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A LOOK AT THE POLICY OPTIONS  
IN WAR-TORN SYRIA

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good afternoon, everyone; welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon in the Foreign Policy Program along with my colleagues from the Center on the Middle East Policy at Brookings. We are joining with you today and discussing policy options for the crisis and the conflict in Syria. Obviously this is related to the broader challenge posed by ISIL throughout much of the broader Middle East and beyond, and of course in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy in Paris on Friday. I know I speak for everyone in the room, I'm sure, in saying that our hearts go out to our French friends, and not only our French friends, also individuals throughout much of the world who have been affected by this terrible crisis, from Beirut to Ankara, to citizens of St. Petersburg coming home on an airplane over the Sinai, and obviously millions and millions of Syrian citizens themselves, as well as others throughout the region

Our purpose today is to discuss what alternative strategies might be considered for the conflict in Syria in particular, but then of course in the context of this broader crisis that we see in the region and the world today. And what we thought we would do -- for those of you who have been friends of Brookings and been involved in our conversations over the years, you know this is not the first time we've convened to discuss Syria, but we've often focused on a little broader level of debate. And for those of you who have attended previous events, Jeremy Shapiro and Michael Duran representing poles in the debate about whether to get involved or not, and that was a lot of the more philosophical, almost theological level of debate at times. We had a very good event this spring where Senator Murphy was very kind to join us from the State of Connecticut in a debate we had on whether to do more or not. Today we're going to try to go one layer lower and more detailed and more granular, and get into a discussion of policy options.

So the way we're going to proceed is that three of us will lay out briefly our thoughts on our specific proposals for Syria. Then two of us will add other perspectives -- and I'll say a little bit more in just a second about how we're going to do this -- we'll put these initial thoughts on the table, then we'll go through a second round of sort of friendly and polite discussion/debate where we acknowledge that none of our plans is perfect, but maybe poke some holes in each other's a little bit, and then look to you, hopefully, to repair the damage and come towards a consensus in a best case. But we'll spend at least the last half hour, and maybe a little more, on discussion with all of you and your questions and answers.

So immediately to my left is Tamara Wittes who runs our Center on Middle East Policy here at Brookings. She will be our clean-up hitter, going last in the line-up today. Next to her is Ken Pollack whose article, "An Army for Syria," appeared in *Foreign Affairs* last year. He will follow me in the order and will lay out some of the thinking behind that concept, which I'm sure many of you have studied and read previously. Next to him is Dan Byman, also here at Brookings and also at Georgetown University, and Dan has been writing about containment. And so his concept of how to handle the situation in Syria is to contain a problem that is perhaps too difficult to get to the root of. And then finally Will McCants, who recently wrote "The ISIS Apocalypse", but also I'm sure you've been seeing his name all over newspapers in recent days. None of my colleagues here was absent from the media in recent days, but Will may have taken the cake. So if you were wondering, who is this Will McCants guy, you've read a lot of his name, you haven't seen him yet in person, there he is. And he will talk about, again ISIS or ISIL's strategy in the broader region.

Okay, that's the basic concept. Now I'm going to momentarily switch over to be a panelist -- and while I still have the microphone -- lay out just two or three

minutes on my own concept. Again, my idea is what I call a confederal model for Syria and it's both a political and a military concept. Ken will talk about creating an alternative army among opposition groups to then take on existing forces within Syria. Dan's policy is about containment. Tamara has testified recently about broader political challenges in the region. Her book, "Freedom's Unsteady March," written a few years ago was about the broader effort at promotion of democracy in the broader Middle East. She spent time thinking about that in the State Department, working on that issue as well in the first term of the Obama administration.

So a confederal model for Syria, if I could now lay out a couple of these ideas. The basic notion in the common vernacular might be to think about what's a Bosnian model. How do we recognize that Humpty Dumpty is not going to be easily stitched back together; that Syria is largely, certainly not entirely, but largely segregated along sectarian lines. And maybe it makes the most sense to try to help create autonomous zones of governance and also work within these autonomous zones to build up security forces that can act as opposition to ISIL and Assad. This then becomes not only a political vision for the country's future, but a roadmap for how do we work more closely with the Syrian opposition. And the basic idea that I would have here in addition to saying that a strong unitary government strikes me as unrealistic, is that I think a confederal model allows to potentially create some bridges or at least deconflict our differences with Turkey as well as Russia.

So in this vision of a future Syria, which is not yet ripe for negotiation, what I would hope would get there in coming years, the idea would be to have an Alawite sector in the country's northwest, and maybe Assad could wind up there as sort of a compromise. He wouldn't have to step down from all positions of public life, but he would only have any authority over his own fellow Alawites, and Russians could be part of a

