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Biden Has a New Opportunity in Syria

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Two Different Perspectives 1

American Forces in Syria 2

Political Transition in Syria 3

American-Turkish Relations 3

It Is All Contingent 4



Introduction

The exceptional nature of the 2020 American presidential election, held in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic that has so far killed over a quarter million Americans, gave little chance to both the incumbent President Donald Trump and his challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden, to discuss foreign policy challenges. Instead, in campaign gatherings, Trump lauded what he considered his accomplishments in the Middle East such as destroying the so-called Islamic State and killing its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, moving the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. For his part, Biden confined himself to his headquarters and held mostly virtual public gatherings in which he hardly brought up foreign policy matters.

Trump did not discuss Syria much except to describe it in 2019 merely as a place of “sand and death.” He subsequently saw no strategic value in the country for the United States and thus wanted to withdraw American forces from there. But pressure from the Department of Defense forced him to leave a residual force—as he explained it—to “take the oil.” By contrast, Biden made no public statements about Syria that would commit him to a specific policy, prompting questions about how his administration is likely to deal with the country that is approaching the end of an entire decade of civil war.

Two Different Perspectives

There appear to be two perspectives as to what a Biden policy would be like in Syria. The first believes that he is likely to repeat the Obama Administration’s approach and points to the number of officials Biden has drawn from its ranks to help devise his policies toward the Middle East. These were important officials in his presidential campaign, such as Antony Blinken, whom he tapped to be his secretary of state. They are isolationists who advocate withdrawing from the Middle East, and specifically from Syria, while continuing to deploy drones against terrorists and extremists. In effect, they reason, the United States should not pursue its political or military engagement in a failed region that is divided along sectarian lines, as former President Barack Obama recently wrote in his new memoir, *A Promised Land*.

The second perspective advises that President-elect Biden should not behave as if he is a carbon copy of Obama. While it is true that Biden served as Obama’s vice president for eight years, the final decisions were made by the president, be they regarding the number of American troops or their deployment in the Middle East. It would thus be folly, adherents contend, to assume that Biden will repeat Obama’s policies, especially with regard to the Iranian nuclear program and whether it gets prioritized over the Syrian crisis. Former Obama officials criticized the Democratic president’s policy in Syria and Biden may have another opportunity to correct its shortcomings. In other words, holders of this perspective expect positive changes in how the new president is likely to deal with the continuing morass in Syria.



Whatever perspective wins in the coming administration's deliberations on Syria, there are serious decisions that President-elect Biden will have to make about many of the issues left behind by the Obama Administration (and continued during Trump's). Whether he gives Syria priority or relegates it to a secondary status, there are specific concerns Biden will have to address during his term in office.

American Forces in Syria

The United States deploys some 600 soldiers in Syria's east, an oil-rich and strategic location formerly controlled by the so-called Islamic State. The US military has allowed the Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to exploit the area's resources to finance their operations in the region. In 2019, President Trump declared that he wanted to withdraw American soldiers from there, only to change his mind and allow them to stay. The year before, the president had said that regional states, especially those in the Gulf, would finance the SDF's operations. Indeed, Saudi Arabia contributed some \$100 million for that purpose.

The decision to finance the SDF angered Turkey, which shares a 600-mile border with Syria and considers any intervention to assist the SDF—which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), viewed as a terrorist organization by Ankara—to be a direct threat to Turkey's security and stability. That led to a political dispute between Washington and Ankara that almost resulted in economic sanctions on Turkey, a principal actor within NATO. An added complication was Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system to which the United States has objected—and that is despite the system's existence in Greece, another NATO country.

Considering the complications on the ground, as president, Biden may simply preserve the status quo of US forces in Syria and perhaps increase the number of troops by a few hundred. The Islamic State appears to be active again in the Syrian desert and it may be unthinkable that Biden would repeat Obama's original mistake of withdrawing forces from Iraq before ridding that country of the organization. Such a calculation is buttressed by the fact that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad is unconcerned about fighting the Islamic State and is instead preparing a military campaign against what is left of the Syrian opposition in Idlib province.

At any rate, the presence of American forces in Syria should be part of a strategic plan with clear objectives, not a mere demand by President Trump about taking the country's oil. This plan should also receive the support and endorsement of American allies in NATO. Such a coalescence of parties would give the United States leverage in negotiations with Russia about a political transition. It would also pressure President Bashar al-Assad to accept the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2254 that stipulates a peaceful transition and independent and fair presidential and parliamentary



elections under United Nations supervision. It is thus incumbent upon the Biden Administration to augment American forces in Syria and link them to a strategic plan to allow for a peaceful resolution of the war there.

