

# The Biden Administration's How the United States Should Approach Normalization Efforts with Syria

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

U.S. partners in the Middle East have started to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, even though Bashar al-Assad is still in power.

The Biden Administration cannot look the other way as countries begin to normalize relations with the unrepentant and unaccountable Assad regime.

The United States must continue to isolate Assad and his regime, discourage other countries from normalizing relations with him, and apply sanctions wisely.

Over the past few months, a number of U.S. partners in the Middle East have started to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, even though Bashar al-Assad is still in power. Recognizing the Assad regime has no strategic value for the U.S. and instead creates a number of headaches. The U.S. should think long and hard about the realistic policy outcomes that it can achieve. The United States must continue to isolate Assad and his regime, discourage other countries from normalizing relations with him, and apply sanctions authorized by the Caesar Act wisely.<sup>1</sup>

## U.S. Policy Toward Syria

The relationship between Syria and the United States has always been a cold and problematic one. Syria cut diplomatic ties with the U.S. in 1967.<sup>2</sup> Although

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relations were resumed in 1974, the 1970 coup that brought the Assad regime to power only worsened the relationship. The Assad regime's support of terrorism, its alignment with the USSR, its interference in Lebanon, its pursuit and use of chemical weapons, and its continued hostility toward Israel made the country a target for U.S. sanctions. Relations took a turn for the worse again in 2011, when the Syrian regime brutally cracked down on anti-regime protests during the Arab spring. In response, the United States cut diplomatic ties with, and imposed sanctions on, the Syrian regime. As the country slowly spiraled into a civil war, the resulting power vacuum allowed the so-called Islamic State to carve out sanctuaries in Iraq and Syria.

In 2014, the United States formed a broad international coalition to defeat the Islamic State. By early 2019, the territorial "caliphate" was defeated. With the counterterrorism mission complete, the Trump Administration reduced the U.S. military presence from 2,000 to 900 troops to continue to support and advise the Syrian Democratic Forces fighting the Islamic State.

Since the rise of ISIS in 2014, U.S. policy has focused on providing humanitarian aid to conflict-affected areas, mitigating the growth of terrorism, and reaching a political settlement in Syria via its support for United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>3</sup> During the early stages of the civil war, the fighting pitted regime forces against opposition groups. However, between 2015 and 2018, the conflict was further complicated by two factors: (1) interventions by Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, and (2) the expansion of ISIS to Syria. The chaotic aftermath gave the Assad regime the opportunity to recapture most of the country in 2019.

Today, Assad is still in power, propped up by Russia and Iran. With a few Arab and European countries starting to reopen diplomatic channels to Damascus, the Biden Administration cannot look the other way as Arab states normalize relations with Assad. U.S. policy options in Syria are limited; however, the U.S. can mitigate the threat of ISIS, influence the approach of allies and partners in Syria, and support humanitarian relief in Syria.

## The Land of Bad Options

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated that the U.S. has no plans to "normalize or upgrade" diplomatic relations with Syria, but the Administration is still conducting a policy review.<sup>4</sup> Syria is a complex issue with no easy solution. U.S. commentators are generally divided into two camps: those who propose a conditions-based phased normalization, and those who still advocate for complete isolation of the Assad regime.

Proponents of normalization believe that the Assad regime acts as a stabilizer, arguing that the United States can leverage diplomatic incentives, reconstruction assistance, and sanctions relief to advance a number of U.S. policy goals. In the short term, they argue, the U.S. can encourage a cease-fire in Idlib and a removal of chemical weapons. Long term, proponents believe that the U.S. can support negotiations for the safe return of Syrian refugees, support political reform, and contain the power of rivals, such as Russia and Iran.<sup>5</sup> These idealistic goals rest on a number of false assumptions. The reality is that:

- **Stability under Assad is far from guaranteed.** Although Assad has regained nominal control over most of the country, his control is tenuous. Stability in former rebel-held areas that the Assad regime now controls is already showing signs of weakness. Clashes this past summer in Daraa prove that Assad is not a reliable guarantor of stability in the long term.<sup>6</sup>
- **Assad is not a reliable “broker” for the international community.** Even after years of crushing sanctions and political isolation, Assad continued to conduct chemical attacks and break multiple de-escalation agreements. The Assad regime’s de facto control over Syria means that there is little incentive for him to make political concessions to the opposition or to provide for the safe return of refugees.
- **Russia and Iran will always wield more influence in Damascus than the U.S., as long as the Assad regime survives.** Russia and Iran have always been, and will continue to be, influential in Syria. Russia has been a long-term partner of the Assad family in Syria. Throughout Syria’s nation-building process, the Soviet Union provided political support, economic aid, military aid, and cultural exchanges to establish Syria’s education system.<sup>7</sup> Russia will never part with the Assad regime if it means that it loses access to the Syrian ports of Tartus and Latakia and the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, leaving Syria securely in Russia’s sphere of influence.<sup>8</sup> Iran capitalized on the Syrian civil war to spread its influence by deploying Revolutionary Guards to train and support local defense forces and Shia militias and integrating them into the Syrian Armed Forces. These military and security links are further strengthened by Iran’s ties to Syrian businessmen, Islamic charities, and educational outreach programs. Iran will remain a central actor as long as Assad rules, regardless of U.S. involvement in Syria.

