

Fall 2023 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

Managing US Involvement in Syria

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Statement of Scope: This paper will not cover the recent Hamas-Israel conflict, as much of the research for the paper was done before this conflict occurred. The ACLED data used throughout this paper does not cover incidents that occurred after September 15, 2023.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States' unconventional warfare campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria, through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has been largely successful. As long as ISIS in Syria remains degraded and contained, and as long as the SDF remain capable of sustaining unilateral operations, the United States will find it more difficult to justify its military presence in Syria on the basis of the ISIS threat. The main threats to U.S. forces and the SDF emanate from Iran-linked militias and Turkish forces, respectively.

While Iran is a regional threat and countering Iran is a vital national interest, a war with Iran over Syria is not necessarily warranted. Accordingly, Congress must exercise greater oversight into the United States' irregular warfare activities in order to mitigate the risk of drawing the United States closer to war with Iran over Syria. The 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) and the Constitution's Article II authority, which have been used against Iran in Syria, are inappropriate and too broad, respectively, while other statutory authorities, such as § 1202 and § 127e, possess potential for abuse and mission creep.

It will be sensible to avoid escalation with Turkey to avoid jeopardizing the SDF's anti-ISIS mission. It is unlikely that Turkey will compromise on its aggressive position against the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the militant Kurds, and Turkey will likely see the YPG as a greater threat than what it would be without U.S. support. Diplomatic approaches are needed to mitigate Turkish aggression while the United States' continued support for the YPG should be re-examined. Furthermore, the SDF faces serious internal problems that make the YPG an untenable choice as a surrogate force going forward.

The United States does not have much to lose by withdrawing from Syria in the future. The United States' network

of regional partners can play a more constructive role in promoting regional stability, and a withdrawal from Syria will not significantly negatively impact the United States' ability to fight a war with Iran. Attempting to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power will be difficult, given Iran and Russia's support and interest in bolstering the Assad regime, and given the openness of Turkey and Iraq to normalize relations with Assad.

Introduction

The United States has several policy priorities in Syria, but not all of them will be feasible without risking mission creep. Some of the policy priorities are: (1) continuing the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); (2) expanding humanitarian activities; and (3) holding President Bashar al-Assad accountable for his human rights violations through sanctions and international law.¹ Of these priorities, the anti-ISIS campaign will be the most feasible, while holding Assad accountable will be the least feasible. Expanding humanitarian activities outside of essential services and into a security and stabilization operations context, as seen in nation-building activities, will likely risk mission creep.

Outside of the anti-ISIS campaign and the other policy priorities, the U.S. interest in Syria includes countering Iranian and Iran-backed threats and engaging in strategic competition against Russia to contain its regional influence.² Strategic competition in the context of the Defense Department is about limiting a competitor's actions by achieving a strategic or military advantage, but without a significant increase in resources or commitment, and without escalation to armed conflict; selective, transactional cooperation with a competitor is also part of the strategy.³ Commander Michael Kurilla, who heads U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the relevant combatant command for the Middle East, stated in March 2023, that CENTCOM's primary role is "as a redoubt" against Iranian-directed activities in the Middle East, while it views Russian activities in Syria as supporting the Assad regime.⁴ Regional stability is also a U.S. interest. This includes preventing spillover effects from Syria, e.g., terrorism, narcotics, or mass migration.

Geopolitical realities in Syria require addressing the inadequate policy on countering Iran and the risk of

mission creep, as well as the policy gap of dealing with Turkish attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Since 2022, the main attackers of U.S. forces in Syria have been Iran-linked militias. Iran (in cooperation with Russia) has also exploited Arab tribal unrest against the SDF. The SDF, which the United States has been using as a proxy force, is dominated by the Kurds (through the People's Defense Units, or YPG) and has mainly been targeted by Turkish forces this year. Turkey likely sees the Kurdish problem as an existential threat to Turkish sovereignty and territorial integrity, and addressing the Turkey issue will require addressing the Kurd issue.

Turkey's unrelenting aggression against the Kurds requires reconsidering the viability of long-term support for the YPG. Even in 2022, the United States acknowledged the increasing Turkish problem, as there was "a significant increase in Turkish air operations against SDF... compared to the previous quarter."⁵ Due to the proximity of U.S. forces to some of the Turkish strikes, U.S. concerns over Turkey's activities against the SDF are also worrisome. The United States' policy towards Turkish activities in Syria needs to be clearer, and not solely revolve around opposing Turkey-Syria normalization efforts.

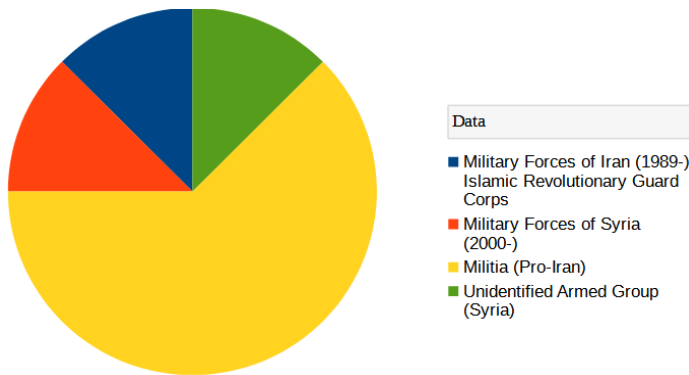
ISIS Is Not the Main Problem in Syria

Not all of the major actors in Syria have been contributing significantly to the anti-ISIS fight in Syria. The major actors relevant to Syria are the following: United States, the Assad regime, Turkey, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and the SDF. Iraq is included because of its direct relevance to the transnational Kurdish issue, the anti-ISIS fight through Operation Inherent Resolve (which covers Iraq and Syria), and the issue of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Syria. The Iraqi PMFs in Syria should be considered an issue linked to Iran, and not the Government of Iraq (although they originate from Iraq). Despite the anti-ISIS alignment of all of these major actors, Iran and Turkey, for example, have not contributed significantly against ISIS in Syria (even through their proxies). Although Russia has significantly reduced its attacks against ISIS in Syria, it remains one of the main anti-ISIS forces in Syria. The Assad regime has also significantly reduced its attacks against ISIS since last year.

