keen to see their brand of control consolidated across the Middle East, as the hope and brief momentum of the 2011 Arab uprisings further recede. As Hassan put it, "Unlike the geopolitical winds that buffeted Saddam Hussein in the 1990s after the first Gulf war, everything is blowing strongly in Assad's favor."

That means just the opposite for many Syrians, especially the most vulnerable, who have borne the brunt of the world letting Syria slip this far. Amid ongoing talk of reconstruction, including Trump's seemingly bogus claim that Saudi Arabia would foot an unspecified amount of the bill, there is little actual mention of another word for this traumatized society: recovery.

Frederick Deknatel is the managing editor of World Politics Review.

WHAT WILL A POST-ISIS POLITICAL ORDER IN SYRIA ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?

SAM HELLER | NOVEMBER 2017

In Syria, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, or ISIS, was always treated as a problem with an essentially military solution. At least for the U.S.-led international coalition, there was no positive end state or program of political change that could be joined to the military campaign against the jihadi group. The general repulsiveness of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad meant that, unlike in neighboring Iraq, Washington and its allies could not simply invest in the Syrian state. And none of Syria's nonstate armed factions represented a plausible governing alternative, at least not for more than a piece of the country. The result was a counter-ISIS military campaign absent a coherent, viable political vision for a post-ISIS Syria.

Now that post-ISIS Syria has arrived, and the West still has no satisfactory answer for what a good, stabilizing post-ISIS political order in Syria should actually look like. So Syria will be defined not by what should be, but what is: a political map that has been redrawn by the fight against the Islamic State.

But even that map is not indelible, and Syria's broader civil war goes on. And while the West lacks a compelling vision for the country, Assad and his allies do not.

The Islamic State lost its de facto Syrian capital in Raqqa last month and, in short order, nearly all of its remaining territory in the country's eastern province of Deir el-Zour. What had been the "Caliphate" in eastern Syria has been mostly divided between the Assad regime and the U.S.-backed Syrian

Democratic Forces, or SDF, led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units, known as the YPG.

The regime availed itself this year of a strategically timed "de-escalation" agreement covering western Syria and critical support from its Russian and Iranian allies to launch its drive into the Islamic State's eastern territory. In doing so, it demonstrated its bona fides against the Islamic State and reasserted itself as the only party to the conflict operating on a truly national scope. The YPG, for its part, has proved itself as a disciplined, effective military force and the U.S.-led coalition's preferred local partner against the Islamic State. The YPG has gone from a leftist curio on the margins of Syria's war to one of the conflict's central players and the dominant force in northeastern Syria.

Syria's revolutionary opposition to the Assad regime, meanwhile, played a tertiary part in the fight against the Islamic State and will reap few of the political spoils. The mixed nationalist-jihadi opposition could never be reliably motivated or organized to fight the Islamic State, or made to interface effectively with a great power military. They were sidelined as a result, while their local enemies proved themselves more useful proxies for foreign powers concerned, mostly, with killing jihadis.

The case for involving these opposition factions in the fight against the Islamic State was that they could claim to be a more resonant, locally acceptable force in eastern Syria. The thinking was that these almost entirely Sunni Arab rebels had unique authenticity that could rally Sunni Arab residents in ISIS-held areas to their side, spurring defections and minimizing local resistance. It could also, ideally, help them stabilize these areas with a popular, representative political order.

Yet it is unclear that the opposition was necessarily a superior force against the Islamic State, even on these terms. Rebels' factionalism, corruption and inability to police themselves for extremists initially helped the Islamic State infiltrate areas before it defeated these rebels outright and scattered them in exile. In

ABOVE A Russian military policeman, left, rests in the lobby of a hospital in the city of Deir el-Zour, Syria, Sept. 15, 2017 (AP photo).

the one large section of territory rebels captured from the Islamic State—eastern Aleppo, taken in 2016 with extensive Turkish support—they failed to attract mass defections that might have spared al-Bab, on the eastern edges of Aleppo, from extensive destruction. In post-ISIS Aleppo, they have so far mostly replicated old patterns of militia dysfunction, instead of creating a rational, stabilizing political order.

It seems impossible to say which of the combatant parties to Syria's war, if any, truly represent the Sunni Arab residents living under the Islamic State in eastern Syria. It is not clear to what extent that representativeness even really matters, as opposed to locals' more prosaic concerns like security and normal economic life. These easterners have now been distributed between the Assad regime and the YPG-led SDF, each of which have projects that are officially defined in broadly inclusive, ecumenical terms, even if they have distinct sectarian or ethnic tones in practice. These projects have little place for Islamism, Sunni Arab chauvinism or a post-2011 revolutionary identity. But are those identifiers, as political categories, genuinely absolute and immutable, or are they something more transient?

So long as Sunni-sectarian grievance persists in Syria—defined in sectarian terms, as opposed to Syrian disenfranchisement more generally—some manifestation of the Islamic State seems likely to survive. As scholars such as Hassan Abu Hanieh have pointed out, the Islamic State's message is still the purest, most readily understandable version of Sunni revanchism among the various militant ideologies today. The Islamic State has a track record of spectacular violence and conquest, and, for angry sectarians, it promises a fairly straight line to revenge and death.

FOR THE ASSAD REGIME, THE FIGHT AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE HAS ONLY BEEN A SINGLE EPISODE IN A LONGER STRUGGLE AGAINST INSURGENCY AND TERROR.

As for the actual organization of the Islamic State—not its mass membership and symbolic appeal, but its individual commanders, its structures and institutional knowledge—that too will persist in some form. The circumstances of its rapid collapse in Deir el-Zour are still unclear. It is not obvious whether the group's cadres deliberately melted away, or if it was just terminally depleted by a multiyear war of attrition. But the group has survived underground before, and it has had time to prepare for a stretch of militant austerity. Its future in Syria is also inseparable from its prospects across the border in Iraq, its real home, which will remain restive and unsettled.

Still, the Islamic State will inevitably be much reduced. The Assad regime and the SDF may not have perfect local legitimacy, but they both have effective security apparatuses that can mostly control a brutalized, fatigued populace and suppress jihadi insurgents. The Islamic State is unlikely to really roar back or to recover the sort of strength it had in 2015. The group's rise to proto-statehood was the product of exceptional circumstances: the sudden collapse of Syrian state authority, wide-open borders and a sluice of material support and foreign manpower for an unruly insurgency. These conditions are not replicable, at least not any time soon.

Syria's war will go on, though, even as the Islamic State becomes an insurgent phantom. Once it has sufficiently pacified Syria's east, the Assad regime will turn back west and, with Russia and Iran's help, resume crushing the revolutionary opposition. Eventually, it will also come after the SDF, although likely not before the Americans and their coalition partners withdraw. There still is no clarity about the extent and duration of the U.S. commitment to the SDF, but, presumably, it is not unlimited.

The Islamic State's defeat only returns to the fore the central political question of Syria today: How to reconcile Syria's periphery with the Damascus-centered Syrian state, which, under the regime, emanates destabilizing resentment and grievance. The West has no way forward for Syria other than a U.N.-sponsored peace process based on a binary regime-opposition dynamic that is now defunct. The West is still holding onto a panacea political solution that is basically unreal. Damascus and its allies have a different goal: a restoration of central state authority through mostly unilateral, nonconsensual means. It is an uglier course, but one that at least makes sense on its own terms.

For the Assad regime, the fight against the Islamic State has only been a single episode in a longer struggle against insurgency and terror. And just as the battle against the Islamic State has shaped the current political aftermath, it is the totality of Syria's war—not this interlude against the Islamic State—that will determine the country's future.