## Regional Normalization Efforts

Throughout the Syrian civil war, 21 countries maintained their diplomatic relationship with Syria, 10 countries cut ties with Syria, and the rest severely downgraded the diplomatic relationship.<sup>9</sup> The goal of the United States should be to ensure that as few countries as possible recognize the Syrian regime. Last month, Jordan's King Abdullah received a phone call from Assad while trade ministers from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Syria met to discuss economic ties.<sup>10</sup> During the U.N. General Assembly two months ago, Egypt's and Syria's foreign ministers met on the sidelines to discuss "Syria's position in the Arab World."<sup>11</sup> However, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have stated that they will not re-engage with the Syrian regime at this time.<sup>12</sup> These different approaches suggest that countries in the region are divided on what to do about Syria, which has been largely isolated from the region since 2012.

The European Union maintains lower-level diplomatic contacts with Syria. However, there are a few individual EU member countries who have a diplomatic presence in Damascus. Bulgaria and the Czech Republic have maintained diplomatic presences in Syria since 2012, while Cyprus, Greece, and Hungary are in the process of reopening their embassies in Damascus.<sup>13</sup> Other European nations may soon follow suit.

## Recommendations for the U.S.

The Biden Administration began reviewing U.S. policies across the Middle East in January, including its policy on Syria.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. must be pragmatic about what it can achieve, and the Biden Administration should:

- **Continue to isolate Assad and his regime.** Re-establishing diplomatic ties with Syria would signal to other rogue regimes that gross human rights violations will go unpunished, emboldening the Assad regime to commit future atrocities and setting a dangerous precedent. It would also feed into China and Russia's criticism of "U.S. hypocrisy" on human rights.
- **Encourage Arab nations who feel the need to normalize to do so at the lowest diplomatic level possible.** Privately, the U.S. should encourage partners who want to reopen diplomatic channels to restrict engagement to the lowest diplomatic level.<sup>15</sup> Arab states can engage the regime through a third party, such as Bahrain, Egypt,

Kuwait, Oman, or the UAE, which has either reopened or maintained an embassy in Damascus. However, the U.S. should caution Arab partners about readmitting Syria into the Arab League and other regional organizations. Readmission and direct engagement would further legitimize the Assad regime, which has made no efforts to change its behavior.

- **Weigh other geopolitical interests before pushing back against countries that normalize relations with Syria.** The U.S. should be careful how it responds publicly to countries in the region that have been critical partners. For example, while Bahrain and the UAE have open diplomatic channels with the Assad regime, they are key signatories to the Abraham Accords and are important partners for deterring Iran. The U.S. should not jeopardize its bilateral relationship with these countries over Syria.
- **Encourage European allies who are tempted to normalize to work through existing third-party frameworks.** Greece and Cyprus have taken steps to normalize, and many European allies have hinted that they are open to adopting a new policy. The Czech Republic currently acts as the protecting power for U.S. and European interests in Syria. Europe should work through this existing framework when necessary to avoid direct engagement with the Assad regime.
- **Use the Caesar Act wisely.** Under the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2019, the President can sanction the regime, Syrian businessmen connected to the regime, and non-U.S. persons and entities who do business with the Syrian government in an effort to create accountability for crimes by the Syrian government and its allies Russia and Iran against the Syrian people. These sanctions target economic ties, which is likely the second step after diplomatic normalization. However, President Joe Biden can issue waivers to persons or entities if he “certifies to the appropriate congressional committees that such a waiver is in the national security interests of the United States.”<sup>16</sup>

Ideally, the Biden Administration should continue to target the regime and its network for economic ties, but avoid imposing sanctions on its Arab partners who are looking to reopen trade networks. If the Administration

does decide to impose sanctions for economic ties, President Biden should consider waivers for Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syria historically was a major transit route for imports and exports. The disruption of trade in addition to the refugee burden has put immense pressure on the economies of each of these countries. Economic instability threatens political stability of these countries, something that is not in the interest of U.S. national security.

## The Biden Administration Should Not Ignore Syria

Syria is not a foreign policy priority for the Biden Administration. Looking the other way will leave regional allies to implement policies as they see fit. U.S. policymakers must make clear to allies and partners what Washington will and will not accept. Assad's brutality has demonstrated to the world that he will go to any lengths to stay in power, but that does not mean the world should accept him as a legitimate state actor.