peacekeeping force that would ultimately help this deal. This is the kind of vision that I would at least hope would mitigate some of the differences we have now with our friends the Turks who are nervous about any collaboration with Kurdish forces because they see that potentially as a way to help the PKK in their own country and also maybe even promote the idea of Kurdish independence. If we're very clear about the confederal model being as far as this would go, it allows us to potentially -- at least hypothetically -- work with the Kurds without eliciting this fear that we're really sort of pursuing or encouraging Kurdish independence in disguise. So at a political level it hypothetically at least allows us to, I think, come up with a strategy that Russia and Turkey in theory would object to less than the current approach. Militarily what this allows us to do is to get on the ground in a few places, and get on the ground with a lot more than the 50 Special Forces that President Obama has recently authorized. I'm envisioning up to several hundred or even maybe a couple of thousand Americans. Also British, French, Turkish, Saudi, Jordanians, Special Forces acting primarily as trainers whenever it's become safe enough to get on the ground and do so. And essentially this is an ink spot strategy for building up more military capability in the opposition by working with them where they live instead of expecting them to come out of the country where it's so hard for them to get, where they're leaving their communities defenseless along the way, where I don't think they have the time or feel they have the time to be able to just leave the battlefield for a year and then maybe come back later. And so the notion here would be get on the ground, help build up these autonomous zones, and then further on down the path, maybe in a year or two, then the peace talks to stitch this together in a formal way would become possible. And it would necessitate at that point deployment of an international peacekeeping force.

That's the fire hydrant version of a confederal model for Syria along with

the political vision and the military specifics of how we try to get there. I'll just say one last word in closing, which is I am a big critic of the Vienna talks. I think they're not only almost hopeless, but counterproductive. I think they actually obscure our thinking about what's going to be needed to create battlefield circumstances that will allow a realistic peace deal.

And with that we'll then proceed -- again, it will be Ken, then Dan, then Will, and then Tamara.

MR. POLLACK: Thank you, Mike. Thank all of you. It's always great to be up here. So I'm going to outline my thinking about Syria. It's going to sound a lot like Mike's. There are differences; there are a lot of similarities, but we'll sharpen the differences a little bit more in the second round when we go through it.

What I proposed for Syria feeds off of my own work on civil wars. For the past 10 years when Iraq fell into civil war I started reading the academic historical literature about civil wars, started talking to real experts on civil wars. And those conversations and that reading have led me to a particular perspective on Syria. First point that's worth making is that it's the zeitgeist here. Everybody seems to believe that you can't intervene in somebody else's civil war and actually do anything useful. That's just wrong. It's simply not historically accurate. I now everyone believes it, it's just wrong.

Over the last 100 years, looking at about 150 different civil wars, the scholars have basically established that at least 20 -- and, yes, there are different ways that civil wars end -- 20 percent of the time civil wars are ended by a third party in a negotiated settlement, and ended far short of what they probably would have done if they were allowed to run their natural course, which typically winds up with a civil war 15-20-25-30 years in length. And in fact if you look at the last 20 years that number goes up to

more like 40 percent as people have learned more about how to do this. But doing it isn't easy. And one of the big things that does come out of this literature also is that if you think that it's easy or quick or cheap to end a civil war, you're making a very big mistake. It is rare that you can do it quickly, easily, cheaply. And I'm dramatically over simplifying.

And friends of mine who are real academics, real scholars, who work on this, would probably cringe to hear me reduce it to these three basic steps, but in the interest of time I'm going to reduce it to three basic steps. First think that you have to do is you have to create a military stalemate. You can do that by occupying the country the way that we eventually did in Iraq or the Australians did in East Timor. Or I think the more relevant model here is you build a force that is actually able to win on the battlefield and then you rein it in.

Second thing you need to do is you need to forge a power sharing agreement among all of the different communities, one that accurately reflects the real demographic weight of the different communities. So everybody gets political weight and economic benefits, but represents their real demographic weight.

And then the third thing that you have to do is you have to have long-term guarantees that this power sharing agreement which you put in place, which I should have noted, has to include real guarantees for minorities, but your long-term guarantees that this is going to endure. And there are lots of different ways to do that. Americans tend to fixate on number one, creating the military stalemate as being the hardest thing. It actually isn't. There is an argument to be made that it's relatively easy if you do it the right way. And it's worth pointing out that when the surge began you had all kinds of critics saying this was going to take 10 years for the surge to secure the country. You may have noticed that it took the surge about 12 to 18 months to do so. That is not exceptional, that is the historical norm. If you do it properly, it can be done very fast. The

hard part is step three, the long-term guarantees. And that's typically where we screw things up, by walking away from things prematurely.

So based on that what I come to for Syria is a model that says that what we're going to need to do is to build a new Syrian opposition army. We're going to have to build a real one, it is going to have to be large, it is going to have to be conventional. I do not believe that you can do it in Syria. Again Mike and I are going to go back and forth on that. I think you have to take it out of Syria. I think it is entirely possible to do so. I know that also the *New York Times* has come to the conclusion that the United States has never been able to build another country's army. That is also just nonsense. And it's worth keeping in mind here that we're not looking to build an Iraqi or a Syrian army that -- an opposition army -- that is the equivalent of the American army. We simply need it to be -- I wouldn't say even as good as Daesh or the Assad regime's army, or Nusra's army. It simply has to be good enough that it plus the addition of American air power, Special Forces, et cetera, will be enough to beat all of those things. And it's worth keeping in mind that those other armies stink. The Assad regime's army is dreadful. The Arab armies have traditionally been dreadful. The Syrian army is one of the worst, and it continues to demonstrate that it is terrible. Daesh has this wonderful outsized reputation. It too is mediocre at best. And I would actually argue tactically it too stinks. It relies on certain factors which give it advantages over its current rivals, but that's pretty much it.

So first point, build a serious army. Basically go back to what General Dempsey outlined when he presented what was supposed to be the administration's plan back in September of 2014, but which the administration promptly walked away from, you know, no sooner than the echoes of General Dempsey's voice had died in the Senate committee rooms.