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SYRIA'S ASSAD IS COMING IN FROM THE COLD

IYAD DAKKA | FEBRUARY 2019

As the Syrian civil war grinds to an end, the government in Damascus, propped up by Iran and Russia, is regaining its footing, with important implications for the balance of power in the Middle East. Syria's neighbors and powers outside the region are now attempting to determine the appropriate level of engagement, if any, to have with President Bashar al-Assad's regime. While Assad's main foreign patrons will no doubt continue to deepen their military, political and economic ties, it is countries that stood against him over the past seven years that now have the most difficult decisions to make. If recent trends are any indication, it seems many of them are increasingly leaning toward at least some sort of engagement. The question is how to do this in a face-saving manner that doesn't weaken their diplomatic and political standing, particularly after President Donald Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw the 2,000 American troops in Syria.

Nowhere is this calculus more evident than in Turkey. After throwing its full support behind Syrian rebels, calling Assad a "coward" and vowing to "pray at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus" following his overthrow, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan may be moving instead toward a gradual détente with his neighbor. Turkey and Syria have been sending signals back-and-forth in a form of tacit negotiations for several months now. Speaking at a conference in December, Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, declared that Ankara would work with Assad if he were to win a "democratic election" in Syria. For their part,

ARAB STATES' RUSH TO ENGAGE WITH SYRIA IS ALREADY CREATING FRICTION WITH THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE.

Syrian authorities raised the prospect of re-activating the 1998 Adana Agreement—a dormant security pact between Damascus and Ankara to counter Kurdish separatists in Syria—if Ankara withdrew its forces from northern Syria and allowed the Syrian army to regain control of Idlib province, the last remaining opposition enclave.

None of this means Ankara has to make a deal with Assad in the short term. Turkey does have some options on the table, including working with the U.S. to establish a "safe zone" in northern Syria that would provide Ankara with the buffer it needs to keep the main Kurdish militia, the YPG, at bay, although Washington and Ankara continue to disagree over the fine print of the Turkish role in the area. But taking the longer view, it's hard to see how Ankara can deal with Syria's Kurdish militants without coordinating with Damascus. As a case in point, Erdogan recently admitted that Turkish security agencies continue to have direct back channels to their Syrian counterparts. The Turkish government downplays the importance of these contacts, but they may offer the stepping stone toward eventual political rapprochement. And if Turkey chooses to dig in its heels in northern Syria without eventually coordinating with Assad, then the Kurds will surely further gravitate back to Assad's orbit. Either way, it's a win-win scenario for the Syrian regime that would boost and solidify its postwar standing.

BELOW A man walks past a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Aleppo, Syria, Dec. 24, 2018 (Photo by Mikhail Voskresenskiy for

Assad is also making significant inroads back into the Arab world. After being exiled from the Arab League seven years ago, the majority of Arab states want Damascus to be readmitted. According to some Arab diplomatic sources, only a handful of member states

out of the Arab League's 22 now actively oppose Syria's readmission. While there may not be a consensus in time for the upcoming Arab League summit in Tunisia next month, Damascus is most likely to be back in the fold in 2020.

Bilateral relations are being restored as well. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have both reopened their embassies in Damascus, while Jordan has appointed a chargé d'affaires. Given those countries' close relations with Saudi Arabia, it's unlikely they would have acted without a wink and nod from Riyadh. For Assad's former Arab foes, there is a counterintuitive geopolitical logic at play here: Having failed to sever Damascus's link to Tehran through military pressure by arming Syrian rebels, they are now aiming to prevent Assad from being completely dependent on Iran by building economic linkages of their own. The goal wouldn't be to break the Syrian-Iranian strategic alliance—all but impossible at this point—but to prevent Syria from becoming a full-fledged Iranian proxy state.

There is also pure economic self-interest to consider. After eight years of conflict, Arab states want to reopen dormant trade arteries and cash in on the many possible lucrative opportunities available as Syria is re-integrated into the regional economy and reconstruction of some form begins. After trade between Syria and Jordan resumed through the Naseeb border crossing last October, several Jordanian delegations, including contractors and engineers, have visited Syria to scope out opportunities involving public and private sector projects. Arab Gulf investors and companies are equally eager to get a slice of the rebuilding pie. Direct commercial flights are also set to resume between Syria and the UAE, Bahrain and Oman in the next few months.

But this rush to engage is already creating friction with the United States and Europe. Washington wants to extract maximum economic pain on Assad and his backers by withholding any reconstruction assistance and investments. James Jeffrey, Trump's Syria envoy, vowed that the U.S. will do all it can to prevent regional and allied states from getting

involved in postwar rebuilding in Syria "until the political process makes progress," and that looks as unlikely as ever, to say the least. The threat of U.S. sanctions against states that do business with the Syrian government, or any company associated with it, is making many Arab investors and companies nervous. European countries are also still wary of dealings with a regime they consider to be illegitimate. Although less hawkish then Washington, the European Union recently expanded sanctions against prominent Syrian entities and business figures.

But even here, the long-term interests of Washington and Brussels may not necessarily align. While the U.S. and powerful European countries have shared the objective of removing Assad from power, European countries, because of their geographic proximity to the Middle East and the influx of Syrian refugees, are concerned about a weak Syrian state and economy that would fuel further regional instability. Javier Solana, the former EU high representative for foreign and security policy and former NATO secretary general, recently argued that the West must admit that its approach to Syria has failed and "negotiate more seriously, and at all levels."

Of course, these diverging interests make life easier for Assad moving forward. Playing regional and global powers against each other to secure Syria's strategic interests has been a hallmark of its foreign policy for the past four decades, perfected by Assad's father, Hafez, over his 30-year rule.

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THERE WILL BE NO JUSTICE IN ASSAD'S 'VICTORIOUS SYRIA'

FREDERICK DEKNATEL | AUGUST 2018

The billboards that greet people crossing the border from neighboring Lebanon now read: "Welcome to victorious Syria." It's unclear if they've replaced the old signs inviting you into "Assad's Syria," which have adorned highways near Syria's land borders and the Damascus airport for years. A decade ago, one of the many other pieces of pro-Assad propaganda lining roads and the sides of buildings across the country was a huge, backlit sign that guarded an entrance to Damascus' Old City, abutting the medieval Citadel: "I Believe in Syria," it read, next to a beaming, waving President Bashar al-Assad.

The Associated Press noted the new welcome signs in a cautiously optimistic report from Damascus late last month, where "many of the checkpoints that for years have snarled traffic are gone." The outlying suburbs held by various rebel factions, recently retaken by the regime at a staggering cost, are again connected to the city center. "There's a new feeling of hope that an end is near to Syria's seven-year civil war," the AP explained.

What does "an end"—not the end—mean? For one thing, it means that the government is issuing hundreds of death notices to families whose detained and missing relatives, it now says, have been dead for years. They are "the first public acknowledgment by the government that hundreds if not thousands of prisoners died in state custody," according to The New York Times. Some of the notices suggest mass executions; others indicate torture in prison. The release of information has been unexpected and haphazard. "In some towns, the

government has posted names of the deceased so their relatives can get death certificates," Ben Hubbard and Karam Shoumali reported. "In other cases, families have obtained documents that attest to their relatives' deaths. In some cases, security officers have informed families personally."

It's an exceedingly grim and cynical attempt by the regime at closure. "The regime is closing one chapter and starting a new one," Emile Hokayem, a Middle East analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told the Times. "It is telling the rebels and the activists that this chapter is gone, that whatever hope in some surviving revolutionary spirit has been crushed."