Despite the lack of significant anti-ISIS activities by

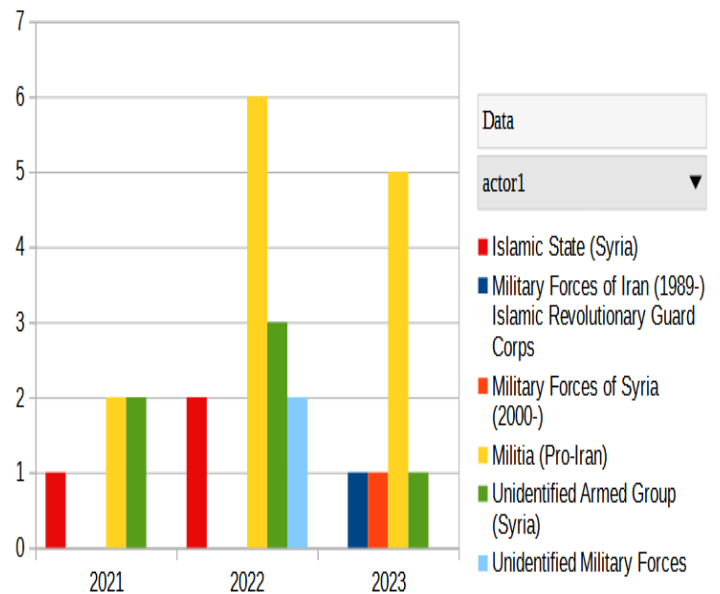
some of the major actors, ISIS has not been the main problem for the United States or the SDF in Syria this year. ISIS continues to be degraded and contained, and there were no prison break attacks this year (based on ACLED data up to September 15, 2023).⁶ According to ACLED data from January 1, 2023 – September 15, 2023 that the author curated, the main problem for U.S. forces in Syria has been Iran-linked militias. While the United States is part of the global coalition forces, only the instances where the data explicitly mentioned that U.S. forces were harmed or targeted in the attacks were used for the analysis. This curated data showed eight instances this year, up to September 15, 2023, with the majority of the attacks (five) stemming from pro-Iran militias (see Pie Chart1 – Who Attacks U.S. Forces 2023):

Pie Chart 1 – Who Attacks U.S. Forces 2023



Data source used for creating this graphic: [ACLED Data](#)

Bar Graph 1 – Who Attacks U.S. Forces 2021 - 2023



Data source used for creating this graphic: [ACLED Data](#)

According to ACLED data, collectively, the IRGC, Hezbollah, Liwa al Quds, Fatemiyoun Brigade, and pro-Iran militias (ACLED treats pro-Iran militias as a distinct actor), have primarily attacked civilians this year, followed by global coalition forces (which includes the United States, but not every instance of an attack on global coalition forces involved U.S. forces). There was no ACLED data on Iranian and Iran-linked forces attacking ISIS in Syria this year, up to September 15, 2023.

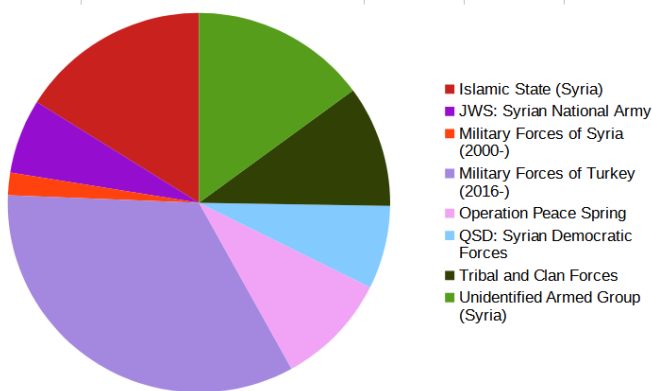
Using the same curating criteria to focus on instances where U.S. forces in Syria were harmed or were targeted, ACLED data was comparatively analyzed from January 1, 2021 – September 15, 2023, which showed that attacks against U.S. forces stemming from pro-Iran militias decreased from last year, but also showed that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a formal Iranian military institution, was responsible for one of the attacks against U.S. forces this year. According to this data, attacks against U.S. forces stemming from ISIS were absent so far this year, and also showed that ISIS has not been the main attacker of U.S. forces, even going back to 2021 (see Bar Graph 1 – Who Attacks U.S. Forces 2021 - 2023):

Turkey, not ISIS, has been the main attacker of the SDF this year. Notably, the SDF significantly includes the Kurds, e.g., the YPG (Kurdish backbone of the SDF). The Kurds have not only attacked Turkey via the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK (the U.S. government sees the PKK Kurds as a terrorist group), but they also seek autonomy over areas which include Turkish territory. Turkey's threat perception revolves around the Kurds, which Ankara likely views as an existential threat, and Turkey makes no distinction between YPG and PKK forces. Attempts to halt Turkish aggression against the Kurds have been attempted in the past,⁷ e.g., through the creation of buffer zones between Turkey and Syria, but Turkey has continued to attack the Kurds in Syria, and militia forces continued to operate against the SDF

through Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring, which may be viewed conventionally as having ended in 2019.

For the purposes of this analysis, the SDF (QSD in ACLED data) has been curated by the author to include the following entities labeled by ACLED as YPG, Asayish (which is the Kurdish internal security force), HXP (which is SDF’s auxiliary force), and QSD itself. This was done because all of these entities serve Kurdish interests and are loyal to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which is where the SDF operates. For the purposes of this analysis, military units belonging to its respective service were integrated and treated as one entity, e.g., Syria’s Fourth Armored Division and Fifth Assault Corps, which belong to the Military Forces of Syria. To show the entities which have attacked the SDF with higher frequency, all entities that attacked the SDF fewer than ten times were excluded from the curated ACLED data from January 1, 2023 – September 15, 2023, which left a total of 677 instances where SDF was attacked (see Pie Chart 2 – Who Attacks the SDF 2023). Of these 677 attacks, 288 originated from the military forces of Turkey, sixty-five from rebel forces still operating under Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring, and forty-three from the Turkey-backed JWS, which together, accounts for nearly half of all the attacks against the SDF this year. Infighting and other security issues within the SDF accounted for forty-eight instances. Attacks originating from ISIS only accounted for 109 instances, or about sixteen percent.