The second piece of it, critically important, is you are going to have to



deal with the political situation. And that means dealing with the political situation as you move this force back into Syria. This is also spreading ink stain strategy, it's just unlike Mike's it doesn't start from where they are now, it starts from where we want them to be. They occupy territory, they create a safe space, they actually demonstrate they can govern and feed and clothe and take care of the population. That is going to require big international effort, preferably one led by the United Nations. But again you need a conventional force to create that safe space to enable to take care of the civilians, and to demonstrate that they can govern and create a better alternative for people out there.

And the final point, one of the reasons that I think that this needs to be a conventional force with a very heavy American compliment, air power, Special Forces, but a very heavy training and advisory program, is that it does need to provide that long-term guarantor role. This is the mistake that we made in Iraq. We actually built that military and then walked away from it and allowed Nouri Maliki to politicize it overnight. We need a force in Syria that is going to act as an institution around which you can build a new Syrian state. That is not impossible. And a military can serve that role, but we it is going to have to be conventional, it is going to have to be disciplined, it is going to have to be able to hold territory, and it is going to need to have a very heavy American presence to make sure that it doesn't become a new cat's-paw of some would-be dictator.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Ken. I should say there are about a half dozen seats up front if anybody wants one.

And, Dan, over to you.

MR. BYMAN: As Mike said, I'm presenting on the containment option. And I want to be clear from the start, by containment I don't mean containment of the Islamic State, which is how some people have interpreted this approach, but really

containment of the instability in Syria.

A while ago Ken and I did some research on these massive civil wars, ones like what we're seeing now in Syria, and we found one of the biggest problems is that they often spill over into neighboring states. So not only does this spread a tremendous humanitarian tragedy even further, but it leads to the spread of terrorist groups or the creations of new ones, it leads to instability in neighboring countries, and it leads to intervention and war that gets more massive. And this should be pretty obvious because we've already seen it in Syria. The Syrian civil war began in 2011 and several years later we see Iraq in a massive civil war as well. And there is a lot that went into the Iraqi civil war. I don't want to say it was all Syria, but it's hard to tell the story of the renewal of civil war in Iraq without including the story of Syria.

And so the question to me is are there ways to look at this conflict and prevent it from spreading further. So further into Iraq, but also to Lebanon, to Jordan, to Turkey, on and on and on, to the region in general. Are there ways to stop harmful interventions that make the conflict worse or spread elsewhere? I think the Saudi intervention in Yemen for example is in some ways linked to the conflict in Iraq and Syria, and Saudi Arabia's view of the world that emanates from that. And so when we think about containment, what might that mean? One of the first things are the refugees. This has gotten a lot of play, but by refugees I primarily don't mean refugees in Europe or the several thousand being considered to the United States, I mean the millions who are in neighboring states. And there is tremendous potential for destabilization. One of the best historical analogues is the Palestinian refugee problem, where after the '47-48 war of Israeli War of Independence, we saw massive Palestinian refugee flows and over time this grew in very odd and perhaps unanticipated ways, but ways that spread civil war, that spread radicalization. And the Syrian refugees are not going home in the near-

term. It's not as if anyone I think in this room thinks oh, in one year, three years, or even five years these people are going back home. So we're having a generation of refugees raised outside their homes, yet not integrated into their new homes. And to me that is first of all horrible in the humanitarian sense, which I think should matter to us, but beyond that it's a recipe for instability and disaster. These are young people ripe for recruitment for radical groups. We see again and again that the refugee camps themselves become bases for fighters. So if you want to contain the violence you start by caring for refugees. And "caring for" doesn't just mean clothing and feeding, it also means policing, it means preventing the refugee camps from becoming armed camps for militant groups. Ideally it means moving refugee camps away from borders; it means breaking them down so they're smaller and not these kind of concentrations of instability, and ideally integrating refugees into their host societies. And so it's a significant humanitarian effort that also has strategic consequences.

Also you care about border security. You want to stop militants from going back and forth across borders, and you want to try to seal this off. This is exceptionally difficult of course, but you can limit the problem, you can reduce it by more effective border security. Whether it's Jordan, whether it's Lebanon, there are places where you can change this, and we've seen this recently in Turkey, where Turkey had basically a very laissez faire attitude towards fighters going into Syria in particular -- and I don't want to say it's perfect now, but there has been quite a dramatic shift in recent months.

Also you want to give counterterrorism assistance. You want to make sure that the neighboring states are able to fight terrorism on their own soil and in general have competent intelligence service and competent security services in general. And more broadly, this extends to the military. I would not expect the Jordanian military to

collapse on contact with Islamic State fighters, but you want to make sure that neighboring states are able to fight effectively when pressed. That if the Islamic State does try to expand further, that it's pushed back not only by U.S. air power, but by effective neighboring state forces.

And last is you also want to try to weaken the Islamic State. Now I want to be careful here. If we're talking about containment it's not talking about defeating the Islamic State. I would love that to happen, right, I would love to have a magic wand and have the Islamic State go away tomorrow. But realistically what you're trying to do is use a combination of limited air power and limited training methods to try to prevent the Islamic State from getting bigger and ideally push it back, kill its leadership, weaken it. Hopefully there will be competent indigenous forces that arise that you can advise. But this is a limited effort measure. So I want to contrast it with what Ken is proposing which as far more potential but is also far more difficult and involved far more of an effort.