As Sam Dagher wrote in The Atlantic this week, reporting from Lebanon, many Syrians "believe the regime wants the lists of the dead to serve as a cruel, macabre epilogue for all those who rose up more than seven years ago." He interviewed Syrian refugees from the town of Daraya, outside Damascus, who were starved and besieged until the rebels there surrendered in 2016. Dagher says the message to the survivors of Daraya from Assad "is loud

BELOW A poster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with Arabic that reads "Welcome to victorious Syria," is displayed on the border between Lebanon and Syria, July 20, 2018 (AP photo by Hassan

and clear: You must lose everything for having challenged me. Nobody is going to hold me accountable for punishing you."

There are other demonstrations of Assad's renewed confidence and strength. In July, his forces, backed by Russia and Iran, retook the dusty town of Daraa, where the 2011 uprising essentially began, and the rest of southwestern Syria, which had been under the sway of different opposition and jihadist groups since the early days of the civil war. A new offensive looms in the northwestern province of Idlib, along the Turkish border. The last Syrian province outside regime control, Idlib has been, in the words of the United Nations, a "dumping ground" for rebel fighters and their families, given the terms of so-called evacuation deals imposed by the regime on Homs, Aleppo, the Damascus suburbs and other devastated battlegrounds once declared "liberated." There is nowhere else for the displaced of Idlib to go.

In his big picture briefing for WPR this week on the current landscape of Syria's war and what's to come, Aron Lund explains why the fate of Idlib, like two other pockets of the country that Assad's forces have not retaken, "is now in the hands of foreigners." In Idlib, that means Turkey, which now has some 1,300 troops stationed in a dozen outposts on the edge of the province, and Russia. They have competing interests, between Moscow's aim of eliminating the sizable jihadist presence in Idlib and Ankara's worry of another exodus of refugees into Turkey if there's a full-blown military offensive. "Some pieces of Idlib may be handed over to Assad," Lund writes, "but if Russia then decides to put its thumb on the scale in Turkey's favor, large parts of Syria's northwest could be out of Assad's reach for the foreseeable future."

"FOR SYRIAN SOCIETY ITSELF, THERE MUST BE A RECKONING WITH THESE ABUSES IF THERE IS TO BE ANY PROSPECT OF A STABLE FUTURE."

"It wouldn't be a clean end to the war, but does Moscow really need that?" Lund adds. "From Moldova to South Ossetia and eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin has a habit of

letting messy situations linger to its advantage. As seen in Cyprus, Turkey is also no stranger to the concept of endless interim solutions." The future of Syria, as the war winds down, could be a series of more localized, semi-frozen conflicts—a Turkish dependency in the northwest, and a Kurdish proto-republic in the northeast, tepidly backed by the United States.

All this geopolitical wrangling, and how it may or may not be resolved, pushes other questions out of the picture, as the regime's sudden release of death notifications makes clear. Four years ago, before Russia's military intervention all but saved Assad, and at a time when a regime defector was sharing thousands of images in Washington of torture in Assad's prisons, the question of accountability and justice—of a Syria without Assad—was at least open to debate. "If Assad stays in power, I don't see a possibility for transitional justice," Mohammad Al Abdallah, the executive director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Center in Washington, told me in 2014. David Tolbert, the president of the International Center for Transitional Justice, added: "For Syrian society itself, there must be a reckoning with these abuses if there is to be any prospect of a stable future."

Four years later, a different future is here: an Assad victory, on his extreme terms, even if victory doesn't guarantee Syria's full territorial integrity.

Frederick Deknatel is the managing editor of World Politics Review.

THE WIDER JIHADI MOVEMENT WILL TAKE OVER WHERE THE ISLAMIC STATE LEFT OFF

TORE HAMMING | NOVEMBER 2017

What does the future of the Islamic State look like in the wake of its battlefield setbacks in Iraq and Syria, from the fall of Mosul last summer to Raqqa last month? Will it revert to a low-level insurgency, or lash out with the kinds of terrorist attacks more associated with its predecessors, like al-Qaida? Can it sustain itself as a movement drawing in sympathizers and recruits from around the world?

Writing for The Washington Post last month, J.M. Berger and Amarnath Amarasingam argued that the Islamic State's "enormous losses ... will cripple the effectiveness of its previous approach to recruitment" since "it has lost far more than territory. It has lost the living, beating heart of its appeal." They highlighted a fundamental factor behind the Islamic State's success: its ties to a broader social movement of jihadi extremism. As they pointed out, a shared sense of identity among its adherents manifested itself in the concept of "entitativity," or groupness, that is essential for mobilization.

The crumbling caliphate and the resulting demise of the Islamic State's propaganda output will certainly make it a less attractive outfit to join for sympathizers to its cause. Although the Islamic State will strive to mitigate these negative effects by emphasizing a new "post-caliphate" narrative to draw in supporters, the setbacks will be evident. But they will be setbacks for the Islamic State itself, the specific organization, and not necessarily for the broader jihadi movement that fed it.

In the study of social movements, scholars have introduced an important distinction between social movement "organizations" and social movement "families." Donatella Della Porta, an Italian political scientist at the Scuola Normale Superiore, has argued that the social movement family is "a set of coexisting movements, which, regardless of their specific goals, have similar basic values and organizational overlaps, and sometimes may even join for common campaigns." The Islamic State is thus just one movement within a broader jihadi family, albeit the most prominent one over the past three years.

ABOVE A member of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces walks inside a prison built by Islamic State fighters, Raqqa, Syria, Oct. 20, 2017 (AP photo by Asmaa

This jihadi family, often wrongly referred to as the jihadi-Salafi movement or ideology, has managed to attract sympathizers for more than three decades. That jihadi-Salafi label is misplaced since far from all jihadis are in fact Salafis—ultraconservative Sunni Muslims who adhere to a strict, puritanical form of Islam—so the notion overestimates the Salafi influence on the jihadi movement. The movement's success in mobilization reached new heights after the eruption of the Syrian civil war. But even as the role of jihadis may dwindle in Syria and Iraq as the Islamic State's caliphate falls, the diverse but related ideologies of jihadi groups will continue to attract followers, for three main reasons.

First, since Syria's civil war broke out, the vast number of people either actively fighting for the jihadi cause on the battlefield or following and promoting it behind their computer and smart-phone screens implies that a generation has become embedded in jihadi ideology and accustomed to the normality of violence as a legitimate method of political expression. A major but often overlooked challenge here is the high number of children of foreign fighters who have grown up under the

Islamic State. According to new figures from the French Ministry of Interior, for example, as many as 500 French children under the age of 12 are currently residing in the Islamic State's remaining territory in Syria or Iraq with their jihadi father or mother. What happens if or when such indoctrinated youth return to their home countries in Europe?

Second, the immense amount of jihadi material, including propaganda, that has been produced and disseminated in the past decade, but especially since the Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014, is still widely available online. As evident in the popularity of the material of Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical Yemen-based cleric who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011, this material will prove essential for jihadi sympathizers in years to come. Add to this the recent years of high-intensity jihadi activity that have entailed the indoctrination of young cadres of jihadi ideologues, disseminators and recruiters who will not necessarily put down their pen or leave the keyboard because of the organizational demise of the Islamic State.

Third, the underlying factors initially leading to the radicalization and popularity of jihadi groups are still prevalent. Sectarianism is only getting worse; many Middle Eastern states remain in the hands of autocratic regimes that leave little space for political opposition; and external actors, including Western states, continue to either uphold such regimes or in other ways interfere counterproductively, for example through drone strikes that inflame anti-American and anti-Western sentiment. On several occasions, I have received messages—sometimes reliable and sometimes not—from individuals in Yemen concerned or directly affected by the U.S. drone campaign. These on-the-ground accounts confirm what has been widely established in reporting and other studies on Yemen and Pakistan: that

THERE IS LITTLE TO SUGGEST THAT THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE WILL CAUSE JIHADISM TO LOSE ITS POSITION AS THE MOST ATTRACTIVE RADICAL IDEOLOGY ON OFFER.

such assassination programs benefit jihadis more than they harm them, by stoking anti-Americanism.