Pie Chart 2 – Who Attacks the SDF 2023

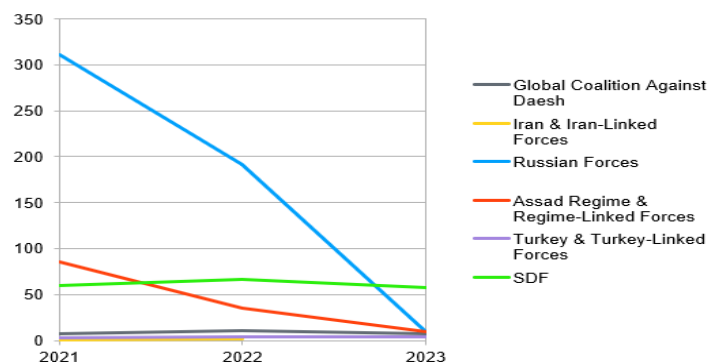


Data source used for creating this graphic: [ACLED Data](#)

According to ACLED data, ISIS attacks against the SDF have decreased since last year, from 152 attacks to 109 attacks. The decrease in ISIS attacks against the SDF may be attributable to the sustained anti-ISIS efforts waged by the SDF, the global coalition forces, and the United States. The decrease in ISIS attacks against the SDF cannot be attributed to Russian efforts against ISIS, as Russian strikes against ISIS have sharply decreased since last year, from 192 strikes to ten strikes. While the SDF attacks against ISIS have also decreased since last year, from sixty-six attacks to fifty-seven attacks, it is less of a change than the decrease in global coalition forces attacks, which fell from eleven attacks to seven attacks. Despite these decreases, the SDF remains the main attacker of ISIS in Syria.

A comparative analysis, using ACLED data from January 2021 – September 2023, shows that most attacks against ISIS have decreased since last year (see Line Graph 1 – Attacks Against ISIS 2021 - 2023). This shows demonstrates that ISIS is overall viewed as a lessened threat. Consistent with previous curation parameters, the SDF (QSD in ACLED) includes Asayish, HXP, YPG, and QSD; Iran & Iran-Linked Forces includes the IRGC, Liwa al Quds, Fatemiyoun Brigade, and Hezbollah; Assad Regime & Regime-Linked Forces includes the Military Forces of Syria (including subordinating units), pro-government militia, and QDW; Turkey & Turkey-Linked Forces includes the Military Forces of Turkey, JWS, rebels operating under Operation Peace Spring, and the National Police Forces.

Line Graph 1 – Attacks Against ISIS 2021 – 2023

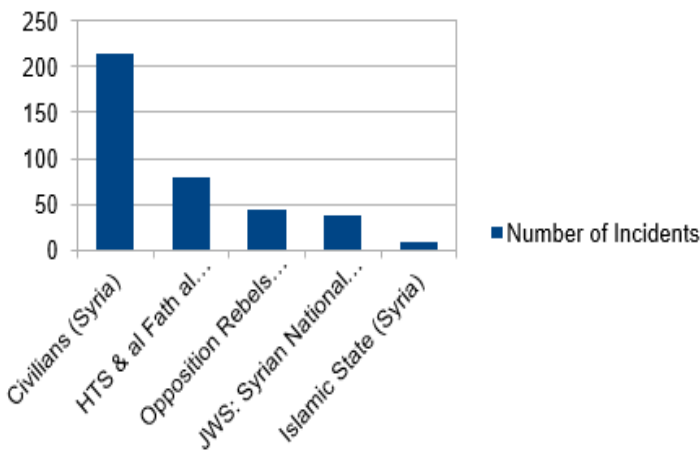


Data source used for creating this graphic: [ACLED Data](#)

ISIS predominately attacks the SDF and Assad regime forces in Syria, but the Assad regime forces have not

been attacking ISIS as its primary target, or even as one of its top targets (see Bar Graph 2 – Who Assad Forces Attack 2023). According to ACLED data from January 1, 2023 – September 15, 2023 that the author curated, Assad forces as a whole (including pro-government militias, National Defense Forces-or QDW, regime police and regime intelligence entities) have primarily been attacking civilians, HTS (Islamist group in northwestern Syria formerly linked to ISIS, al Qaeda, and Jabhat al-nNusra), and the al Fath al Mubeen Operations room (multi-faction Islamist group linked to HTS).

Bar Graph 2 – Who Assad Forces Attack 2023



Data source used for creating this graphic: [ACLED Data](#)

ISIS in Syria may be less of a threat today than how it is commonly perceived. Concerns over radicalization in the refugee camps should be addressed, as it may involve threat inflation.⁸ The main refugee camps are the al-Hol camp and the al-Roj camp. According to a study by the RAND Corporation, more than two-thirds of the population in the al-Hol camp were children, with half of these children being under 12 years of age.⁹ Up to 94 percent of the al-Hol camp population may consist of women and children,¹⁰ from which it can be inferred that military-aged men are a minority. A 2022 UNICEF publication states that at the al-Roj camp, 66 percent were children.¹¹ While women and children can engage in violent jihad, violent jihad is mostly fought by men. Furthermore, if the radicalization of children is of concern because they are prone to being influenced, then by this same logic, it should be easier to de-radicalize children.

While there have been instances of ISIS supporters and radicalized activities in the camps, there have been no statistics detailing how many are radicalized or any projections of how many could become radicalized. The aforementioned study by the RAND Corporation stated, “Indeed, there is a group of inhabitants at al-Hol and potentially Roj who remain sympathetic to ISIS, but we could not determine the spread of their influence... Determining ISIS’s influence within the camps is necessary to inform future decisions.”¹² Absent basic facts of how many in the camps have been or could become radicalized, treating a small amount of danger as serious danger would be threat inflation.

The National Interest – Security & Economic Interests

It is important to assess the national interest in relation to the security problems identified in the preceding section. However, economic interests should also be assessed because economic strength buttresses American power. The levels of national interest may be distinguished conceptually as existential issues, vital issues, non-vital but important issues, or tangential issues (see Table 1 - Categorizations). This distinction was inspired by Hans Morgenthau’s concept of categorizing the national interest as vital or secondary issues, but attempts to be more discriminating:

Table 1 - Categorizations

Categorizations & Descriptions			
Existential	Vital	Non-vital but important	Tangential
Major, serious threat against the U.S. homeland, or can cause catastrophic political, military, or economic damage to the U.S.	Can cause significant impact to major U.S. political, military, or economic interests in a tangible manner	Can cause some impact to major U.S. political, military, or economic interests in a tangible manner	Weakly relevant to major U.S. political, military, or economic interests and does not impact these interests in any important, tangible manner

Collating these categorizations with the previously identified security issues and the economic interests discussed in this section, a comparative table was developed (see Table 2 – Categorizations vs. Interests):