A few last things to say about this option. It's hard. The dynamics we're talking about in civil wars are powerful and they're difficult for outsiders to directly shape. I think you can move things around, but hard to directly shape. And at best it's going to be incomplete results. This is not the sort of thing where you say oh, Byman said take care of refugees, we'll do that, they're taken care of. You're going to have a lot of programs going on, some of which will be more effective than others. And I think very important to add, what I'm proposing doesn't completely solve the problem. You still have a massive civil war going on in Iraq and Syria. The idea is to staunch the bleeding and prevent it from getting worse. And ideally by reducing some of the intervention and so on you might be able to reduce the kind of heat of the fires. But this is not stopping the war, the war continues.

But the advantage of this compared with other option, which I'm going to

talk about more, is it's relatively low cost. When you're not talking about a massive military effort, when you're not talking about extensive U.S. political involvement in the same degree, there is still cost but it is not the same level. And as I'm going to talk about later in Q & A, I think there's limited political support among the American people for a more costly effort.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Dan. Will, over to you.

MR. McCANTS: So I'm here to represent the ISIS perspective.

(Laughter) And I like to think that they have had similar kind of seminars or meetings (laughter) to discuss strategy as well. And it's not incredibly farfetched because this is an organization that has thought deeply about the utility of violence and how to use it to pursue political objectives. Its favorite strategy manual is a book called The Management of Savagery. It came out in 2004. And the book outlines a plan very similar to the plan that Mike began with, an ink spots plan for taking territory and eventually establishing a state. The author went by the nom de guerre Abu Bakr Naji and he talks a great deal about the value of brutalizing one's enemies and using brutal governance techniques in order to scare the population, polarize them, and subdue them to cement your rule. It's a strategy which the Islamic State has pursued to great effect but it has pursued it to great effect because of the politics on the ground. They tried the same thing they are doing today back when they were founded in 2006. They tried to take territory, small towns. They tried to govern, but they didn't succeed. And the narrative that was spun out of their failure was that they are simply terrible at governing and this is why they collapsed. But we alighted the fact that there was a gigantic powerful military on the ground as well that was conducting raids every night, that was giving arms to the Sunni Arab tribes that had grown angry at the Islamic State, and that's what ultimately contributed to the Islamic State's collapse. The coming of the Syrian civil war and the draw-down of U.S. troops in

Iraq provided another opening for the Islamic State. And they didn't change up their basic strategy. They were no less brutal; they were no less focused on state building. Other rebels were going after central governments and trying to topple them. The Islamic State has been focused on creating its own central government. And it was doing it in an area in Iraq, in Syria, that was not a high priority for the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad or the Assad regime. They were more worried about problems closer to home. And so there was for a time a *modus vivendi* between the Islamic State and some of its potential enemies, particularly between them and Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. If Hezbollah and Russia weren't going to come after them, the Islamic State wasn't going to go after those two countries in return. They would rather have focused on state building.

Now the Islamic State wanted to also give themselves some strategic depth. So what they decided to do was to copy the Al Qaeda model and build franchises or affiliates across the Muslim world. And the timing proved propitious because of course in the Middle East and North Africa, the governments in a number of those countries were falling apart. So there were a number of security vacuums that were opening up where this ink spot strategy could be used once again. The Jihadists would go in, they would take control, they would provide basic services, they would assassinate their rivals, they would initially work with other rebel groups, and then once they had dominance get rid of them. They followed the same playbook over and over. Since its founding in 2006 then the Islamic State has been focused on, as its name would indicate, state building in Syria and Iraq and across the Middle East. Heretofore it has not really had a foreign ops interest. It has not had an interest in carrying out large scale attacks against powerful international actors like the United States and Russia. If it carried out foreign operations, it was closer to home. Carrying out attacks in Turkey to divide it from the Kurds, carrying out attacks in Saudi Arabia against the Shia, again to polarize the government and its

Shia population. But it was not dedicating a lot of resources to carrying out major attacks abroad.

Something has changed in the last two weeks. It has all of a sudden decided to devote resources to carrying out attacks on its primary enemies. Some of these attacks make sense from the outside, some of them don't. It makes sense that they could carry out an attack on one of the major members of the alliance that is bombing them in Iraq and carrying out a few attacks in Syria, namely France.

What's a little bit more puzzling, and hard to square with all of this, are the attacks on Iran and Russia, because they have had this tacit understanding before now of you leave me alone and I will leave you alone. It seems with the attack on the Russian airliner, with the attack in Beirut in a Hezbollah controlled area, that this understanding is gone. It might have to do I think with its loss of territory. For all of the problems with the current administration's strategy in Syria and in Iraq, the Islamic State has lost 25 percent of its territory and lost tens of thousands of fighters. And according to one former member of the Islamic State, who has been talking to the press over the weekend, his thought was that the move to international ops has to do with this loss of territory and manpower, that the Islamic State has come to believe that it is more valuable to have these fighters abroad putting pressure on the alliance rather than inviting them to come to the Islamic State and build the state as they had been doing before.

