



One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

January 24, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I write to express serious concern over the Biden administration's Syria policy and urge you to take immediate action to ensure assistance is delivered in a manner that is consistent with U.S. strategic objectives.

Allowing more investment into Syria in any form is a form of normalization with Bashar al - Assad that diminishes his pariah status. As both Republican and Democrat administrations have made clear, support for Syria's long-term development, to include any form of reconstruction in Assad-held areas, is unacceptable absent a permanent, political resolution in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254. Far from working to advance a sustainable political settlement, Assad and his supporters continue to perpetrate war crimes across Syria as they profit off international aid.

Current estimates suggest the cost of rebuilding Syria could run as high as \$1.2 trillion, a figure many times greater than Syria's annual gross domestic product. Rebuilding will necessitate support from the international community. Reconstruction remains the international community's most important source of leverage to ensure Assad, and his Russian and Iranian backers, are held accountable for their war crimes against the Syrian people. What happens in Syria matters not just for the Middle East, but also for Ukraine and beyond.

For these reasons, I am alarmed by the dramatic expansion of U.S. assistance to areas controlled by Assad for purposes far beyond lifesaving humanitarian aid. As a result of action taken by this administration, U.S. funds—including those provided through the United Nations (U.N.) and other international organizations—are now supporting several long-term development projects such as business development training, bakery rehabilitation, and climate change programs in regime-held areas. This is a clear shift away from longstanding U.S. policy and threatens to

create a dangerous precedent for countries seeking to normalize relations with the brutal Assad regime. I am further concerned by this administration's efforts to solicit support for certain types of assistance like "early recovery" despite the lack of consensus on how this term is defined.

U.N. agencies receiving U.S. funding define "early recovery" as a form of development aid "for building resilience in post-crisis settings." This is in contrast to the definition used by the United States, which classifies "early recovery" as aid designed to address "recovery needs that arise during the humanitarian phase of an emergency, when saving lives is still an urgent and predominant need." By promoting "early recovery" aid in regime-held areas absent clearly defined guardrails on what exactly constitutes lifesaving humanitarian assistance compared to development aid, this administration risks distorting crucial distinctions between assistance and reconstruction, eroding our strongest leverage against Assad and his backers.

To prevent Assad and his backers from exploiting these ambiguities to further their goal of reconstructing Syria without complying with UNSCR 2254, this administration must engage with allies and partners to prevent "early recovery" from being used as a license for reconstruction. There must be clear definitions of what constitutes "early recovery" and how it is distinct from development aid or reconstruction.

To this end, the United States should press for the adoption of a single, clear, universally held, definition of "early recovery" at the United Nations Security Council that is humanitarian, not development, based. This must be a necessary precondition for future U.S. support for "early recovery" assistance, whether through the U.N. or non-governmental organizations.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I look forward to continuing to engage with you on this and other important elements of U.S. policy toward Syria.

Sincerely,



MICHAEL T. McCAUL
Chairman