Impact of US Elections on Syria’s future
Why the US election result will have little effect on the Syrian conflict

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 expecting 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. “Intra-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 and pieces.”

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.