Is this a sustainable strategy? A lot of it depends on what strategies the current administration and the next administration adopt. They will constrain and shape what the Islamic State can do. But conversely, what the Islamic State does can constrain and shape what the allies are able to do against it. I think one major liability for the Islamic State, and it's the same liability of every other jihadist group that has tried to set

up a government, is that they have taken on all enemies at the same time. They are not incapable of prioritizing enemies, but often for global jihadists the circle of enemies grows so large that you eventually invite destruction. It's not because they are terrible at governing, it's not because they're too brutal, they are terrible and they are brutal, but these governments collapse ultimately because they galvanize the international community to act.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you very much. Tamara.

MS. WITTES: And I'm going to try and provide a little perspective in terms of regional political dynamics, and I think in doing so talk about the limits of uniting the international community, and particularly uniting the region in terms of an approach to ISIS and to Syria.

The Obama administration I think has had at least four different approaches to Middle East policy over its time in office, and it's got another 14 months to go. It has the Cairo speech in June 2009 after the Arab uprisings. So the Cairo speech basically said reducing America's military engagement, building up people-to-people in civilian engagement. After the Arab uprisings in May of 2011 President Obama outlined a different approach that was rooted in an understanding that stability would not return to the Middle East until governments responded to the demands of their people for change, and therefore the United States would advance democratic reform and democratic transition across the region. That approach was replaced in the fall of 2013 when President Obama, looking at the outcomes from many of these Arab uprisings, went up to New York and spoke at the U.N. General Assembly and gave a very narrow conception of American interest in the Middle East. We're here for energy supply stability, we're here for counterterrorism, we're here to protect our allies, we're here to prevent weapons of mass destruction from proliferating. And beyond that you guys are on your own. And



that only lasted about a year. And after the fall of Mosul in August and September of 2014 the president outlined the current approach which is focused on ISIS and the need to degrade and ultimately defeat it.

Each of these four strategies, very different strategies has foundered on the realities of a disordered region in which not only our adversaries but also our allies and partners have simply not been on board with the president's approach. For the first several years of this Syrian civil war the Obama administration's attitude was that this conflict simply wasn't a central arena for American interest. They discounted the risks of spillover, they discounted the vulnerability that the Syrian civil conflict posed to their Iraq strategy, and therefore they discounted the possibilities that then emerged of a link between the Syrian and Iraqi arenas in precisely the ways that Ken laid out.

Now this to me is a manifestation of the gap in understanding and perception between Washington and actors in the region. Because for regional actors, whether friends or foes of the United States, Syria was central, Syria is central. It is an arena -- in fact in many ways it has become the arena for all of the conflicts that are raging across the Middle East. We have a Middle East that is undergoing historically unprecedented change. We have a breakdown of states; we have a breakdown of the state system. And in the midst of that breaking down, we have multiple conflicts being waged across the region. All of them are present in Syria and create a very complex picture. We have obviously a sectarian conflict with the minority regime, Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad allied with the Shia of the region, and carrying out this war largely against a Sunni population. Now that sectarian conflict, that sectarian tension let me say, has always been there as part of Syria's reality, but Syria has always had a multi sectarian reality and a reality of co-existence. The sectarian dimension of this conflict was certainly exploited by regional actors, including regional government. Regardless,

that sectarian conflict is today a reality for Syrians, and it's one we can't wish away. Of course it also reflects a broader power struggle in the region largely between Iran and its allies and the Sunni-Arab states led by Saudi Arabia at this point and its allies. And that's a struggle for power with the breakdown of the state system. Who will dominate the future of the Middle East is what's at stake.

And then we have the conflict over the role of Islam in politics within the Middle East dividing many of the governments that support the opposition to Assad, dividing them over what should replace Assad, and therefore, which rebel factions should be backed and how. So if you look across these various conflicts we have two big problems in the Middle East today. We have a problem of order and we have a problem of authority. We have a problem with the basic breakdown of states and we have a problem of who gets to decide. The Obama administration's policy towards Syria hasn't truly engaged with any of these overlapping conflicts, and it doesn't present any answers to the problems of order and authority in the region today. It's focused on ISIS. ISIS -- which is a symptom of these conflicts, a manifestation of this problem, not the disease itself. So interestingly, Obama speaking in Antalya today in his press conference made the point that Assad's war on his own people is the major root cause of this crisis. I think many of America's regional partners would agree fiercely with that statement, and yet there is one thing that the strategy he laid out does not address, and it's Assad's war on his own people.

President Obama also said today that it was important for the United States to explain to Iran and to Russia that ISIS is their greatest threat. And I think they would agree. I don't think they need to be persuaded, certainly not in the wake of the airplane downing that ISIS is their greatest threat. But their answer to the problem of ISIS and their answer to the problem of order and authority in the Middle East is very

different from the answer that would be preferred by the United States if we had a clear view, and certainly different than the answer that is preferred by our regional partners.

So looking at that vast gap in understanding and in preferences between the United States and those actors in the region that need to be its partners in whatever it's trying to do, how do we evaluate the three alternative proposals that have been put forward before you today? I think the advantage of Mike's ink spot strategy is that it addresses the problem of order from the bottom up. What's happening in Vienna today is an effort by a concert of great powers to impose an answer to the order problem on those who are doing the fighting on the ground. And I think there are a lot of reasons -- Mike spoke to some -- as to why that's not going to work.

So Mike's proposal tries to deal with that by building from the bottom up, and there is something to be said for that. The question is whether it's possible to do that in the face of the kind of Russian and Iranian opposition that I think we should anticipate. I wonder if you're perhaps a bit too sanguine about their attitudes. I also think that given the divisions within the governments in the region that are backing various parts of the Syrian opposition, given the divisions amongst them, whether an ink spot strategy might not be a little too vulnerable to power machinations within the region.

