

REPORT

# Will the US-Russia Summit Lead to Progress on the Syrian File?

*June 2021*



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**On Wednesday, June 16, 2021, the first summit between US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin concluded in the Swiss capital Geneva. The summit occurred at a time when bilateral relations are strained by diplomatic, military, and economic tensions — mainly tensions around issues concerning strategic stability and disarmament. This is in addition to regional disputes existing between both countries, especially in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.**

Several strategic files and critical issues were at the top of the summit's agenda and forecasts had suggested that the Syrian file would be central to the summit's agenda. However, the [remarks](#) of both summit participants indicated that the Syrian

file was discussed but was not central to the summit's agenda. Putin revealed this when he said that he hoped dialogue would resume on issues of mutual concern with Washington, particularly discussions related to strategic stability as well as talks to address ongoing regional disputes in places such as Syria and Libya.

Prior to this summit, White House National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan](#) announced President Biden's intent to discuss issues regarding Syria with his Russian counterpart. At this point, a question arises about the political approaches and perspectives that the two leaders brought to the summit, as well as a question about the summit's outcomes in regard to the Syrian file and its future post-summit.

The US and Russian presidents attended the summit despite significant divergences in their points of view regarding the importance of the Syrian file in their respective regional and international calculations. This is considering the fact that there were other files of greater importance on the summit's agenda. Furthermore, there was speculation that the Syrian file would be marginalized in favor of outlining measures to restore confidence between the two nuclear-armed powers on several other strategic files.

The position of the new US administration on the Syrian file remains ambiguous. So far, President Biden and his team — even though it has been five months since he entered the White House — have not outlined a comprehensive position on Syria, although they consider the Syrian file as one of the keys to resolve other regional disputes — especially given its link to the Iranian file.

The Syrian file, however, is of major importance to Russia as was reflected in the [composition](#) of the Russian delegation that attended the summit, which included the Russian special envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev. This indicated a serious desire by President Putin to hold a wide-ranging and comprehensive

discussion regarding the Syrian file. Moscow is aware that despite its efforts to save Bashar al-Assad, handling Syria's economic and social crises, bearing the burdens of reconstruction and bringing back millions of displaced Syrians remain difficult. The aforementioned will endanger Russia's gains in Syria because of the pressure of managing these crises and burdens. Therefore, it was expected that Russia would resort — through this summit — to using the Syrian file to find a path to address many outstanding issues with Washington and pressure it to advance understandings on Syria — including steps to ease the Caesar Act's restrictions. Russia considers this act an impediment to Syria's reconstruction and an obstacle to attracting foreign investment. Moscow hoped to make gains in other overlapping conflict hotspots (Ukraine, Crimea and other files). Here, it can be said that Russia's military escalation and bombardment of Idlib and Afrin in northern Syria, just a few days before holding multiple remarkable meetings — including this recent summit — was a means to exert pressure and gain bargaining chips to force Washington to make concessions in relation to the Syrian file.

At the conclusion of the summit, no new developments regarding the Syrian file were announced except for the [remarks](#) of the US president. He said that he had briefly spoken with the Russian president regarding mechanisms to facilitate humanitarian aid to enter Syria. The Syrian file was totally [absent](#) from the remarks of the Russian president. Moreover, [Russia](#) did not announce any commitment to support the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria. This may mean that the issue will remain unsettled until July 10, 2021, the deadline set for [reassessing](#) the UN resolution on whether to continue with the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria.

The provision of humanitarian aid and its importance cannot be downplayed considering the tragic conditions facing millions of Syrians. In fact, the issue of humanitarian aid is subject to tri-

lateral political disputes between the United States, Russia, and Western countries.

The United States, for its part, is ramping up pressure to get [more](#) border crossings opened, in addition to keeping the current UN Security Council mechanism in place which allows for aid to be delivered to areas outside the control of the Syrian government. Currently, the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian border with Turkey is the only lifeline for the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Moscow — for its part — is ratcheting up pressure to send UN assistance through the areas controlled by the Syrian government. It hinted at not voting in favor of the UN resolution allowing for humanitarian aid to be delivered via the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing during the next UN Security Council meeting to be held on July 10, sparking international concerns. Perhaps Russia wants — through the pressure it is exerting — to make further gains and hold more negotiation levers in its bid to create pathways for international understandings to legitimize international dealings with the Syrian government and end its international isolation.

