

# Impact of US Elections on Syria's future





# Why the US election result will have little effect on the Syrian conflict



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As US media declared Joe Biden president and with President Donald Trump wanting to go to court, the reality of the situation in Syria shows that it does not matter who claims victory in the elections, as the country's fate lies squarely in the hands of the Syrian people.

There has been much speculation that, as president, Donald Trump and Joe Biden are bound to approach the Syrian crisis in drastically different ways. However, there is less certainty about whether either administration could do much to help end Syria's nightmare while President Bashar Assad remains in power – and it seems neither would be willing to take the necessary steps to see him removed.

The US record in Syria is not a good one. One year into the civil war, then-president Barack Obama backtracked on his chemical weapons “red line” after the Assad regime used sarin gas on its own people and was met with no US military action. Later claims emerged that Obama's failure to act was out of concern that Iran would reject the nuclear deal that his administration was determined to drive through. Today, with Obama's JCPOA deal undone by Trump, Iran continues to have a strong and growing presence in Syria and an undue influence on its prospects for peace.

Under President Trump the influence the US once had in the region has faded, a reality underlined by his decision to withdraw troops from Syria, leaving Russia and Iran to step into the gap. There is also no indication from the current US president that he seeks regime change in Syria. In 2017, Nikki Haley, then-US ambassador to the UN, said it was no longer a priority of the US to remove Assad, but instead it intended to work to achieve a political settlement with other powers invested in the country, such as Turkey and Russia.

If Trump loses and Biden wins the presidency, there is fear in the region that the new Democrat president would restore the Iran nuclear deal, emboldening the Iranian regime and, by extension, Assad. There is also speculation that Biden could lead the US into another war in the region. However, the US foreign policy think tank The National Interest recently said: “The former VP was actually one of the Obama administration's leading skeptics about what the US could do in Syria.”

What is evident is that under neither Trump or Biden is the US likely to reverse its new non-interventionist worldview, and regardless of the outcome of the US election, the fate of Syria rests rightfully where it should – in the hands of the Syrian people.

**A**s US media declared Joe Biden president and with President Donald Trump wanting to go to court, the following paper argues that it doesn't matter who wins the 2020 elections because the fate of Syria - approaching the 10-year mark of a bloody civil war that has claimed over a half million lives, displaced one-third of the population and transformed the nation into a host for the export of the Iranian regime's revolution - lies in the hands of the country's people.

Whoever takes the oath of office as president on inauguration day in January; it is far more likely that any substantive change in Syria will be driven from within the country itself.

In October, nearly two-thirds of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs sent a strongly-worded bipartisan letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressing “deep concern” that “various countries have taken steps to renew formal diplomatic ties with Bashar Al-Assad despite his ongoing and unrepentant brutality.”

Urging the State Department to remind the US's allies that “the US opposes any efforts to renew diplomatic ties with or extend formal diplomatic recognition to the Assad regime,” the 31 signatories praised the Trump administration's imposition of sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.

The committee, they added, “look forward to working with you [the US] to ensure ongoing robust implementation of the Caesar Act, including sanctions, in order to communicate to the international community that the United States opposes any efforts to rehabilitate Assad and his cronies absent the behavior changes outlined in law.”

Although addressed to the Trump administration, it was perhaps intended to place the Syrian issue at the top of the in-tray for whoever is the next occupant of the White House.

There has been much speculation that, as president, Donald Trump and Joe Biden are bound to approach the Syrian crisis in drastically different ways. However, there is less certainty about whether either administration could do much to help end Syria's nightmare while Bashar al-Assad remains in power – and it seems neither would be willing to take the necessary steps to see him removed.



***If Trump loses and Biden wins the presidency, there is fear in the region that the new Democrat president would restore the Iran nuclear deal.***

The US's record in Syria is not a good one. One year into the civil war, President Barack Obama warned that the use of chemical weapons by the regime would be a “red line”. However, when Assad's government stepped over that line in 2013, using sarin on its own people, the US took no military action. Later claims emerged that Obama's failure to act was out of concern that Iran would reject the nuclear deal that his administration was determined to drive through. Today, with Obama's JCPOA deal undone by Trump, Iran continues to have a strong and growing presence in Syria and an undue influence on its prospects for peace.

Iran's interest in Syria is obvious – under Assad, Syria is the Islamic Republic's closest Arab ally. As a result Tehran has invested \$30 billion in Syria since the start of the civil war and continues to fund its proxies there despite the suffering of its own people. Earlier this year the Atlantic Council described Iran's credit line to Syria as “a well that never runs dry”.