Table 2 – Categorizations vs. Interests

	Existential	Vital	Non-vital but Important	Tangential
The ISIS threat			X	
The Turkey threat			X	
The Iran threat		X		
Syrian oil				X
Economic Support Funds			X	

ISIS

The ISIS problem in Syria is not an existential issue because ISIS’s external operations have been severely degraded, because it no longer has a “caliphate” to launch external attacks from and because its priorities, as evidenced by the ACLED attack data, do not involve attacking U.S. forces as the primary or even as one of its top targets. It is not a vital issue, because ISIS attacks have decreased against SDF since last year, because there have been no jailbreak attacks in the past year (containment is working), and because despite the lack of significant attacks against ISIS by the other major actors in Syria, ISIS continues to remain degraded and contained. A Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessment from last year claimed that ISIS experienced setbacks in Iraq and Syria and pointed to ISIS in Afghanistan (not Syria) as the potential global jihadist threat that could threaten the U.S. homeland.¹³ However, ISIS in Syria is still somewhat of a threat to the SDF, a partner force of the United States, so it is not a tangential issue.

It will be difficult for the United States to justify remaining in Syria if ISIS is used as the reason. Unless there is a significant resurgence of ISIS activities that seriously degrades the SDF or seriously threatens U.S. personnel, the small contingent of approximately 900 troops in Syria should be enough to continue operations and finalize the last phase of the Operation Inherent Resolve campaign plan in Syria, which is to enable “partner-led operations and operational-level advising that focuses on institutional capacity.”¹⁴ A mission update this year from the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve stated that the SDF is now “capable of conducting unilateral operations to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.”¹⁵ Given the U.S. investment in the SDF as a proxy force against ISIS, and given the progress that the SDF has made, it would be premature to withdraw U.S. forces in Syria at this point. However,

indefinite support for the SDF would be irresponsible. It is impossible to completely eradicate terrorism, so ensuring that the ISIS threat is continuously degraded and contained should ultimately be the responsibility of the SDF.

Turkey’s Attacks on the SDF

The issue of Turkish and Turkey-linked forces attacking the SDF forces should be a non-vital but important issue at this time; it is not an existential, vital, or tangential issue. Despite the large number of attacks emanating from Turkish and Turkey-linked forces against the SDF, the SDF has not been destroyed, has maintained its anti-ISIS operations, and has not been overpowered by ISIS. However, should Turkish or Turkey-linked forces cause the SDF to become incapable of sustaining its anti-ISIS operations, in turn enabling a surge in ISIS activities, then pushing back against Turkey should become a vital national interest.

Despite the fact that Turkish and Turkey-linked forces have been the main attackers of the SDF, the United States should not provide the SDF with anti-aircraft weapons to shoot down Turkish aerial assets, as this will risk escalation, worsen the existing problems between the United States and Turkey, and jeopardize the SDF’s anti-ISIS mission. So far, it doesn’t seem like mission creep against Turkey through the SDF has occurred. In the FY 2024 Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, the United States seeks to provide its Syrian partners mainly with small arms, vans and SUVs , and miscellaneous personal equipment,¹⁶ not anti-aircraft weapons systems. While avoiding military escalation with Turkey is sensible, it would also be sensible for the U.S. government to seek non-military approaches to push back against Turkey in Syria.

Iran and its Proxies

If Iranian and Iran-linked activities in Syria are considered in a vacuum, then they could be considered a non-vital but important issue. This is because these activities have not been able to significantly hamper U.S. activities against ISIS and have not degraded the U.S. forces in Syria. While Iran has taken actions to hamper the SDF, it has not been a driving force (militarily) against the SDF.

Considered in a vacuum, the United States does not have much to lose in Syria. While the United States may project force through the al Tanf Garrison in the south,¹⁷ and restrict some Iranian corridors through Syria, it is not enough to defeat Iranian and Iran-linked forces in Syria. Even if the U.S. military withdraws from Syria, it would not seriously hamper its ability to fight against Iran if necessary. Furthermore, the United States has a stronger troop presence in neighboring countries.

However, the Iran issue is a vital one. Iranian threats have not been contained or degraded like the ISIS threat has, and Iranian activities in Syria have regional implications. Expelling the United States from Syria would enable Iran to expand its access to Syria and support its growing regional ambitions, which includes supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iran threat in Syria is also a vital issue, because it is easier for Iran to attack U.S. forces in Syria than elsewhere. However, regional security should not be a burden that the United States should heavily bear, as neighboring countries can field more of their own troops to secure their own borders.

Syrian Oil

Syrian oil as an economic interest should be a tangential issue for the United States, unless it seeks to significantly benefit from Syrian oil in the future. Importing Syrian oil to the United States is currently prohibited by law.¹⁸ While there was a previous attempt by an American company (that was authorized under the Trump Administration) to develop more than half of the oil fields that the SDF controlled,¹⁹ the plan did not actualize into reality, and the Biden Administration did not renew sanctions waivers for the American company.²⁰ However, the attempt under the Trump Administration shows the economic interest the United States had in Syrian oil, and this is further supported by Donald Trump's claim in 2019 that "we're keeping the oil."²¹

Syria isn't a major exporter of oil but it does have crude oil. A 2019 U.S. Geological Survey concluded that the SDF controlled most of the crude oil, while the Assad regime controlled most of the refined oil.²² ISIS no longer controls Syrian oil fields, so ISIS cannot be used as an excuse to focus on protecting Syrian oil fields.

Economic Support Funds

A different U.S. economic interest in Syria involves the economic investment that has been made through USAID and the State Department, which is fundamentally about U.S. political and strategic interests. According to a 2022 report by the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, economic assistance to Syria goes beyond food, water, and shelter, or basic humanitarian assistance, and includes things such as civil society programs, education programs, independent media programs, political programs, election-related programs, and livelihood programs.²³ These types of expanded activities are prominent in security and stabilization operations in nation-building programs. For FY 2024, the State Department asked for \$80 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) for Syria,²⁴ which are intended to "support U.S. political and strategic interests rather than development or humanitarian goals."²⁵ Despite this investment, it may be a non-vital but important issue, as it is a sunk cost.

Competing Geopolitical Interests in Syria

The salient threats against the SDF and U.S. forces in Syria have been identified, but there are other issues in Syria that involve the interests of regional state actors which can be illustrated through an issue alignment table (see Table 3 – Issue Alignment). The United States' involvement in Syria and the Kurd issue are the two most salient issues that involve most of the regional state actors. Despite the United States' interest against the Assad regime, most of the other regional state actors do not share in this interest. Turkey's interests against the Assad regime revolve around the Kurd issue and Syrian refugees.