The advantage of Ken's proposal is that it doesn't rely on consensus building with other actors at all. It basically says okay, you guys can't agree, you can't get your act together, we will do this for you for our sake and for the sake of the region. And there's an argument to be made for that, but as Ken I think very, very frankly points out in his writing and in his presentation today, it's a major investment, it's a long-term investment. And those are two things that the American political class and the American public seem very unlikely to support in the current moment. So how do you make the case for that kind of investment?

Containment I think has some merits in dealing with the symptoms, but as Dan is very honest in pointing out, it doesn't deal with the root causes. How do we deal with the root causes and how do we bridge the gaps between the United States and its necessary regional partners, and amongst those regional partners? Because I think until we close those gaps we won't have an effective military strategy and we won't have an effective diplomatic strategy. What Kerry is doing in the Vienna talks is trying to work from the outside in, as I said, using Russia to corral the Iranians and Assad while the United States is meant to corral the Gulf and Turkey. And I think we see already that that's not working out very well. Ultimately those who have a greater stake in the problem are going to find a way to pursue their own preferences. The other problem with this approach is that if it works it will sacrifice those regional interests that I laid out, which are about answers to the questions of order and authority. It sacrifices those for the interests of external actors, the United States and Russia, that are primarily about counterterrorism. Now both those sets of interest are legitimate to be sure. The question is whether you can sacrifice one set for the other and assume that the conflict will remain abated. I think in fact it will make the renewal of conflict more likely.

So it's a regional conflict as I've just tried to convey. It needs a regional solution. I think that means that whatever else we do—containment, diplomacy, ink spots—we need to convene a regional security dialogue that's not driven by outside actors, but that is driven by the interests of those in the region and that reckons very frankly with these questions of sectarian identity, with the role of political Islam, and with forging from the ground up, the necessary consensus for Syria's future that will really end this war and squeeze ISIS, which is what the President said he wants to do.

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Tamara. So what we're going to do now is

a second round and we're going to try to do it fairly quickly. Tamara has already sort of brought the spirit of the second round to us by beginning the critique, and that's what we're going to spend the next few minutes on with each person maybe offering just a couple of specific questions, concerns, about one another's proposals. And then I I'm sure you'll continue that conversation.

I'm not going to spend too long, but since I have the floor and Tamara raised one question about my plan, let me suggest the following in response because it's a good point, good observation she made. Just like Hillary Clinton said on this stage a couple of months ago about how we should distrust the Iranians, I do distrust them and the Russians, but the plan for working in these oil spots in the center southeast to begin with doesn't necessitate their collaboration or their acquiescence. And this approach towards a confederal Syria, one advantage is if you get halfway in pursuit of it, but you don't get the deal for the foreseeable future, you still have half the country where you're better able to squeeze ISIL and deliver humanitarian relief and begin to help the local populations rebuild some governance structures. So even if the long-term goal of an integrated loosely confederalized Syria takes a while to get to for the kinds of reasons that were mentioned, I think you can make a lot of headway locally and regionally along the way, and you can squeeze ISIL pretty hard.

My strategy by the way, just to be clear, does not involve an autonomous sector for ISIL. (Laughter) It would not be anticipating or envisioning that kind of outcome. So part of the purpose here is to figure out a way to put more pressure on it, both with outside military force, but also with these indigenous resistance movements that hopefully would grow more quickly.

So I'm going to pass to Ken and Dan and then perhaps Will and Tamara would want to add in as well. So I'm just going to put a question on the table for each of

them that they can address or not as they see fit, but that essentially is my critique in disguise for each plan.

And for Ken my main question is where do you get these recruits? And I hope there's an answer because I'd actually love to support his plan, but that's the question I can't get beyond. Where do we find the people, the 50,000 that we can pull out for a year and train and equip?

And then for Dan my question is to the extent I -- you know, obviously containment can be tighter or looser, and if you start to have momentum you can hit harder and you can -- maybe at some point containment starts to merge with a more ambitious strategy, but to the extent that you're trying to draw a distinction between containment and the other, more ambitious strategies right now, is that really enough in light of what we've seen in the last month? Hasn't the last month underscored more than we even appreciated before, just how dangerous this group is?

And so I'll leave it at that and then let my colleagues each speak as they wish.

Ken, over to you.

MR. POLLACK: Thanks, Mike. And I just want to emphasize the point that I think you should hopefully have gotten from all of us, which is that every one of us recognizes that his or her own preferred approach stinks, right. There are no good solutions for the Syrian civil war, let alone for Daesh. And of course one of the problems that I think Tamara outlined very nicely is that one of the biggest problems we have is that this administration has decided to focus on Daesh -- as if that's something that you could actually do-- Daesh in absence of dealing with the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars. And what all of us are starting with the implicit recognition of is that's simply not possible. It is not possible to focus on Daesh absent the wider problems of the Iraqi and Syrian civil

wars. And it's why this administration's whole approach is self-defeating and nonsensical. The problem is dealing with the problems of the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars is very hard. And the easy solutions, we lost those years ago. And we can debate exactly when we lost them, but it's not a terribly interesting conversation. So the question really before all of us is which suboptimal, which bad option you think is least bad.