Nevertheless, as Berger and Amarasingam noted, the Islamic State was unique in several ways, including its declaration of a physical caliphate and emphasis on governance, not just terrorism, as appeals to its followers. This uniqueness will likely have the effect of pushing Islamic State adherents, especially youth, to search for another radical ideology to vent their frustrations, rather than shop around for a new jihadi outfit to join. However, there is little to suggest that the organizational fragmentation of the Islamic State will cause jihadism to lose its position as the most attractive radical ideology currently on offer.

In fact, the broader jihadi movement—in the form of country-specific and globally focused organizational expressions—stands ready to take over. For some jihadi sympathizers, these known entities, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—formerly the Nusra Front—or al-Qaida, will not be enough, and they will either establish new groups or operate outside any organizational framework. Others will favor the prospect of joining another well-established and less radical group with a similar level of entitativity or groupness.

In either case, the broader jihadi movement will learn from the experience of the Islamic State, both the positive and negative. The past four years leave other groups with a list of "do's" and "don'ts" for the future. This especially concerns methods of mobilization, but also warnings about not engaging everyone else as the enemy.

In attempting to forecast what will follow the collapse of the caliphate, the focus should not be limited to the appeal of a specific group, but instead the appeal of the broader jihadi movement. After all, there is little indication that jihad as a method of political mobilization has lost support among those who are disaffected and radicalized.

The Islamic State's fall will emphatically change global jihadism and its organizational and ideological expressions, but

not necessarily its prospects for mobilization and success. There is still a long way to go to ensure that.

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AMERICA'S SYRIA POLICY IS INCOHERENT, AND THERE'S NO SIGN IT WILL CHANGE

STEVEN METZ | SEPTEMBER 2018

As the tragic civil war in Syria grinds through its eighth year, it is impossible to make sense of the Trump administration's strategy as it moves in one direction and then shifts in another, again and again. American policy is utterly incoherent, and there is no sign that will change.

President Donald Trump's position on Syria, expressed more often in tweets than in formal policy statements, vacillated wildly even before he was elected president. In June 2013, for instance, he contended that the United States should "stay the hell out of Syria." But two months later, after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own people, Trump advocated for a U.S. military strike and vociferously criticized then-President Barack Obama for not ordering one.

Once in the White House, Trump initially focused on defeating the Islamic State, which by that time controlled a miniature, self-proclaimed "caliphate" based in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa. He expanded support for local militias fighting the extremists and increased direct U.S. air and artillery strikes. But after Raqqa fell and the Islamic State dispersed, the Trump administration appeared to have no clear idea how to turn battlefield success into strategic victory. By March 2017, administration officials were saying that the U.S. would not be involved in determining Syria's long-term future.

But a month later, after another chemical attack by the Assad regime, Trump ordered a cruise missile strike on a Syrian airbase.

ABOVE Protesters from the Answer Coalition gather in front of the White House, Washington, April 14, 2018 (AP photo by Carolyn Kaster).

"Steps are underway," then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson even suggested, to create an international coalition to remove Assad. A bit later, Tillerson said the U.S. might broker a cease-fire that included Assad, while Nikki Haley, Trump's ambassador to the United Nations, and H.R. McMaster, Trump's national security adviser at the time, both expressed skepticism about a political solution that left Assad in power.

In the late summer of 2018, the confusion escalated. The president indicated that the U.S. would not play a role in Syria's reconstruction despite reports that U.S. military leaders felt that was necessary to prevent an Islamic State revival. While Trump had indicated that he wanted to "get out of" Syria, administration officials like James Jeffrey, a retired diplomat whom Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently named U.S. special representative for Syrian engagement, said earlier this month that American military forces would remain for some unspecified time. Then, this week, National Security Adviser John Bolton switched to a different objective, announcing that U.S. troops are not leaving Syria "as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders."

All of this is incoherence, not flexibility. In part, it reflects the broader incoherence of the Trump policy formulation process, where a presidential tweet or off-the-cuff remark can change everything. With no experience at foreign or national security policy, no overarching concept about the purpose of American power, and a personal style focused on disaggregated responses to immediate problems rather than a long-term approach to various challenges, Trump is the antithesis of a strategist. He operates without a

IN THE ABSENCE OF A CLEAR OBJECTIVE IN SYRIA, THE BEST THE U.S. CAN HOPE FOR IS AVOIDING AN OUTRIGHT FIASCO.

discernible vision for the Middle East or American security writ large in the coming decades, or for how to balance security benefits against costs and risks. Trump's senior advisers do have more strategic mindsets but are sometimes themselves at odds and, after staking out a public position, often are contradicted or undercut by the president.

American policy in Syria is also incoherent because the U.S., out of all the nations and nonstate groups involved there, has the least clear sense of its strategic priorities. Assad, Turkey, Iran and Russia all know what they want and what price they are willing to pay to get it; America does not. For a while, the defeat of the Islamic State was paramount, although neither the Obama nor Trump administration fully explained why that was vital for U.S. national security. Then America's objective was to deter chemical attacks, although it was never clear why those were unacceptable while conventional violence was acceptable. At other times, Washington seems concerned by the humanitarian disaster in Syria yet is unwilling to take in refugees. Sometimes the U.S. wants to limit Russian influence, but at other times it doesn't seem to care. Most recently, Bolton linked the presence of American troops in Syria to containing Iran. But no one in the administration has explained how a small U.S. troop deployment will thwart broader Iranian aspirations or deter Tehran from supporting Assad, which it considers a vital national interest.

At this point, there is no indication that any of this will change and that a coherent Syria policy will emerge. Past American presidents who assumed office with limited national security expertise, like Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, eventually developed a feel for strategy. There is no sign that Trump will. Yet he is unwilling to delegate control of national security policy to one of his senior advisers, in essence making them "strategist in chief."

With so little chance of the Trump administration setting clear priorities in Syria, questions abound. Is preventing the return of the Islamic State the most important U.S. objective in Syria? Or is it containing Iran? Perhaps preserving regional

order? Or maybe maintaining limitations on what dictators can do to their own people? Is it sustaining a security relationship with Turkey, a NATO ally—or helping defend Israel? Something else? No one knows. The best that can be hoped for, then, is avoiding an outright fiasco. But in the face of continuing policy incoherence, there is no guarantee of that.

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TRUMP'S SYRIA DEBACLE UNNERVES ALLIES, COMFORTS ENEMIES AND SQUANDERS U.S. POWER

JUDAH GRUNSTEIN | OCTOBER 2019

There are any number of defensible arguments in support of President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria. It is safe to assume that Trump didn't consider any of them. Instead, Trump seems to have acted as ever on impulse, out of a misguided sense that his instinct is a better guide than strategic planning and historical literacy. His decision reveals not an infallible instinct but a failure to understand three core elements of American power: assurance, deterrence and leverage.

To begin with the theoretical arguments in support of withdrawing from northeastern Syria, first and foremost, the U.S. has no essential national interests at stake there. The U.S. deployment that began in late 2015 accomplished a number of valuable goals inexpensively, including militarily defeating the Islamic State, and keeping Syrian, Russian and Iranian-aligned forces out of the area. But the presence of American troops there and the partnership on the ground with Syrian Kurdish militias were ad hoc arrangements that were never meant to be more than temporary. After the defeat of the Islamic State on the battlefield, the many problematic aspects of America's partnership with Syrian Kurds—namely the ideology of their most potent militia, the YPG; its ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK; and the perceived security threat the YPG poses to Turkey —took on newfound significance.