Iran, Russia, and Syria (under the Assad regime) are all opposed to U.S. involvement in Syria, and Turkey is also opposed to U.S. actions in Syria, specifically regarding U.S. support for the SDF and the YPG. Iraq wants foreign combat troops out of its country in the future, and this will affect supporting activities for counter-terrorism efforts in Syria, as well as U.S. interests against Iran.

The Kurds are an undesired entity in Syria, and the Kurdish issue will be addressed, but the issue is more

nuanced, as not all of the major state actors in Syria oppose the same Kurdish entities.

Table 3 – Issue Alignment

	Anti-ISIS	Anti-U.S.A. or SDF	Anti-PKK or YPG	Anti-Syria	Anti-Iran	Anti-Russia	Anti-Turkey	Anti-Iraq
Turkey	X	Anti-SDF; partially anti-U.S.A.	Anti-PKK & YPG	partial				Anti-Kurds in Iraq
Iran	X	X						Anti-U.S. in Iraq; against Iranian Kurds in Iraq
Russia	X	X						
U.S.A.	X		Anti-PKK	X	X	X	partial	
Syria	X	X	Anti-YPG				partial	
Iraq	X	Wants foreign combat troops out of Iraq	Anti-PKK					

Turkey’s Interests

It is rational to assume that states will act in their own best interests. Turkey, for example, will likely be uncompromising on the Kurd issue, and its aggressive foreign policy towards Syria will likely continue unless the Kurd issue is resolved or made less of a threat to Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan won re-election based on his strong stance on national security and neo-Ottoman nationalism (including the projection of Turkish power into Syria) and has staffed some government ministries with interventionist actors.²⁶ For example, Hakan Fidan, the former head of Turkish intelligence (MIT), is now foreign minister. Under Fidan, MIT started focusing on foreign intelligence, and was authorized to carry out attacks in foreign countries, including against the Kurds in Syria.²⁷ Yasar Güler’s appointment as defense minister will likely mean that Turkey’s military will continue to have a strong regional presence.²⁸

President Erdogan has garnered public support for his views on the Kurd and Syrian refugee issues, which are both relevant to Turkish national security. Erdogan’s anti-Kurd stance was historically supported by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), those friendly to the AKP, and the Turks in the electorate. According

to a 2019 poll by KONDA, a research and consultancy agency, 77 percent of those in the AKP agreed that the Kurds’ rights are sufficiently granted, while 69 percent of those in the AKP-adjacent Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) agreed with this statement.²⁹ In the electorate, 65 percent of Turks surveyed agreed with this statement while the Kurds strongly disagreed. Regarding the Syrian refugee issue, most of both Turks and Kurds agreed that Syrian refugees harmed Turkey’s economy and made Turkish cities more insecure.

Frayed Turkey-U.S. relations have persisted for years, and the disagreement over the Kurd issue has potential for further deteriorating relations. The animosity against the United States is not limited to political leaders, as the Turkish public sentiment towards the United States has not been rosy. For example, a Pew Research poll from 2019 found that 46 percent of Turks saw the United States as the greatest threat to Turkey in the future, while only two percent of Turks saw the Washington as the most dependable ally in the future.³⁰ While Turkey stands to benefit from U.S. military assistance, Washington’s stance on the SDF, YPG, and the Kurds may lead Turkey to continue to limit its cooperation with Washington and seek a broader bandwidth of security and diplomatic partners.

Iraq and Iran’s Interests

Aside from Turkey and the United States, Iraq and Iran are also involved in the Kurd issue. Iraq, which also has Kurds in its territory, has taken actions against the Kurds in Iraq aligned with the PKK, to remove them further from Turkish borders.³¹ Turkey already has a military presence in northern Iraq to deal with the Kurds,³² which is an incentive for Iraq to comply with Turkish interests.

Iraq has recently stated that it does not need foreign combat troops on its soil.³³ This is a change from its previous statement early this year, when it claimed that it needs foreign forces, and did not set a timetable for U.S. withdrawal.³⁴ However, these previous claims were in the context of the need to eliminate ISIS. While it may be impossible to completely eradicate terrorism, if ISIS is no longer viewed as a threat, it is questionable how Iraq would view the U.S. presence. According to the Defense Department in April 2023, there were a total of 6,503 Defense Department contractors in Iraq and Syria,³⁵ while the Congressional Research Service reported in February 2023 that there were about 900

U.S. troops in Syria.³⁶ Mohammad Shia al Sudani, Iraq's new Prime Minister, has previously sparked concerns due to his activities with Iran-linked entities.³⁷ Should the United States pull out of Iraq, it would benefit Iranian interests.

While Iran has indirect links to some Kurds, e.g., the PKK in the Sinjar region (which borders Syria), to avoid conflict with Turkey and protect Iranian interests, Iran may have been involved in Iraqi activities against the PKK, as Iran is involved in the Sinjar region through the PMF.³⁸ Iran has also made a deal with Iraq to curb the activities of Iranian Kurdish groups in Iraq to prevent cross-border attacks into Iran.³⁹ Iran and Turkey are competitors, but they also have a shared interest against the Kurds when it comes to opposing an independent Kurdistan.

Iran's interest in Syria is significant and it stands to benefit from remaining in Syria to project its influence in the region. Iran's investments in Syria include hard power activities, such as developing military infrastructure,⁴⁰ and soft power activities, such as socio-economic activities to influence civilians in Deir ez-Zor.⁴¹ Iran's Syria policy is unlikely to change if hardliners are in control. According to an assessment by The Critical Threats Project, it is most likely that a hardliner will succeed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, but even moderate candidates do not diverge significantly from hardliner interests on Iranian foreign policy and national security policy.⁴²

The Assad Regime's Interests

The Assad regime benefits from Iranian influence in Syria, especially to counter common foes such as Israel and the United States. Both the Islamic Republic and Syria (under the Hafez and Bashar al-Assad regimes), have a history of being anti-Israel with uncompromising positions. Despite the relatively recent Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement, Iran still holds deep anti-Israel positions, and has opposed Israel-Saudi Arabia normalization efforts.⁴³ Recently, Assad has rejected normalization with Israel and still contests the Golan Heights.⁴⁴ Assad is unlikely to follow suit with other regional actors normalizing with Israel, and being brought back into the "Arab fold" is unlikely to influence Assad into normalizing relations with Israel, or to rely less on Iran.