Without a doubt, the Trump administration has been the toughest on Iran in recent history – as one of his first acts upon taking office the president kept his promise to pull out of the nuclear deal.

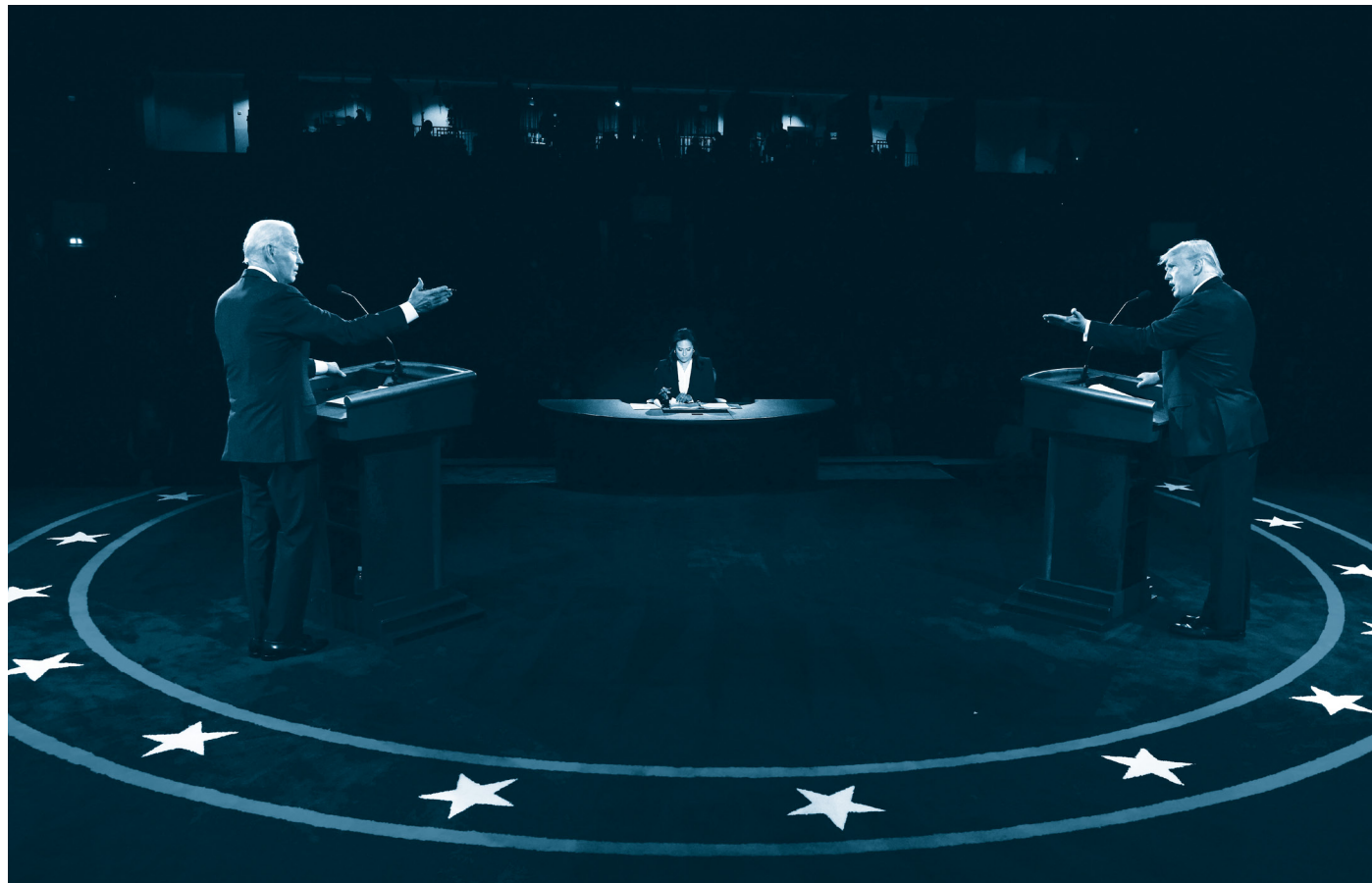
However, under Trump the influence the US once had in the region has also faded, a reality underlined by his decision to withdraw troops from Syria, leaving Russia and Iran to step into the gap. For Russia its foothold in Syria is also its foothold in the wider region at large. Unfortunately for the Syrian people, Moscow does not see an alternative to Assad and Vladimir Putin does not want him removed from power.

