

Please provide an overview of the security and stability challenges in Syria given the threat of non-state actors in Idlib and the N/NW, such as Hayât Tahrir al-Sham and Turkish-backed militias. What are the implications of those challenges for the humanitarian situation in the north, and what are the next steps for U.S. policy toward Syria?

Chair Maenza, Deputy Chair Turkel, distinguished commissioners: thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important subject of the ongoing conflict in Syria and its dire humanitarian effects. There are of course many pressing crises on the international agenda today, but I am grateful for your continued attention to this terrible war and its many pernicious effects.

I've been asked to provide an overview of the security and stability challenges in Syria, particularly the threat of non-state actors in Idlib and northwest Syria; outline the implications of those challenges for the humanitarian situation; and perhaps chart some next steps for U.S. policy toward Syria.

But a few broad contextual points are important before diving into the details.

Strategic context

The fact is that Syria is not today a top-tier U.S. strategic priority. The administration is understandably focused on responding to Russia's horrific invasion of Ukraine, as well as with its agenda of domestic renewal, the challenge of confronting China, the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of last year was consumed by the crisis in Afghanistan. And, globally, there are more people today forcibly displaced from their homes than at any time since the end of the Second World War. The strategic picture is unrelenting.

This context is important for a few reasons.

First, it means that the administration has placed a large emphasis on "keeping things on an even keel," both in the Middle East generally and in Syria specifically. Given that reality, the U.S. has welcomed the regional de-escalation and reconciliation efforts that have taken place over the two years, whether that's between regional players like the UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt, or in the reduction in overall violence in Libya and Syria. But that does not extend to normalization with the Assad regime, nor is it likely to extend that far.

Second, it means that it is hard to realistically recommend that the U.S. "do more" in Syria, beyond maintaining its presence and stabilization activities in the northeast and continuing to provide substantial humanitarian support. The U.S. government and international donors must weigh the profound needs in Syria against urgent requirements in other crisis spots. In addition, after more than a decade of conflict, the intensity of the fighting has thankfully ebbed – the U.S. and most of its partners are loathe to re-escalate in this context.

These realities and the accompanying limitations are difficult to accept for those of us who follow this conflict and its costs, but they are difficult to dispute analytically.

The U.S. approach in Syria

In terms of the U.S. approach in Syria, there has been a great deal of continuity over the last seven years, with the notable exception of former President Trump's two sudden—partial and subsequently

aborted—withdrawal announcements. President Biden has offered genuine presidential-level commitment to the SDF and reiterated that the U.S. would remain in the northeast to keep a lid on ISIS and help stabilize the region. The Biden administration has also de-emphasized more maximalist goals vis a vis Iran's presence and the Assad regime that the Trump administration had advanced. But the U.S. has broadly continued to implement the strategy laid out late in the Obama administration.

That approach is premised on the reality that the conflict has settled into an uneasy stasis, despite the continuing violence, and that no political resolution is likely in the near-term. Most of the outside powers can live with the status quo, though Turkey is probably least happy with it and Iran is probably most inclined to push the boundaries. Given all of that, and the lack of any political appetite in Washington to double down, the U.S. decided some time ago that the best course was a strategy of de-escalation, seeking to stabilize the current contours of the war, ease humanitarian suffering where possible, and back the SDF to maintain pressure on ISIS. Some U.S. officials further hoped that the SDF's influence would offer some leverage in any eventual political deal.

This is a utilitarian policy approach aimed at doing the most good for the most people, faced with the daunting facts that 90% of Syrians live in poverty; 60% are food insecure; and 12 million Syrians are internally displaced or refugees.

For the areas of the country where the U.S. has influence, through the SDF, economic collapse and drought are the main challenges, along with the disruptive attacks of hostile outside powers like Turkey and Iran (and their proxies), a lingering ISIS insurgency, and the challenge of managing Arab-Kurdish ethnic tensions and intra-Kurdish rivalries.

Outside of the areas where the U.S. has a military presence, policymakers are focused on the provision of humanitarian aid, particularly through the maintenance of the UN cross-border mechanism from Turkey. The Security Council mandate for this UN humanitarian aid, on which some 2.5 million Syrians in the northwest are almost entirely reliant, will once again be up for renewal in July. Russia has used previous renewal cycles to limit the number of border crossings, essentially trying to use humanitarian assistance as a tool—alongside barrel bombs and torture—in their effort to help consolidate regime control of the country.