TRUMP'S IMPETUOUS DECISION WAS DEVOID OF ANY PLANNING PROCESS, LEAVING NOT ONLY AMERICA'S PARTNERS AND EUROPEAN ALLIES IN THE DARK, BUT ALSO MOST OF HIS OWN ADMINISTRATION.

Nevertheless, given the volatility of the situation on the ground and the power vacuum that U.S. forces would leave in their wake, all these arguments presupposed a measured withdrawal in proper order at the appropriate time. In this way, security assurances could be provided to both America's erstwhile Kurdish partners and its NATO treaty ally, Turkey; the gains against the Islamic State preserved; and Syrian and Russian forces prevented from entering the area.

Instead, Trump's impetuous decision was devoid of any planning process, leaving not only America's partners and European allies in the dark, but also most of his own administration, including the U.S. military. That is in part a damning indictment of U.S. and European policy planners, since Trump has signaled his desire to leave Syria since at least December 2018. In finally and abruptly doing so, he has set in motion a chain reaction that has undone in a week most if not all of the objectives that had been achieved over five years, while exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the area and doing enormous damage to America's regional standing.

BELOW President Donald Trump arrives to speak at a campaign rally in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Oct. 11, 2019 (AP photo by

As is often the case, Trump's misguided faith in his own instincts blinded him to the true sources of American power, starting with its ability to assure allies and deter adversaries. Assuring allies of the U.S. commitment to their defense is the cornerstone of America's global network of security alliances and partnerships, which functions as a force multiplier for the U.S. military and a readily available pool of potential coalition partners. For obvious reasons,

allies that don't trust the U.S. to be there when it counts will begin making other arrangements for their own security. They will also be more circumspect when it comes to participating in American-led military operations.

Over the course of his presidency, Trump has already been a one-man wrecking crew undermining the trust U.S. allies and partners place in Washington, from his transactional approach to security alliances to his use of national security justifications to impose trade tariffs. Trump's apologists have long argued that despite his iconoclastic pronouncements, his administration's working policies toward America's alliances have not changed.

But the cavalier manner in which Trump betrayed the trust not only of America's Kurdish partners in Syria, but also its European allies participating in the U.S.-led coalition there, will make America's allies and partners think twice about how much faith they should put into U.S. security assurances moving forward. That will almost certainly prove costly the next time the U.S. needs their help to achieve its military objectives.

Trump's decision also undermines the U.S. ability to deter adversaries, or in this case a treaty ally, from actions that Washington opposes. U.S. deterrence depends on a number of conditions, including not only the ability and willingness to act militarily in order to uphold clearly defined objectives, but also the perception by the actor to be deterred that all of these conditions apply. When they do, the presence of a mere 50 U.S. special operations forces on the Syrian border can effectively deter an incursion by thousands of Turkish and Turkish-aligned forces.

If any of them fails, so too does U.S. deterrence. By redeploying those U.S. forces away from the border in the face of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's threats, Trump has raised valid questions about how willing he is to use force to defend America's red lines. And by failing to clearly define those red lines, he has introduced uncertainty that heightens the risk of an adversary's miscalculation leading to conflict.

Rightly or wrongly, Trump's decision to call off punitive strikes against Iran for downing a U.S. drone in June had already given

the impression that he is a paper tiger. His actions of the past week heighten the incentives for other adversaries to bet against or at least test his resolve, further weakening America's ability to achieve its objectives without resorting to the use of military force.

Finally, Trump's determination to pull out of Syria regardless of the consequences demonstrates his failure to understand the use of military leverage to achieve political objectives. Since the start of Syria's civil war, U.S. policy regarding the conflict has been a litany of tragic errors, half-measures, false starts and missed opportunities. At the same time, the U.S. has managed to avoid becoming entangled in an exceedingly complex and treacherous conflict. The military deployment to northeastern Syria is in many ways a microcosm of this broader narrative. Despite long-term complications and with a limited military presence, the U.S. has nevertheless been able to achieve surprisingly substantial objectives. But the key payoff, besides rolling back the Islamic State, remained ahead: leveraging the U.S. military presence for a say in determining the final political resolution of the conflict.

To be clear, this was never going to allow Washington to dictate outcomes. But it would have perhaps provided enough clout for the U.S. to gain meaningful concessions. Trump unilaterally squandered that leverage, allowing Syrian and Russian forces to enter an area that had until now been off limits to them, with nothing to show for it in return. The same dynamic was on display in September when, after having torpedoed a tentative deal with the Taliban that would have conditioned U.S. troop reductions on security guarantees and other concessions, Trump refused to rule out going through with the drawdown anyway. The clear message for the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as for Iran, North Korea and Venezuela, is to wait Trump out until he loses patience, declares victory and caves.

As always, Trump's latest crisis is entirely self-made. In fact, he has benefited from a remarkable run of benign international circumstances that only make the prospects of his handling a real crisis even more worrisome. Until now, the damage Trump had done to America's alliances and global standing was largely

theoretical and probably remediable, though with great effort, by his eventual successor. The fallout from this past week's debacle is more concrete and could prove to be more lasting.

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THOUGH STRENGTHENED IN SYRIA, HEZBOLLAH FACES UNPRECEDENTED DANGERS WITHIN

NICHOLAS BLANFORD | SEPTEMBER 2019

BEIRUT—In late August, an Israeli airstrike on a compound south of Damascus killed two Hezbollah fighters, who had reportedly been working alongside members of the Quds Force, the elite branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to launch drone attacks on Israeli territory. According to the Israeli army, the airstrike thwarted an imminent attack.

Hours later, two mini rotary drones, one fitted with explosives, crashed into the southern suburbs of Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold, damaging a Hezbollah media office. Details of the incident remain foggy, but reports suggest that Israel had dispatched the drones to target a machine used to mix solid-fuel components for Hezbollah's long-range missiles, which was housed in a shipping container next to the same building.

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, appeared on television the next day to warn that the group would avenge the deaths of the two Hezbollah fighters, while also putting Israel on notice that its drones, which Israel routinely flies over Lebanese territory, would no longer be safe.

Following up on Nasrallah's threats, on Sept. 1, Hezbollah launched missiles at an Israeli military vehicle in northern Israel. The missiles narrowly missed their target, but in an effort to convince Hezbollah that it had drawn blood and thereby avert a potential second attack, Israel staged a fake casualty evacuation. The Israeli military then fired some 100 artillery rounds into southern Lebanon, and both sides stood down.

The quick retreat suggested that neither side is currently willing to escalate the volatile situation into a state of war. But the tit-for-tat attacks are exactly the kind of incident that many fear could eventually lead to an outbreak of heavier fighting between Hezbollah and Israel.

The Lebanese Shiite group, which simultaneously functions as a militia, social welfare organization and political party, has emerged from seven years of war in neighboring Syria strengthened militarily and politically. But Hezbollah also faces internal challenges it must tackle to stem growing disenchantment among the movement's base. All the while, it must navigate the dangerous standoff with Israel to avoid a conflict that neither side wants. For a group that has never been stronger, the dangers have never been more pronounced.

ABOVE Hezbollah fighters at a memorial service in Tefahta village, south Lebanon, Feb. 13, 2016 (AP Photo by Mohammed Zaatari).