However, it is likely that Russia will not move ahead with this decision since its opposition to extending the UN resolution may result in it facing multiple impasses at the international level. More importantly, Russia has a major interest in finding a path to resolve the Syrian file. Apart from the discussions that were held during this summit about assistance and humanitarian corridors, the most important question here is: will this summit — and what follows it — bring about any progress on the Syrian file? Will the US position — regarding its overall concerns and aspirations in the next period — remain absent from Syria's future political settlement?

To answer the question about the fate of the Syrian file following the summit, a host of US moves — directly and indirectly related to this file — have indicated the new position that the United

States will most likely adopt regarding Syria. The US president's talk of joint coordination with Russia indicated a possible significant US move. This prospect will mark an important milestone and indicates that both sides are potentially reviewing their positions in light of the fact that the level of military engagement between the forces of the two sides on the lines of contact in the northern and northwestern parts of Syria has recently witnessed an upsurge.

In fact, when both leaders speak of their countries' respective roles in ensuring international strategic stability, the Syrian crisis must be at the center of this shared goal, particularly as Moscow is seeking to advance its [military capabilities](#) in Syria and transform it into a strategic base. Russia is working on expanding the Tartus naval base so that it can receive large naval vessels as well as expanding Hmeimim Air Base's airstrip and developing it so that it can receive strategic bombers that carry a nuclear payload.

All these moves pose a threat to US interests in the Middle East. Based on the announcement of the two countries that they intend to engage in understandings regarding strategic stability, it is likely that Washington will work on discussing arrangements in relation to the Syrian file over the coming months though this was not directly announced during the summit held between the two world powers.

Moreover, it is likely that the fate of Syria will be a top priority for the United States to limit Russia's expansion through the war-ravaged country. In this context, Washington may possibly take additional steps to directly impact the Assad regime as long as this regime continues to guarantee Russia's military presence in Syria. Washington also puts emphasis on returning to the international arena and participation in crafting new approaches towards regional disputes related to its interests and objectives. For this reason, the United States held a summit with the nations comprising the international coalition against ISIS

in Rome on June 28, 2021 which was co-chaired by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The files discussed at the summit included humanitarian aid to Syria, Syria's political crisis as well as issues regarding chemical weapons and reconstruction.

This could reflect a [new orientation](#) of Washington's current policy towards Syria and an indication of it wanting to expand its involvement in the country's deadlocked political settlement following its previously ambiguous position regarding this file. In parallel, Jordan will [discuss](#) the Syrian file during the meeting which will be held between Jordanian King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein and US President Joe Biden in July. They will explore ways to reach a political settlement as well as discuss the Caesar Act. This Jordanian position would not be possible without a tacit green light from the Biden administration to discuss these issues.

In addition, there are multiple signs of US-Turkish rapprochement that have begun to emerge recently, especially during the period leading up to the recent summit. The Biden administration has intensified diplomatic visits to Ankara.

After the [visit](#) made by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman to Turkey in May 2021, the US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield visited the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing on the Turkish-Syrian border. This is in addition to an anticipated visit by a US delegation to Turkey to discuss multiple issues of mutual concern.

Furthermore, in March 2021 the US Department of State marked the memory of the Turkish soldiers who were killed in Idlib and former US envoy to Syria James Jeffrey said that Turkish-US relations are improving after a period of cool relations.

Even though the bilateral meeting held by the US administration with its Turkish counterpart on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels did not lead to understandings regarding the Syrian file, the issue of border crossings and expanding the delivery of humanitarian aid remain subjects of mutual agree-

ment between the two sides. Thus, it is expected that the United States and Turkey will seek to push for joint understandings on the Syrian file, especially in light of Turkey's critical geographical location when it comes to border crossings and the flow of humanitarian aid. Turkey is also one of the main axes in directing the future course of US-Russia relations.

In conclusion, the summit between the US and Russian presidents did not lead to new developments to radically alter the Syrian file.

The time dedicated by both leaders to discussing the Syrian file did not meet the expectations of many. However, the actual results of this meeting will emerge in the medium and long term. The moves that followed the summit — including subsequent meetings such as the summit recently co-chaired by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Rome, the approaching deadline of voting on the UN Security Council resolution regarding humanitarian aid before July 11, 2021 will definitely reveal the prospects of the next phase — and how far the US calculations regarding the Syrian file will stretch.

Are there clear solutions to resolve the Syrian crisis? Or are the proposals put forward merely nominal to manage the parties involved in the Syrian crisis by countering Russia's clout in Syria on the one hand and exerting more pressure on Iran on the other to push it to adopt a more flexible approach in the ongoing negotiations over the nuclear deal?





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