When I look at Mike's option -- first I actually want to emphasize a couple of points that we have in common because I'm perfectly open to the idea of a confederal solution. As I pointed out you have to have a power sharing arrangement. That power sharing arrangement would give the Alawites political and economic weight equivalent to their demographic status. That could result in a confederal structure ultimately. The differences between Mike and I are really at the military level on how you get there. And I will simply say that what concerns me about Mike's idea is that I recognize that it's probably politically more sellable, I just worry that it's not as military feasible over the long-term. You're going to have these isolated enclaves of Syrian fighters. I think that they will be susceptible to attack by a whole variety of groups militarily. It will be much harder to support them, let alone knit them together. And I also worry that at the end of the day if you start with the opposition as it is, and simply provide them greater military capacity, in the end you will get the Afghan Mujahedeen, which at the time in 1989 was a great answer to the problem of the Soviets in Afghanistan, and it turned out to be a disaster because all it did was feed into a new civil war which arguably we've had going since then. And again as someone who thought the Mujahedeen were great back when I was at CIA, one of the lessons that I have learned from that and my study of other civil wars is know when you've got a civil war, as hard as it is you actually have to do the right thing.

And it's my problem with a lot of other approaches that people not on this

dais have been offering, which is everybody wants to come up with an expedient halfway measure, a limited solution. And, you know, I'd love to be able to tell you that there's an easy solution, but my read of the history of civil wars is there just isn't. And again, from the historical literature that emerges very, very clearly, that if you're not willing and able to intervene in the right way, any intervention by any outside power simply makes the civil war bloodier and longer. And I think that's what the Russians and Iranians are doing. In the short-term yes it's embarrassing to the United States; I think that it does point out the bankruptcy of the Obama administration's policies exactly the way that Tamara and Will laid them out, but I think that it also will ultimately result in a bad outcome for the Russians and the Iranians too because they're not going to actually go in and -- they're not doing the right thing there.

As far as Dan's approach, containment, you know, as Dan pointed out he and I spent a lot of time -- we wrote a book on containing civil wars back in 2005-2006. We looked at a dozen cases where people tried to contain them. What I took away from that, what I take away from the wider historical literature, is exactly as Dan said, it's just really hard to do this, really hard. And for those of you who are familiar with my writing, some of you may know, back in 2011-12, even '13, I was saying I don't think that containment is going to work, I'm very ambivalent about it, the historical literature suggests that it won't, but you want to try, given where the American public is, okay, we can try it. And then Daesh got into Anbar in late 2013 and I could see Iraq sliding into civil war. Some of you came to events where I was saying Iraq is sliding back into civil war. Since then my feeling is okay, we tried it, I just don't think it's going to work. I'm just back from Jordan; the Jordanians are terrified that they're the next ones on the list. So that's what I worry about. You know, look at what's going on in Lebanon, look at what's going on in Turkey, you know, we're not containing these civil wars. That's my great fear



ultimately, is we're going to lose more of the region. And at some point, you know, we're going to lose too much for us to bear.

And, Mike, just in answer to your question, which I think is a good one, where are we going to get these recruits? The recruits are there. When Dempsey announced his plan -- and this is now out there in the unclassified literature -- we had something like 5-10,000 Syrians volunteer immediately for that force. We turned them away. We picked out 50 guys from those thousands who volunteered because our recruitment standards were utterly ridiculous. We basically said we will only train you if you agree that you will only fight Daesh, you will not fight Assad under any circumstances, and you basically can never have meet an Islamist in your life. Given those recruitment standards I'm stunned we found 50 Syrians who actually qualified. The forces are out there. And look, this is also true for the region and all of us know this because we go and we talk to these folks, the region is willing to follow, we have to be willing to lead. And as I said, I don't think that any of the half measures are going to work. What I have learned from the history of civil wars is if you're not going to do this right you're just going to make the situation worse for everyone in the civil war, nearby it, and those of us who have interests that are unfortunately intermingled with it.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Dan.

MR. BYMAN: I agree I think 100 percent with Ken's last sentence and therefore disagree with him. (Laughter) I believe that to do this right, to intervene properly, you have to do it incredibly seriously. And frankly I applaud Ken for putting out a serious effort that shows how costly it is, shows how difficult it is. But there's one country we haven't talked about, and that's the United States. And there is almost no appetite for doing this. The appetite is actually about the Islamic State. The appetite is that's what the Obama administration has been doing, which is to say we're going to

focus -- take a tremendously complex problem and focus on one very nasty manifestation of it. That's the politics and that's perfectly logical from a political point of view, but as Ken and Mike and I think almost everyone up here has argued, you can't actually do that, right. You can't solve the Islamic State problem without going after the Syrian problem. But I don't think we're going to do this in a serious way. And I worry about going halfway down this road. And so I don't think in any way containment solves this problem. So I would end up with I'd rather devote fewer resources to eliminating the problem than try in frankly a half-baked way to solve it and not go all the way there because I don't think the politics are there.