After Syria, a Strengthened Hezbollah

Since its founding in the 1980s following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, amid the country's grinding 15-year civil war,

Hezbollah has become one of Israel's gravest security threats. From a small resistance force of some 3,000 to 5,000 fighters confronting Israeli troops in southern Lebanon, the organization has grown to become a battle-hardened army consisting of tens of thousands committed and well-trained fighters.

Hezbollah's involvement in active combat in Syria, which likely began within a few months of the beginning of the Syrian civil war after protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime began in March 2011, is a major reason for its current state of battle-readiness. At the same time, its deployment has strained the group's cohesion and finances. Reflecting the potential divisiveness of its decision to defend Assad, Nasrallah denied for almost two years that Hezbollah had dispatched sizeable numbers of fighters to assist the Syrian army to suppress the popular uprising.

Rumors of the group's involvement began to harden by the summer of 2012, with reports of nighttime funerals of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria. In October 2012, the combat death in Syria of Ali Nassif, a senior Hezbollah commander, further confirmed what had become an open secret. Given Nassif's stature within the organization, it was impossible to cover up his death, and a lavish funeral was held in his honor. By December 2012, videos were circulating online showing Hezbollah fighters deployed in Damascus.

HEZBOLLAH'S ROLE IN SYRIA TODAY IS TO SERVE AS A COMPONENT OF IRAN'S MILITARY ENTRENCHMENT, WITH THE FOCUS NO LONGER ON SYRIAN REBEL GROUPS AND THE ISLAMIC STATE, BUT ON ISRAEL.

In May 2013, Nasrallah finally admitted that his fighters were in fact deployed in Syria. His comments came as Hezbollah units were engaged in their first major battle in the Syrian civil war: to retake the town of Qusayr, strategically located near the Lebanese border and close to the then-opposition stronghold of Homs, from rebel control. The bitterly contested town was key to controlling supply lines from Lebanon.

In a televised speech that month marking the anniversary of Israel's troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, Nasrallah justified Hezbollah's involvement in fighting Syrian rebels, saying that the peaceful protesters in Syria had given way to radical, armed Sunni extremists, or "takfiris," who "are dangerous not only to Hezbollah and the Shia, but also to all Lebanese people and resistance forces." He added that, "If these groups dominate the districts by the Lebanese borders"—a clear reference to Qusayr—"then they're going to endanger the lives of Muslim and Christian Lebanese."

Nasrallah also insisted that Hezbollah had an interest in defending the Assad regime because of the role Syria plays in the "Axis of Resistance," referring to Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and various other Palestinian and Iraqi Shiite factions that oppose Israel and Western policies in the Middle East. "If Syria falls in the hands of the Americans, Israelis, takfiris and the tools of the United States in the region," Nasrallah declared, "the resistance will be besieged and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions on the Lebanese people."

In general, Hezbollah's supporters accepted Nasrallah's logic, while the party's opponents accused Hezbollah of needlessly dragging Lebanon into its neighbor's civil war. That argument gained resonance when mainly Shiite-populated areas in the northern Bekaa Valley and southern Beirut were struck by some 14 suicide bombings between July 2013 and June 2014, killing almost 100 people and wounding more than 800.

The domestic pitfalls of Hezbollah's intervention notwithstanding, it proved timely and critical for Assad. In early 2013, the Assad regime was facing a serious threat to its grip on power. Hezbollah's support was decisive in the seizure of Qusayr in June 2013, which marked a gradual reversal in the Assad regime's waning fortunes.

In the wake of that victory, Hezbollah units began to deploy to multiple fronts across the country. The well-trained and disciplined Hezbollah men were generally given the job of leading assaults against rebel strongholds, while some

Hezbollah cadres were assigned to regular Syrian army units to stiffen their backbones. Other cadres helped recruit and train new loyalist Syrian militias. While exact figures for Hezbollah's deployment in Syria are unknown, estimates have consistently placed it at between 5,000 to 10,000 at any one time, depending on operational needs.

Nevertheless, by early 2015, rebel groups were once more gaining the upper hand. Having seized most of the northern province of Idlib, they began to push south toward the cities of Hama and Homs. Meanwhile, fatigue was beginning to set in among Hezbollah's supporters in Lebanon. Lebanese families were growing tired of the steady trickle of body bags from Syria, especially as there appeared to be no end in sight to a war that had likely already killed more Hezbollah fighters in two years than had died in 18 years fighting Israeli military occupation in southern Lebanon. Stories began to circulate in Shiite areas of Lebanon that some Hezbollah units, after returning from Syria, were refusing to go back. Some Hezbollah fighters quit the party altogether, while others joined the flow of Syrian refugees headed to Europe to start new lives. Hezbollah even established a unit dedicated to improving the morale of the organization, according to sources close to the party.

However, Russia's intervention in Syria in the summer of 2015 once more turned the tide in the Assad regime's favor. Russian air power proved decisive in allowing the ground forces fighting on Assad's behalf—which now comprised regular Syrian troops, loyalist Syrian militias, Hezbollah, Russian special forces and mercenaries, Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militias, and militias composed of Pakistani and Afghan Shiites—to gain back ground from the rebels.

By early 2018, the survival of Assad's regime looked assured, at least in the immediate future. Aleppo had been retaken, followed by several swift offensives to recapture the Eastern Ghouta region, east of Damascus. The provinces of Quneitra and Deraa in the south were recaptured shortly thereafter.

ABOVE Lebanese soldiers next to a Hezbollah flag patrol in the southern Lebanese village of Aitaroun, on the Israel-Lebanon border, Israel, Aug. 27, 2019 (AP photo by Ariel Schalit).

Since September 2018, Hezbollah has been winding down its deployment in Syria as the fighting draws closer to an end. The group's fighters are still battling pockets of the Islamic State in the central part of the country, and it may yet play a role in the ongoing offensive in Idlib province. Otherwise, Hezbollah's role in Syria today is to serve as a component of Iran's military entrenchment in the country, with the focus no longer on Syrian rebel groups and the Islamic State, but squarely on Israel.

Hezbollah has helped Iran and its allied proxies establish a permanent presence in Syria. Military bases south of Damascus —in the provinces of Rif Dimashq, Quneitra, Deraa and Sweida— are being used to store weapons, such as surface-to-surface missiles, pilotless drones and anti-tank missiles. The most recent Israeli airstrike on Aug. 24 targeted one of these bases. Hezbollah has also been recruiting and training local volunteers

into anti-Israel, pro-Assad militias, some of whom monitor Israeli movements along the line of separation in the Golan Heights.

As a result, Hezbollah has become a much more potent threat to Israel, along both its northern border with Lebanon and its northeast border with Syria, where Hezbollah is deployed along with Iranian-backed militias from Syria and Iraq.

Israel and Hezbollah Face Off

Israel has been watching this build-up with alarm. Beginning in January 2013, when Israel staged its first airstrikes against Hezbollah assets located in Syria, it has repeatedly struck to keep the group from acquiring advanced weaponry, and especially to prevent it from transporting any it did acquire to Lebanon. It quickly became apparent that Syria, Iran and Hezbollah would generally turn a blind eye to these attacks against Hezbollah facilities in Syria.

But when Israel struck a suspected arms convoy just inside Lebanese territory near the village of Janta in February 2014, Hezbollah hit back with a series of unclaimed operations launched from the northern Golan Heights, then under Hezbollah's control. The reprisals culminated in the wounding of four Israeli soldiers in a roadside bomb ambush. Since then, Israel has confined its overt attacks against Hezbollah and Iranian proxies to Syrian territory, until the recent attacks in Beirut.