The Biden administration last year announced increases to humanitarian and stabilization assistance, while the President himself reportedly conveyed the importance of the cross-border mechanism to Putin at their summit meeting in Geneva. While Russia continues to try to leverage the cross-border mechanism to secure concessions—for instance on eventual reconstruction funds for the regime—the U.S. and Europe together provide 90% of UN funding in Syria, most of which goes to regime areas, so they likewise hold substantial leverage. If Moscow demands too high a price, the Western allies could seek to reconstitute an assistance structure outside the UN in Northwest Syria—perhaps only further entrenching Assad's loss of sovereignty to Moscow's chagrin.

The security situation in Turkish and rebel-controlled northern Syria

Beyond the dire economic and humanitarian situation, northern and northwestern Syria are defined by the military pressure from the Assad regime and Russia, Turkey's military presence, and the violent and ill-disciplined armed groups that underpin that involvement.

This area is divided into four regions: Idlib (where roughly 3 million people reside); Afrin (with roughly 750,000 people); the “Euphrates Shield zone” from Azaz to Jarabulus (roughly 800,000 people); and, separately, the Turkish salient from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn (roughly 300,000 people).

Turkey has a military presence in all these areas and administers all but Idlib directly. Outside of Idlib, Ankara has settled in for a long presence, making substantial investments, building up militias under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA), and setting up proxy councils to deliver basic services. Ankara has increasingly sought to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey to these areas, though with limited success given the deep roots many Syrians have put down in Turkey. Turkey’s real and stated rationales for this deep involvement are unlikely to fade, again pointing to a long-term presence. In creating these zones, Ankara sought to stifle Kurdish autonomy and externalize the refugee problem – but having created de facto client states in northern Syria, it must sustain them. The enclaves are almost totally reliant on Turkey.

The provision of basic services and governance is complicated by a lingering Kurdish insurgency, a legacy of Ankara’s violent seizure of Afrin from the YPG. But the biggest security issue is the SNA proxies themselves. Ankara’s desire to lighten the direct load on the Turkish military means they will continue to rely on these groups, but the chaos they sow is a key reason international actors cannot do more to help provide services. Fear of these armed proxies is also a major deterrent to resettlement for Syrians in Turkey.

In Afrin, for instance, stabilization efforts are undermined by the legacy of violent seizure, human rights abuses, and massive displacement of Kurdish residents (of whom some 200,000 remain displaced). Turkey has resettled IDPs from other parts of Syria in Afrin, though its invasion displaced more people than have been resettled, so the idea that Turkey’s invasion was humanitarian in any way is outrageous.

This demographic engineering, persistent harassment of Kurdish residents, and violence from Turkish-backed groups like the Sultan Murad Brigade (a Turkmen group and one of Turkey’s closest proxies), Ahrar al-Sharqiya (committed Salafists from eastern Syria accused of many human rights abuses), and the Shamiya (Levant) Front make it impossible for the international community to engage beyond basic humanitarian aid.

The Euphrates Shield zone and the Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn salient are little better. Turkey is totally dominant in these areas, administering them through the governors of neighboring Turkish provinces, controlling the salaries of councils and armed groups, and providing utilities. But despite this de facto control, Turkey has proven itself unable or unwilling to rein in these proxies, and criminality and abuses are rampant in SNA areas, with many well-documented human rights abuses, infighting and general chaos, cruelty, and extortion.

Finally, there is the largest outstanding issue in Syria: Idlib province, primarily controlled by some 50,000 Syrian rebels, dominated by Hayât Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), behind a protective shield of some 10,000-15,000 Turkish troops. Idlib hosts some 3 million people in desperate conditions, as well as the primary border-crossing for UN aid, Bab al-Hawa. It has long provided a haven and relative autonomy for some very radical groups, though both the U.S. and Turkey have ramped up their respective counterterrorism efforts, while HTS has intermittently cooperated to root out international jihadists as part of an effort to gain international legitimacy.

HTS and Turkey share a form of mutual dependence; HTS needs Turkey's protection to stave off annihilation by Russia and the regime, while Turkey wants HTS to defend and administer Idlib to avoid a substantial new burden in Idlib. A parallel balance holds on the Russian/regime side, where the regime likely has the desire but not the capability to prosecute a decisive campaign against Idlib, while Russia has—or, perhaps, had—the capability but not the desire.

Russia has been content to play the long game, doing enough to maintain its relative influence over Assad while maintaining the threat of a decisive attack in Idlib as leverage over Turkey on other fronts and in Moscow's effort to peel Ankara further away from its traditional Western allies. Turkey, meanwhile, has remained desperate for any way to delay the collapse of Idlib and the displacement into Turkey that would likely ensue. While the current "ceasefire" hardly meets the definition, with regular shelling and clashes, and leaves the core dispute unresolved, this uneasy stasis nonetheless suits both sides.