There is also no indication from President Trump that he seeks regime change in Syria. In 2017 Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, said it was no longer the US's priority to remove Assad but instead it intended to work to achieve a political settlement with other powers invested in the country, such as Turkey and Russia. At about the same time, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said “I think the ... longer-term status of President Assad will be decided by the Syrian people.”

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**US President Donald Trump (R)** Democratic Presidential candidate, former US Vice President Joe Biden and moderator, NBC News anchor, Kristen Welker (C) participate in the final presidential debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, on October 22, 2020.  
 AFP

gime and, by extension, Assad. There is also speculation that Biden could lead the US into another war in the region. However, as US foreign-policy think-tank The National Interest recently concluded, “while it’s tempting to push Biden into the interventionist camp that continues to dominate Washington’s foreign policy establishment, the former veep was actually one of the Obama administration’s leading skeptics about what the United States could do in Syria – and indeed, whether the US should do much of anything at all short of providing humanitarian aid.”

Dr. James Carafano, Vice President of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at the Heritage Foundation, believes there is unlikely to be any major changes to US’s foreign policy with regard to Syria, no matter who wins.

“I don’t think there’s much space here for big shifts in US policy regardless of the outcome of the election,” Carafano said. “The reality is, Syria has never been central to US policy in the region. The Assad family has always been against the US and the US has never really cared; it’s a tiny country with a small amount of oil, tucked into the corner [of the Middle East] that is an annoyance but is not a strategic problem.”



*Regardless of the outcome of the US election, the fate of Syria rests rightfully where it should – in the hands of the Syrian people.*

President Trump once dismissed Syria as a land of “sand and death”, a war-torn country that was, in his view, “lost long ago.” Regardless, Carafano explains, the goal should be to get Syria to a phase of post-conflict revival so that nation-building can take place. Until then, the civil war in Syria is “a relatively frozen conflict. I suspect it’s going to stay that way for a while.”

And Syria, he added, was unlikely to be a first priority for an incoming Biden administration.

“Typically, a new incoming administration wants to focus on domestic policies. As far as foreign policy goes, they’re going to focus on the big movements and Syria is not one of them. The other thing you have to remember is any time you go dabbling in Syria, you’re going to create as many problems as you solve because you’re going to create a whole new set of issues for friends and allies in the region.

The challenge for a Biden administration, said Carafano, would be to avoid doing anything that might undo the progress that has been made against Iran under Trump.

“We’re probably in a better position in Iraq than we were four years ago. The US-Israel alliance is strong, Arab countries are normalizing relations with Israel, the Syria problem is

contained, and Iranian surrogates are under pressure everywhere,” he said.

“Iran is nearly bankrupt, so [a Biden administration] is inheriting a pretty good policy.”

The US’s long-term strategy for the region, certainly under the Trump administration, is to work for “a collective security, diplomatic and economic framework that largely allows the region to be relatively self-sustaining.”

For Carafano, the question of whether Biden would bring back the Iran nuclear deal is moot.

“Biden can say that but it’s easier said than done,” he said. “The deal is, for all intents and purposes, already dead.”

Others, though, believe it could be brought back to life – but in a different form.

“If Biden wins I think he will bring the JCPOA back but not on the same terms as before,” said Dr. Nahro Zagros, an academic and political analyst based in Iraq and a fellow at the Gold Institute for International Strategy in Washington.

“They want to reach a deal where Iran will not be able to intervene in international affairs in places such as Syria, Yemen and Iraq and Lebanon.”

Regardless, Dr. Zagros believes that while the Syrian civil war will inevitably come to an end, it won’t be for some time.

“This fight will drag on for much longer even if Assad is deposed from power,” he said. “There are progressives and people who are pro-West but there are also Islamist groups like al Qaeda and affiliated groups like ISIS. There are also Islamic political parties on the border with Israel,” he added, referring to terrorist group Daesh

His medium-term prognosis for the country is a gloomy one. Internal clashes, he believes, will be inevitable when Syrian refugees eventually return home only to find their property has been confiscated. “They will fight to regain their land,” and this will usher in another civil war, fuelled by the many competing interests in the country.

“We have outsiders being brought into Syria to fight from Iran, Turkmenistan, all Shias, and the Turkish army in parts of Syria in the north. Nobody can force them out of Syria. All these regional armies are taking bits of the land.”

Only one single country stands a chance of disrupting this process – and under neither Trump nor Biden is the US likely to reverse its new non-interventionist world view.

Regardless of the outcome of the US election, then, the fate of Syria rests rightfully where it should – in the hands of the Syrian people.