Russia's Interests

While Russia doesn't seem to have an explicit anti-Kurd position, and has acted upon its anti-ISIS interests, it is an unreliable partner for maintaining SDF or U.S. interests in Syria. Instead, Russian activities benefit the Assad regime.

Russia, along with Iran, have been exploiting Arab tribal animosities against the SDF through information operation campaigns,⁴⁵ and both seek to expel the United States from Syria.⁴⁶ Russia has not only provided intelligence to Iran but has also transferred weapons to Iran-backed militias in Deir ez-Zor, and allegedly agreed to establish a coordination center with Iran.⁴⁷ The Russian military has also engaged in provocative actions against U.S. aerial assets by "buzzing" U.S. planes and hitting U.S. drones in Syria. The fact that most of the major state actors in Syria want the United States out of Syria leaves the United States with little support.

Where do the Relevant Actors Stand on Normalization with Assad?

It is unlikely that Assad will relinquish power or be removed from power, as more countries may attempt normalization with Assad. Turkey, which has strongly opposed Assad over the PKK issue and the refugee issue, has been open to normalizing relations with Syria (Russia has encouraged this development).⁴⁸ Iran has also welcomed Turkey-Syria normalization efforts, as Iran stands to benefit by reducing the threat posed by Turkish military activities⁴⁹(which have conflicted with Iran's own areas of influence and interests in Syria). However, the Turkey-Syria normalization has not transpired yet, and there are serious difficulties, such as Assad's unwillingness to compromise on issues of concern.⁵⁰ Iraq has also been open to normalizing relations with Assad.⁵¹

Congressional Oversight of US Operations Against Iran in Syria

The Inapplicable 2001 AUMF and Congress's Abdication of its Traditional War Powers

To confront kinetic Iranian activities against U.S. forces in Syria, the United States needs to be more consistent in seeking proper congressional oversight, as the 2001 AUMF legal authority (which has been used for countering al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS), has been used outside of its original intention to include countering Iran.⁵² For example, the Trump Administration attempted to use the 2001 AUMF to counter Iran-linked militias in Syria but framed the U.S. response as defending U.S. and partner forces engaged in the anti-ISIS campaign.⁵³ The Iran threat should be treated as a separate issue, as Iran is a state actor that was not responsible for the 9/11 attacks nor conspired with those who were.

The War Powers Resolution requires transparency in reporting situations (absent prior congressional authorization) that involve the introduction of U.S. forces which could lead to war. To date, the Biden Administration has few instances in which it has reported these types of situations in Syria.⁵⁴ The Biden Administration has also used the Constitution's Article II authority to justify its actions in Syria against Iran-backed militias.⁵⁵ However, Congress is the authority that needs to set the definition of war and provide oversight for protracted U.S. involvement in Syria and against Iran. The nature of the ongoing proxy warfare that is being used in Syria may not rise to any threshold of conventional, full-spectrum war, but has the potential to become more serious.

The Danger of Relying on Existing Irregular Warfare and Train-and-Equip Authorities

Meeting this challenge through Irregular Warfare (IW) activities by repurposing the SDF or finding other surrogate forces may also draw the United States closer to war with Iran, especially given that existing authorities are rife for potential abuse. The ongoing “by, with, and through” approach through the SDF is fundamentally an Unconventional Warfare (UW) activity. Unconventional warfare is a subset of IW.⁵⁶ Unconventional warfare is defined as “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”⁵⁷ This definition allows for the targeting of state and non-state actors. While there are differing definitions for IW, the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) defines IW activities as activities “in support of predetermined United States policy and military objectives conducted

by, with, and through regular forces, irregular forces, groups, and individuals participating in competition between state and non-state actors short of traditional armed conflict.”⁵⁸

10 U.S.C. § 127e authorizes U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to support foreign, irregular forces in combating terrorism,⁵⁹ and this is relevant to the anti-ISIS fight in Syria. In contrast, Section 1202 of the 2018 NDAA (which has been extended to 2025⁶⁰) authorizes SOF to support foreign non-state actors against state actors, and uses broad language to authorize the Secretary of Defense to support “foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating ongoing and authorized irregular warfare operations by United States Special Operations Forces.”⁶¹ The Defense Department views IW as a broad term which includes numerous activities⁶² that include core SOF activities.⁶³ There have been reports that Section 1202 has already been used abroad for information operations and intelligence gathering.⁶⁴ Given the broad activities that fall under IW, there is a risk that the United States can mission creep itself into a war with Iran over Syria.

However, Section 1202 is partially restrictive, as it cannot be used to support foreign surrogate activities if U.S. SOF themselves are not legally authorized to conduct those same types of activities and it requires operational authority from the President.⁶⁵ Despite these restrictions, Section 1202 requires greater congressional oversight, as Section 1202 is not an adequate substitute for a use-of-military-force authorization by Congress, and there is a risk that Section 1202 can specifically be used to further presidential Article II powers to use force abroad while excluding Congressional oversight.⁶⁶

Another potential issue is how non-AUMF counterterrorism authorities can be applied to Iran in Syria. Iran's IRGC has been designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).⁶⁷ Under Section 1209 of the 2015 NDAA, the Secretary of Defense can train and equip vetted Syrians to protect “the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria.”⁶⁸ While Section 127e and Section 1209 have been used in Syria for countering terrorism, the IRGC and the Iranian proxies that have been designated as foreign terrorist organizations could be targeted under Section 127e and Section 1209. Similarly, Section 1534 (CTPF) of the 2015 NDAA could be used to fund surrogate activities against the IRGC and the Iranian proxies, as it allows