The United States must be realistic about what it can achieve. Sanctions relief and humanitarian assistance are unlikely to change the behavior of the Assad regime, but the U.S. can at least influence Arab partners and European allies to limit their diplomatic engagement. Syria's agonizing crisis is a complex problem that lacks a clear solution, but allowing the Assad regime to reclaim its legitimacy without accounting for its war crimes and human rights violations would only make matters worse. The U.S. should not ignore the situation and should be clear-eyed about its approach to advance U.S. priorities.

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## Endnotes

1. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 sanctions the Assad regime, Syrian businessmen connected to the regime, and non-U.S. persons and entities who do business with the Syrian government in an effort to create accountability for crimes by the Syrian government and its allies, Russia and Iran, against the Syrian people.
2. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Syria," January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/> (accessed November 5, 2021).
3. Carla E. Humud, "Syria and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, September 20, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/IF11930.pdf>, (accessed October 26, 2021).
4. Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S. Says It Won't Normalize or Upgrade Diplomatic Ties with Syria's Assad," Reuters, September 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-says-it-wont-normalise-or-upgrade-syria-ties-2021-09-29/> (accessed October 26, 2021).
5. "A Path to Conflict Transformation in Syria: A Framework for a Phased Approach," The Carter Center, January 2021, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/path-to-conflict-transformation-in-syria-jan-2021.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/path-to-conflict-transformation-in-syria-jan-2021.pdf) (accessed October 26, 2021), and Adham Sahloul, "Ending America's Diplomacy-Last Syria Policy," *War on the Rocks*, October 27, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/ending-americas-diplomacy-last-syria-policy/> (accessed November 3, 2021).
6. Alexander Langlois, "Renewed Hostilities in Daraa Offer Lessons and Opportunities in Syria. But Will Washington Pay Attention?" The Atlantic Council, September 15, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/renewed-hostilities-in-daraa-offer-lessons-and-opportunities-in-syria-but-will-washington-pay-attention/> (accessed October 27, 2021).
7. A secret Syrian–Soviet treaty was signed on February 1, 1946, in Beirut, which included a clause stating that "the Soviet Union agrees to send a sufficient number of military personnel to Syria, comprising military instructors and high-ranking officers, in order to help Syria to build up as rapidly as possible a national army of some strength." See Rami Ginat, "Soviet Policy Towards the Arab World, 1945–48," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1996), p. 323, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283830?seq=3#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283830?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents) (accessed November 8, 2021).
8. The 1936 Montreux Convention gave Turkey control over the Turkish Straits. While Black Sea countries, such as Russia, enjoy certain rights that non-Black Sea countries do not, during times of war Turkey can close the straits to foreign navies under certain circumstances as outlined in Article 20 of the convention. See "Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits," July 20, 1936, [http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Montreux\\_ENG.pdf](http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Montreux_ENG.pdf) (accessed October 27, 2021).
9. The 21 countries that maintained ties with Syria: Algeria, Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, China, Cuba, Egypt, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Vietnam, and Venezuela. The Palestinian Authority also maintained its diplomatic relationship with Syria. The 19 countries that cut ties with Syria: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
10. Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jordan's Abdullah Receives First Call from Syria's Assad Since Start of Conflict," Reuters, October 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordans-abdullah-receives-first-call-syrias-assad-since-start-conflict-2021-10-03/> (accessed October 26, 2021), and "UAE and Syria Economy Ministers Meet Amid Effort to Rehabilitate Assad Regime," *The New Arab*, October 4, 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/uae-syria-ministers-meet-amid-assad-rehabilitation-efforts> (accessed October 26, 2021).
11. "Egypt, Syria's FMs Meet for 1st Time in 10 Years," *Egypt Today*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/108160/Egypt-Syria-s-FMs-meet-for-1st-time-in-10-years> (accessed October 26, 2021).
12. "Qatar Sees No Reason for Normalizing Ties with Syria, Says Foreign Minister," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 30, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2999696/qatar-sees-no-reason-normalizing-ties-syria-says-foreign-minister> (accessed October 26, 2021), and Charles Lister, "'We're not considering' any re-engagement with #Assad, says @FaisalbinFarhan..." November 1, 2021, tweet, [https://twitter.com/charles\\_lister/status/145523501607881140?s=24](https://twitter.com/charles_lister/status/145523501607881140?s=24) (accessed November 5, 2021).
13. Amir Cherif, "EU Members May Be on a Path to Normalization," *Inside Arabia*, September 30, 2021, <https://insidearabia.com/eu-members-may-be-on-a-path-to-normalization-with-syria/> (accessed October 26, 2021).
14. Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Intel: Faith, Civic Leaders Call on Biden to Prioritize Ending Syria's War," *Al-Monitor*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/intel-faith-civic-leaders-call-biden-prioritize-ending-syrias-war> (accessed October 27, 2021).
15. Low level: no recognition and no engagement; mid–low level: no recognition, but limited engagement; mid–high level: recognition with limited engagement; high level: recognition and full-engagement.
16. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, Public Law No. 116–92.