More recently, however, Israel has voiced alarm over an apparent program operated by Hezbollah to turn its existing arsenal of unguided rockets into precision-guided missiles. Since at least 2009, Hezbollah has possessed some guided missiles, namely the Iranian Fateh-110 system, which are accurate enough to pose a threat to a large target in Israel, such as a military base, industrial plant or Ben Gurion International Airport, but less so to smaller, more specific targets like individual buildings. In the past two years, however, Hezbollah has been working to improve their accuracy to bring them to within 10 meters of their targets, according to Western intelligence sources who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The group is also attempting to expand

AS EACH SIDE TRIES TO OUTMANEUVER THE OTHER, THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES HANGING ABOVE BOTH HEZBOLLAH AND ISRAEL IS THE PROSPECT OF ANOTHER WAR.

the range of these missiles from 250 kilometers to 300 kilometers, which would allow Hezbollah to hit all major population centers in Israel with its long-range rockets. Additionally, Hezbollah's Syrian-manufactured unguided artillery rockets are being fitted with guidance systems that will allow them to strike targets within a radius of 10 meters as well, the sources said. Hezbollah is also working to expand the range of these rockets from around 100 kilometers to 200 kilometers.

A year ago, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveiled satellite images of three sites south of Beirut and near Rafik Hariri International Airport that he claimed Hezbollah was using to upgrade its rockets into missiles. "I have a message for Hezbollah today," Netanyahu told the U.N. "Israel ... knows what you're doing. Israel knows where you are doing it. And Israel will not let you get away with it."

In recent weeks, Israel has released more satellite images of Hezbollah facilities in Lebanon, including one in the eastern Bekaa Valley near the village of Khreibe, where it said precision-guided missiles are being assembled. Western intelligence services have apparently known about the checkpoint-guarded facility—which lies at the southern end of a larger Hezbollah training area with several firing ranges and logistical facilities—for at least five years.

Direct clashes between Hezbollah and Israel like those of the past month have been rare since the end of the 33-day war they fought in 2006. Nasrallah declared that war a "divine victory," after Hezbollah had essentially fought Israel to a stalemate, even though more than 1,100 Lebanese civilians were killed, alongside hundreds of Hezbollah fighters. Israeli airstrikes also destroyed much of Lebanon's infrastructure. One hundred

twenty-one Israeli soldiers were killed in the fighting, along with 44 Israeli civilians.

But as each side tries to outmaneuver the other, the Sword of Damocles hanging above both Hezbollah and Israel is the prospect of another war, which would be even more devastating than the one in 2006. This grim reality continues to serve as a form of deterrence for both parties—at least for now.

Consolidating the Home Front

Amid the rising tensions with Israel and the winding down of the Syrian civil war, in early 2018, Hezbollah shifted its attention toward consolidating its domestic base.

In many respects, the picture at home is reassuring. Today, Hezbollah is the unchallenged top dog of Lebanese politics. It continues to maintain a steady cross-sectarian alliance, most importantly with the Free Patriotic Movement, a Christian party whose founder, Michel Aoun, is the president of Lebanon, and whose current leader, Gibran Basil, is the foreign minister. Parties opposed to Hezbollah and its allies include Future Movement, a mainly Sunni party headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri; the Lebanese Forces, a Christian party led by Samir Geagea; and the Progressive Socialist Party of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.

Since 2005, the rivalry between these two camps has led to instability and political gridlock, and in 2008 almost triggered another civil war. However, Hezbollah's opponents have come to accept, grudgingly, that there is little they can do to confront a well-armed group that has demonstrated its willingness to resort to violence if its key agenda is threatened. In 2016, after a deadlock that had left the country without a president for two and a half years, Hariri finally accepted Hezbollah's demand that Aoun become the head of state. Since then, an uneasy truce has existed between the rival parties.

Hezbollah's position was further strengthened in May 2018 when the party and its allies fared well in the Lebanese elections, winning a small majority in parliament. In the months that followed, during tortuous negotiations to form a government

CORRUPTION ERODES THE RESPECT THAT HEZBOLLAH HAS HISTORICALLY COMMANDED AMONG ITS SUPPORTERS. THIS IS ARGUABLY THE BIGGEST LONG-TERM DANGER FACING HEZBOLLAH TODAY.

under Hariri, Hezbollah pushed hard to win control for the first time over a government ministry that offers services, such as telecoms, health or electricity. Since Hezbollah first joined a Lebanese government in 2005, it had generally been content with one or two minor ministries. That gave it a seat at the Cabinet table, where it limited much of its activity to ensuring its core interests—namely, the retention of its military apparatus—were not threatened. Following the May 2018 elections, Hezbollah ended up with three, including the Health Ministry, which could help Hezbollah maintain support within its base by improving health services in Shiite areas of Lebanon.

However, Lebanon's economy is under serious threat. For the first time since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war, the Lebanese public seems more concerned about the country's fiscal health than about the prospect of another war with Israel. Lebanon's government debt stands at 150 percent of gross domestic product, the third-highest ratio in the world. The World Bank estimated the country's growth rate for 2018 at a mere 0.2 percent.

In addition to the poor economic climate in Lebanon, which affects Hezbollah's support base, the party itself is also facing a financial crunch. This is largely due to U.S. sanctions against Hezbollah's sponsor, Iran, imposed after President Donald Trump pulled out of the international nuclear agreement with Tehran in 2018. U.S. efforts to pursue and shut down some of Hezbollah's own global cash-generating operations, and threats to blacklist financial institutions that have any dealings with the group, have also

BELOW Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah speaks via a video link during the holy day of Ashoura in a southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, Sept. 10, 2019 (AP photo by Hussein

strained its financial situation.

This past March, Nasrallah took the unusual step of publicly referring to the financial crunch, which he described as an American-Israeli war against his party, underlining the seriousness of the crisis. "Yes, we may face... some difficulties and some hardship," he said in a televised speech, broadcast as always from an undisclosed location. "But with patience, tolerance, good management and prioritizing we can confront this war, and we can weather this war."

Nevertheless, Hezbollah has had to undertake some cost-cutting measures that may increase discontent within the party. It delayed salary payments for some of its cadres, while others no longer received bonuses for tours of duty in Syria. In early 2019, Hezbollah stopped paying new recruits' salaries—a major lure for young Shiite men looking for work in a country with few economic opportunities—and offered them only the social welfare benefits of membership, which include discounted education and health services at the party's clinics and hospitals.

Making these economic strains worse, in August, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Lebanon's Jammal Trust Bank for allegedly handling Hezbollah accounts. Washington has been rife with rumors for months that some Lebanese politicians allied to Hezbollah could also face sanctions, among them Gibran Basil, the foreign minister and future presidential aspirant.

Adding to the group's domestic woes, it seems that Hezbollah has in some respects grown too big for its own good. While the Shiite community continues to support Hezbollah in general, there are growing signs of dissatisfaction, especially in the tribal-dominated areas of the Bekaa Valley, which has been called the "barracks of Hezbollah" for historically being its main pool for recruitment. Some Shiites are beginning to chafe at the omnipresent organization that has come to dominate their lives, as the rationale for "resistance" grows weaker with each passing year. After all, Israel withdrew from Lebanese territory more than 19 years ago, and the two enemies have not fought each other in sustained combat in over 13 years.

In 2006, after the most recent war, Hezbollah and its chief, Nasrallah, were venerated across the Arab and Islamic worlds, having delivered a humiliating blow to the Israeli army. But Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war on the side of the brutal Assad government against a mainly Sunni opposition has shattered Hezbollah's image in the Middle East as a champion for the oppressed. Hezbollah, which means the "Party of God" in Arabic, has a new name among many Sunnis in Lebanon and across the region: Hizbu Shaitan, the "Party of the Devil." It is unlikely that even another successfully fought war with Israel will restore Hezbollah's standing in their eyes.