Political Transition in Syria

There should be no expectation that Russia will change its policy in Syria. It only pretends to support a political resolution of the war while simultaneously helping Assad militarily on the ground against opposition forces and defending him in the UN Security Council. Russia has used its veto power some 15 times on Syria, mostly to protect Assad against accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It recently tried to organize a conference on repatriating Syrian refugees but that fell by the wayside because conditions are not conducive to their safe return. Indeed, Biden should realize that Russia's position will not change so long as President Vladimir Putin remains in power. If anything became clear over the last few years of Russia's involvement in Syria, it is that the Russian and Syrian regimes are similar in that they both espouse strict authoritarian and social control.

Many Syrians will be disappointed that the new American president will not be more interventionist in Syria than his predecessors. They hope that Biden will make Syria a priority in his Middle East policy, which would help the political transition to a democratic and pluralistic system become a reality. Such an approach, they reason, will facilitate the return of internally displaced persons and refugees to their homes and villages voluntarily and safely.

This is perhaps where Biden can be a decisive leader who is different from the reticent Obama and the neglectful Trump, both of whom ignored the political transition that was needed and concentrated instead on fighting the Islamic State. In this respect, the United States can use its political and diplomatic arsenal to build and rebuild the "Friends of Syria Coalition," thus increasing pressure on Russia and the Syrian regime to accept Resolution 2254. Biden's opening here, and following the failure of the Geneva and Astana rounds of negotiations, could be to push for UN-supervised presidential and parliamentary elections. Such a step is the surest way to ensure the creation of a representative government that can exercise authority over all of Syria and eliminate all foreign militias operating in the country, especially those supported by Iran.

Simultaneously, the United States should vigorously activate the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2019 by imposing sanctions on Russian companies and economic concerns that violate human rights in Syria, in addition to targeting Syrian, Iranian, and other persons and companies. It is important that Russia pay for its crimes in Syria and rethink its continued support for Bashar al-Assad. It is clear that the country is becoming a failed state that cannot secure basic commodities for its people like cooking oil, gas, bread, fuel, water, and electricity.

American-Turkish Relations

The new president must make a decision about American-Turkish relations, especially those affecting Syria. If, as expected, he were to adopt a hard-line position with Russia, which has a large military presence in the country, he might have to do the same with Turkey, whose forces operate in the north following previous military incursions that facilitated the expulsion of Kurdish forces. Indeed, the United States must decide who is going to be its ally in Syria: Russia, as the case has been with President Trump, or Turkey, which is trying to protect the northwestern province of Idlib and its environs against a Russian-Syrian offensive. Such a choice is likely to determine how Biden pursues his involvement in Syria for years to come.

There should be no doubt that American-Turkish relations have suffered from serious difficulties over the last few years. While Trump was able to maintain a personal relationship with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Biden is likely to prefer institutional relationships that are built on mutual interests and cooperation. This, in turn, is likely to augment both the American and Turkish positions in Syria.

On the other hand, what may be an obstacle in the way to better US-Turkey relations is the ultimate fate of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Turkey is keen on ending the SDF's presence on the Syrian-Turkish border, as was evident in its "Operation Olive Branch" that forced the SDF to withdraw toward Raqqqa and Qamishli and the surrounding areas adjoining American troops. The SDF does not enjoy much popular support in its predominantly Arab areas of operation, which is a source of concern for its American supporters. Still, the SDF has strong bipartisan support in the US Congress as an American ally against the Islamic State. This is likely to put the Biden Administration in a bind and make the new president's already difficult choices on a future strategy in Syria even more complicated.

It Is All Contingent

These considerations regarding what to expect from a Biden policy toward Syria are obviously contingent on the importance Syria will enjoy in his administration's foreign policy formulations and how it will be prioritized among the responsible officials. It should be remembered that Biden's primary focus will most likely be domestic, especially in how he addresses the coronavirus pandemic and its economic repercussions. But it is hoped that he will consider Syria as a priority in the Middle East because of its compelling humanitarian, military, and political dimensions.

Simultaneously, there should be no doubt that American policy toward Syria will be part of—and related to—how the Biden Administration approaches Russia and Iran, arguably the two most important players in Syria. Equally important are the political proclivities of the coterie of officials Biden chooses to lead his foreign and national security policies. Overall, it is hoped that Biden will be independent in how he looks at Syria and not be bogged down by Obama's and Trump's approaches. It is critical for the United States to engage seriously in trying to secure a peaceful resolution that can end 10 years of a destructive civil war in Syria.