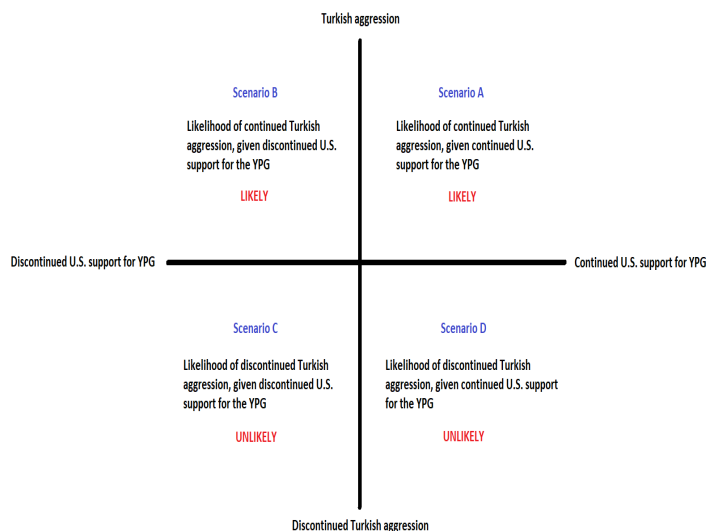
for “support and assistance to foreign security forces or other groups or individuals to conduct, support, or facilitate counterterrorism and crisis response activities under authority provided the Department of Defense by any other provision of law.”⁶⁹

Given the broad activities authorized by these authorities, it is not difficult to imagine how they could lead to an escalatory spiral resulting in a destructive war unauthorized by Congress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary purpose of U.S. military involvement in Syria was to fight ISIS through an UW campaign, which has been largely successful. The anti-ISIS policy priority will be the most feasible objective, as long as the SDF continues to degrade and contain ISIS, and can become more self-sufficient in its anti-ISIS mission. However, the continued success of the SDF will also be affected by Turkish actions against the SDF, as well as the YPG’s infighting against the Arabs within the SDF coalition.

Dealing with Turkish and Turkey-linked attacks against the SDF will be difficult due to Turkey’s status as an ally. However, arming the SDF to fight Turkey in the current state will risk escalation with Turkey, and may jeopardize the SDF’s anti-ISIS mission. It is likely that Turkey will continue to act in its own interest to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity against the Kurds. The likelihood of continued Turkish aggression and discontinued aggression may be conceptualized analytically through four scenarios:



- In Scenario A, continued Turkish aggression is likely, as the United States is still in the last phase of Operation Inherent Resolve, and will likely not the abandon YPG anytime soon. Supporting the YPG would benefit the United States, given how much has been invested into the force, how important the YPG is to the success of the SDF, and the seeming lack of non-Kurd alternatives that could replace YPG. In turn, Turkish aggression will likely continue.
 - Turkey’s Parliament recently extended a mandate that permits Turkey to deploy troops to Syria and Iraq for cross-border operations; the extension was for two years.⁷⁰ Last year, Erdogan claimed that plans for a new offensive into northern Syria would be on the table as long as Turkey faces a Kurdish militant threat.⁷¹
- In Scenario B, Turkish aggression is also likely, as discontinued U.S support for the YPG will be insufficient. Turkey will likely continue to see YPG as a problem as long as YPG remains force capable of militarily or politically harming Turkey. Turkish aggression will also likely continue unless the PKK threat is also resolved.
 - De-escalation through the creation of “buffer zones” has been attempted in the past, to move the Kurds further away from Turkey’s borders, but Turkey has continued in its aggression afterwards. Discontinued U.S. support for the YPG would go a step further than creating “buffer zones,” but would not change Turkey’s threat perception as long as the YPG remains a threat.
- Scenario C is unlikely. Turkey will see the Kurds as a threat regardless of whether or not the United States supports the Kurds. Unless the Kurds make it unequivocally clear that they will not seek an independent Kurdistan, and will not politically or militarily threaten Turkey, discontinued U.S. support for the YPG will be insufficient. Turkish aggression is also unlikely to stop unless the PKK threat is also resolved.
- Scenario D is unlikely. Because the Kurd issue is likely an existential one to Turkey, it is unlikely that the United States can coerce Turkey into forgoing aggression, and it is unlikely that any economic aid or military procurement deal with the United States can erase Turkey’s threat

perception against the Kurds. It is more likely that Turkey will compromise on other issues unrelated to the Kurds.

Aside from Turkish aggression, continued U.S. support for the YPG will be an untenable strategy for several other reasons. The SDF, under YPG command, has attempted to negotiate with the Assad regime on several occasions, even going as far as to offer integration into the Syrian army if the SDF's "special status" is recognized by the regime.⁷² This contradicts stated U.S. interests against the Assad regime, risks the United States losing its influence over the SDF, and shows that the SDF's collaboration with the United States has limits.

The YPG's increasingly autonomous actions also jeopardize the continued feasibility and appropriateness of the United States' UW campaign through the SDF. The YPG has constantly marginalized the Arabs within the SDF coalition by excluding them from leadership positions and decision-making processes,⁷³ which has also caused a loss of support for the SDF in the Arab populations that have previously supported the SDF resistance.⁷⁴

With regard to the Iran threat, there is no congressional use-of-military-force authorization against Iran, fighting against Iran falls outside of the intention of the 2001 AUMF, and existing statutory authorities hold great potential for abuse and mission creep. The scope of IW activities against a state actor and its proxy forces could be greater than what has been used against ISIS (see *Appendix A: Irregular Warfare (IW)* for a more detailed assessment into this issue), would be more of an offensive action than a defensive one, and would bring the United States closer to war with Iran. The risk of war with Iran would also increase if the IRGC or its proxied forces are targeted under counterterrorism statutes. If the U.S. contingent in Syria is repurposed to fight against Iran, it should require separate congressional approval and oversight. If surrogates are used to fight against Iran, it should require separate congressional approval and oversight.

The United States does not necessarily need to fight Iran in Syria. The small contingent of U.S. troops in Syria is not purposed for fighting against Iran, and is inadequate to fight against Iran. Even if the United States withdraws its troops from Syria, it is still capable of fighting a war against Iran, and the withdrawal of

U.S. troops from Syria will not significantly impact its investments in neighboring countries. When it comes to regional stability and preventing spillover effects into neighboring countries, neighboring states, such as Jordan and Iraq, could invest more in securing their own borders with Syria. Burden sharing could mean a reduced need for additional or continued U.S. troop deployments to Syria.

Holding Assad accountable will be the least feasible objective. Not only does the United States not have major multilateral support for this endeavor, but finding surrogates to oust Assad will be much more difficult than it was years ago (when the Central Intelligence Agency attempted to dislodge Assad), as the operational environment has changed (see *Appendix B: Unconventional Warfare (UW)* for more details). It is likely that Iran and Russia will continue to enable Assad, and the United States faces further obstacles due to the willingness of Turkey and Iraq to normalize relations with Assad. It is highly unlikely that Assad will relinquish power or change his fundamental interests.