Corruption erodes the respect that Hezbollah has historically commanded among its supporters. This is arguably the biggest long-term danger facing Hezbollah today.

Even more serious for Hezbollah is the growing problem of corruption within the party. Twenty years ago, Hezbollah's supporters regarded it as the epitome of financial probity in an otherwise wholly corrupt environment. Middle-class Shiite businessmen happily donated to the "resistance," assured that the funds would go toward schools, hospitals, salaries or weapons. No longer. As the party swelled massively in terms of manpower after the 2006 war, corruption began to set in. Hezbollah's leadership attempted to stamp it out as signs of graft became clear. But once corruption takes root in an organization the size of Hezbollah, it is extremely difficult to eradicate.

What's Next for Hezbollah?

Hezbollah emerged from Syria seemingly victorious, with its military and political hand strengthened in Lebanon and the wider region. In January 2017, an influential Israeli think tank, in its annual security assessment, ranked Hezbollah as the main conventional threat facing the Jewish state. It speaks to the military capabilities that Hezbollah has acquired that many analysts and observers in Israel now consider it a more serious threat than any country in the Middle East, including Iran. In the event of a full-scale war, Hezbollah's arsenal would present Israel

with its greatest challenge since the 1948 Arab-Israel war, and most of the country would likely grind to a halt for the duration of the fighting. Israel's leaders appreciate this grim reality, which continues to serve as a form of deterrence for Hezbollah.

Hezbollah also is no longer merely a Lebanese "resistance" force opposing Israel; it has become a regional military player, deploying not only in Syria but also Iraq, as part of the post-2014 anti-Islamic State alliance, and in Yemen, where it has provided assistance and training to Houthi rebels battling a Saudi-led coalition. Hezbollah is Iran's most potent force multiplier, providing the Islamic Republic with strategic reach across the Middle East.

On the flip side, however, Hezbollah faces a serious financial crisis. The U.S. long ago recognized that the most effective means of undermining Hezbollah's capabilities is to go after its money supply. There is little reason to expect any change in that policy even if Trump is defeated at the polls in 2020.

More worrisome still is the curse of corruption. As it eats away at the moral fabric of the party, corruption erodes the respect that Hezbollah has historically commanded among its supporters. This could in time, irrespective of outside influences, irredeemably weaken the organization from within, and is arguably the biggest long-term danger facing Hezbollah today.

Hezbollah has skillfully managed to navigate the treacherous waters of Lebanese politics and the dangers posed by its enemies in Israel and the West for nearly four decades. But rising tensions in the Gulf between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the ineluctable threat of a catastrophic war with Israel as well as the internal strains within the organization represent serious challenges for Hezbollah's leadership in the months and years ahead.

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TRUMP'S SYRIA EXIT DESTROYED THE SLIM CHANCES OF BROKERING AN END TO THE WAR

CANDACE RONDEAUX | OCTOBER 2019

After eight years of chaos, it is hard to know which moment in the history of Syria's brutal civil war-turned-proxy-conflict will ultimately stand out as the most egregious. There can be little doubt, though, that President Donald Trump's sudden decision last week to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and abandon America's Kurdish allies in the militia known as the Syrian Democratic Forces—their most reliable partners on the ground in the campaign against the Islamic State—will rank as one of the most spectacular failures in the history of American foreign policy.

The White House's turnabout by tweet in Syria has not only shredded the last bit of America's credibility as a trustworthy ally and security guarantor in Middle East; it has also effectively destroyed the already slim chances of brokering an end to the war and some kind of sustainable peace, possibly for years to come. With fewer American boots on the ground and relations with Syrian Kurdish leaders fractured, the U.S. has little room now to influence outcomes in Syria. What started as a policy of equivocation about the indispensability of American leadership in the Middle East under the Obama administration in 2012 is now, seven years later under Trump, a policy of American capitulation to Russian aggression and appeasement of Turkey's worst authoritarian impulses.

Any hope that the U.S. might be able to positively shape the outcomes of the multiple, interlocking proxy wars in Syria all but evaporated as Russia rushed to fill the vacuum left by a hasty

exit of U.S. Special Forces from northern Syria and as Turkey appeared determined to wipe out a sizable portion of Syria's Kurdish population. The White House will now have a much harder time convincing members of the U.N. Security Council and exiled Syrian opposition groups still pushing for an end to the war that Washington's word is bond when it comes to brokering an equitable political settlement with Bashar al-Assad's resurgent regime.

ABOVE Vice President Mike Pence and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the Presidential Palace for talks on the Kurds and Syria, in Ankara, Turkey, Oct. 17, 2019 (AP photo by Jacquelyn Martin).

The symbolism of a prominent Russian propagandist, Oleg Blokhin, on hand to record a video of Russian military contractors taking over an abandoned American military base near the embattled Syrian town of Manbij was hard to miss. It appears that President Vladimir Putin now has the wind at his back. A greater Russian military presence near the Turkish border could give the Kremlin just the right amount of leverage it needs to check Iran's ambitions in Syria and the wider region, while stacking the deck in Moscow's favor should any Security Council vote come up in the near term on a pathway to resolving Syria's war.

Trump is already gifting Putin the spectacle of a debased U.S. presidency in near free fall amid an impeachment inquiry over Trump's efforts to get Ukraine to investigate his rival Democrats. The reckless exit from Syria—with U.S. troops forced to abandon their posts and even bomb their own base in order to "reduce the facility's military usefulness"—is another gift to Putin, the politician most responsible for putting Trump in power in 2016.

Meanwhile, Trump's decision to impose sanctions on Turkey over its Syria incursion will further fray U.S.-Turkish relations, while effectively paralyzing NATO if the Turkish military continues its assault on America's erstwhile Kurdish allies. It has

been clear for a while now that Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has soured on the North Atlantic alliance. And sure enough, he outright rejected the first U.S. calls for a cease-fire, effectively raising the diplomatic equivalent of the middle finger to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence even before their flight to Ankara got off the ground earlier this week.

Once they got to Turkey, though, there was a sliver of hope, as Pence, after a long meeting with Erdogan, announced a brief, five-day cease-fire that would allow the U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters to evacuate a strip of northern Syria. In exchange, the U.S. would remove last week's sanctions and hold off on further sanctions. Like much diplomacy under Trump, though, there are many questions marks. Soon after Pence announced the agreement, Turkey's foreign minister denied it was a cease-fire. As the White House frenzy to contain the blowback continues, Erdogan still seems committed to ending any questions about Kurdish autonomy once and for all.

The mayhem that has followed Trump's decision in Syria was entirely predictable. Less than a week after the Turkish army began its assault on Kurdish positions along Syria's border with Turkey, hundreds of Islamic State detainees broke out of a prison camp in the northern Syrian town of Ain Issa. As Turkish troops streamed across the Syrian border, U.S. forces were forced to leave behind dozens of high-ranking Islamic State detainees. Untold numbers of Kurds have been wounded and killed while Turkish-backed proxies have reportedly committed war crimes against members of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

History shows that abandoning allies on the battlefront never goes well. Doing so ahead of highly contentious elections next year only weakens Trump's ability to maneuver domestically and internationally. Anyone looking to cut a deal with the U.S. on a major foreign policy objective would be wise to wait until the results of the 2020

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election. This means China and the Taliban, among others.

The trouble brewing now over Trump's handling of Syria and Ukraine is not likely to clear up anytime soon. On top of frayed U.S. relations with Turkey and Russia, as well as existing tensions with Iran, it should be enough of a warning for the entire world about the perilous state of the Trump White House.

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