Recommendations

The best option for the United States against ISIS in Syria is to finish out the last phase of Operation Inherent Resolve without succumbing to threat inflation. To deal with Turkey in Syria, U.S. policy should lead with adroit diplomacy to protect the SDF's anti-ISIS fight (including by refraining from escalatory arms sales to the SDF). However, the viability of continued U.S. support for the YPG should be re-examined, and Washington should consider non-Kurdish substitutes for long-term stability.

To deal with the Iran threat in Syria, Congress needs to have more oversight and authority to prevent mission creep and abuse of military power, which could lead the United States closer to war with Iran. Any conflict should be legally declared and executed with proper oversight.

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Appendix A: Irregular Warfare (IW)

The Risk of Mission Creep

To show the breadth of core SOF activities, how many of them are included in the understanding of IW, how various statutes have been used (not limited to Syria), what types of activity can potentially be used against Iran in Syria (highlighted in orange), and what should not be used against Iran in Syria (highlighted in red), a comparative matrix is shown:

Some SOF Core Activities ⁷⁵	Enumerated Specific & Related IW Missions ⁷⁶	§ 1202 IW Operations	§ 1209 Syria - Vetted Assistance	§ 127e Support of SOF for CT	§ 1534 CTPF
Civil Affairs (CA)	X (civil-military operations)	See footnote ⁷⁷			
Counter-Insurgency (COIN)	X	See footnote ⁷⁸			
Counter-Terrorism (CT)	X	See footnote ⁷⁹	X	X	X
Direct Action (DA)		See footnote ⁸⁰		X ⁸¹	
Foreign Internal Defense (FID)	X	See footnote ⁸²			
Military Information Support Operations (MISO)	X	Likely MISO (“information warfare” ⁸³); has been advocated ⁸⁴			
Security Force Assistance (SFA)	X (security cooperation)	See footnote ⁸⁵			
Special Reconnaissance (SR)		Could be SR ⁸⁶ as Intelligence/Surveillance/Reconnaissance is used for IW ⁸⁷ , and SR is a SOF activity (“intelligence-gathering” ⁸⁸)			
Unconventional Warfare (UW)	X	Has been advocated ⁸⁹			

- 75 Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations
- 76 Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy, U.S. Department of Defense
- 77 Civil affairs operations can be used in support of other IW activities, such as COIN, FID, and UW
- 78 COIN is broad and can involve CA, FID, and CT, for example, and is done in support of a host nation; AANES is not a recognized state
- 79 If CT involves surrogate forces, it is generally done in partnership with a host nation's forces; CT can be part of other IW activities
- 80 CT can involve DA; DA includes activities such as raids and sabotage
- 81 Stephanie Savell et al, United States Counterterrorism Operations 2018-2020, Watson Institute, Brown University
- 82 FID is for supporting host nation activities against internal threats; AANES is not a recognized state
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- 85 SFA assistance to SDF is possible if AANES is considered as a "legitimate authority"; SFA is typically done in support of a host nation
- 86 SR can be used for Operational Preparation of the Environment as well as Advance Force Operations in special operations; the latter is typically intended to prepare for DA in the near-term
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Appendix B: Unconventional Warfare (UW)

The Problems With Repurposing SDF Against Assad

Source used for table development: (U) TC 18-01: Special Forces Unconventional Warfare, U.S. Department of the Army

Note: This is a non-exhaustive assessment that highlights the more obvious problems that an UW campaign against the Assad regime will face.

	Dimensions	Aspects		
Feasibility	Weakened/ Unconsolidated Regime or Occupying Power	Weakened mechanisms of control over civilian populace	Degraded internal security capabilities	Reliance on foreign support (1)
	Will of the Population	Retention of grievances against regime or occupying power	Will to resist the regime or occupying power	Will to collaborate with resistance forces (2)
	Environmental and Human Terrain	Resistance safe havens and bases of operation relatively inaccessible to regime or occupying power	Accessibility of the civilian populace to the resistance	Existing supporting infrastructure for resistance
Appropriateness	Resistance Willingness	Willingness to collaborate with the United States	Willingness to distribute power across the resistance (3)	
	Resistance Compatibility	Inter-resistance: ideological, ethnic, religious, or tribal bonds for viable mutual goals (4)	Resistance goals are compatible with U.S. goals (5)	Resistance must not cause negative legal or political ramifications (6)
	Resistance Potential	Strategic oversight : can provide direction, guidance and coordination	Operational management: can manage underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla operations	

(1) The Assad regime is reliant on Russian and Iranian support, but this support makes the Assad regime stronger. Reliance on foreign support can be a weakness if foreign support can be curtailed, but both Russia and Iran stand to benefit from supporting Assad against the SDF. A UW campaign against the Assad regime will increase the likelihood of conflict with Iran and Russia.

(2) Arab tribesmen, who were once on the side of the Syrian revolution and supported the SDF, have increasingly fought the SDF.⁹⁰ This indicates the SDF's decreasing ability to maintain popular support, which is critical for an insurgency movement in unconventional warfare. Increased Arab animosities against the SDF will increase the likelihood of exploitation by Iran and Russia, which has already started in the form of information operations.⁹¹

(3) Power-sharing and decision-making within the SDF has been an ongoing problem that has marginalized the Arabs. Preference for the Kurds has led to civil institutions in the SDF losing legitimacy.⁹² The SDF has also attempted to disband the Arab Deir ez Zor Military Council (part of the SDF).⁹³ While SDF has concerns that the Arabs may be co-opted by the Assad regime, power-sharing and decision-making exclusive of the Arabs will

increase the likelihood of disunity and infighting.

(4) The SDF and the Arab Deir ez Zor Military Council have been fighting each other. An assessment by the Critical Threats Project in September 2023 asserted that the SDF's ability to maintain control in Deir ez Zor will be undermined for several months.⁹⁴ This indicates a worsening inter-resistance dynamic that threatens unity.

(5) The SDF has offered to negotiate with the Assad regime, and has offered to integrate the SDF into the Syrian army if the SDF's "special status" is recognized by the regime.⁹⁵ This shows the limitations of U.S. collaboration with the SDF, as the SDF pursues its own goals outside of the anti-ISIS fight. Integration into the Assad regime would go against U.S. interests against the Assad regime.

(6) Violations of international norms by the SDF have been reported. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that the SDF has engaged in indiscriminate shelling - a violation of international humanitarian law tantamount to war crimes.⁹⁶ Violating international norms increases the risk that the SDF will be delegitimized.

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