I also don't think the alliance politics are there. I look at the number of actors in Syria, in Iraq, and it's actually rather staggering. And what's staggering is how much they actually disagree with one another, even ignoring the United States. So let's look at three groups we hate: Hezbollah, Islamic State, and Jabhat al-Nusra. They're actually fighting each other, right. So it's not that, you know, we have enemies and we just need to sit down with our enemies and work out a deal. It's our enemies have enemies that are our enemies, and then you could add to that area regimes that don't get along, you could add to that allies that like to act on their own in episodic ways, and it's remarkable chaos. And we also in the long-term disagree with our allies on what we want Syria to look like. We want frankly a good Syria that's more representative, that respects the rights of minorities whenever our allies don't. And I think it would be very hard to tell the American people to go to war, to pay these enormous costs, and say, you know, in the end we're going to give the country to have it be somewhat like it was in the country, or something that the Saudis would want, or we're going to deny the current rights as the Turks would prefer. So I think there's a tremendous complexity to doing this is in a diplomatic sense.

I think the military dynamics are complex. It's funny because I was actually very strongly for the opposition option several years and wrote about it and urged it. But I think what was possible several years ago is -- I don't want to say impossible now, but much harder now, that military dynamics are much more complex, the nastier groups are much bigger and stronger. And we had a window and I'm not sure I'd necessarily say it's closed, but it's certainly a much smaller window. So again a lot of what I argue is about practicalities, that's both practicalities of the problem but also practicalities of U.S. politics.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Dan. Will and then Tamara, and then all of you.

MR. McCANTS: Yes. I want to talk about the difficulties presented by the alliance politics. A big problem I would foresee with Ken's plan is that we have attempted versions of it in the past with our allies, but they have all wanted to fund different people. And if we were going to do it right we would have to own it completely ourselves. And so then I wonder then if we have the political will in this country to do it. Because if we're supposed to do it with our allies the Qataris are going to want to work with the Al Qaeda guys, the Saudis are going to want to work with their guys. They've been fighting each other throughout this entire civil war about who to fund and how much; it's one of the reasons this effort has foundered. And so I recognize at the outset that if it were to be done it would have to be done by us alone.

But then my question would be if we're the only ones that care enough about this to make it work, why are we doing it when it presents far more of a threat to our allies in the region?

MS. WITTES: That is President Obama's question I think, although not the one that he would explicitly lay out today.

MR. McCANTS: Right. And the same kind of thought about Dan's containment strategy is that I think we've seen over say the past year that we've been pursuing something like it, at least with regards to ISIS, that we are seeing the phenomenal and the free riding, that a number of our allies who should be really in this right, the Emiratis, the Saudis in particular, the Turks, they've got other things that they're worried about. Why? Because as Tamara said, they have other priorities. It's not that they don't dislike ISIS, they dislike ISIS intensely, but it ranks fairly far down the list of priorities. And the biggest one, particularly for Saudi, is Iran. So it's another instance of us leading an effort when we have a very distant -- we're not going to be hit in the way that Europe is going to be hit, or the Turks are going to be hit, or the Saudis are going to be hit. They are much closer to the problem, yet we are the one bearing most of the costs.

I am I guess most partial to Mike's plan, but I see even more problems with it. And the problem I see is one that he has already alluded to, and Ken talked about explicitly, which is that other rebel groups, when you set up enclaves they're going to, oh, yeah, oh, we're ready, we're ready to go in, we know they're not going to resource this well from the outside. ISIS is absolutely terrific at penetrating these kind of enclaves, assassinating other leaders, and eventually establishing its own control. And then we also have the problem with our allies. I could see your plan working really well down south with Jordan. It's hard for me to imagine how it works with Turkey because Turkey is going to be using it as a foil for stopping the Kurdish drive to statehood in northern Syria. And that gets us into a whole new conflict.

MS. WITTES: And so I'll just close with a couple of quick comments which is that as Will just emphasized, a lot of the regional actors that need to be partners with the United States in an effective approach to end the Syrian civil war have this

blinking alarm bell -- to mix a metaphor -- blinking alarm light Iran, Iran, Iran. And that is motivating a lot of their behavior around the region, including in Syria. Right now the Emiratis and the Saudis and others are focused on fighting Iran in the Yemen arena, not so much in the Syrian arena.

Now that suggests that if the United States were willing to take their attitude, their regional approach, and apply it to the Syrian conflict and say the problem in Syria is Iran and its support for Assad, and if we focus on getting rid of Assad and bloodying Iran's nose, then we'll have all of these Sunni states on side with us wholeheartedly. And I think that's not quite true. We have to recognize that they have a whole -- they are playing on a whole lot of game boards at once around this region, and the Turkish example that Will just cited is a great one. So that's one major problem.

Another major problem is that there are Sunni states that would prioritize the territorial integrity of Syria, even perhaps over the survival of the current government in some form, maybe not with Assad at the top of it. But breaking up Syria is terrifying to them because it sets a terrible precedent in the Arab world, and because they see it -- and I think they're probably right -- as a recipe for continued conflict. I think we've got a good enough track record in even our post-Cold War history for the idea that separating states along ethnic lines and setting up new mini states is not a magic bullet for ending conflicts. And I think we have a reason to be skeptical that it would work in this case as well.

But there are other Sunni states I think that are so worried about or afraid of the idea of maintaining an Iranian role in a multi-sectarian united Syria who are so unhappy with the idea of a Syria that is not Sunni dominated, that they would prefer the breakup of Syria, and they would prefer to have Sunni states over which they could have influence, and some rump Alawite state that the Iranians can play with. And so the

conflict within the Sunni-Arab world over the future of Syria is a huge obstacle for any of these strategies

I want to spend one minute on the political will question with regard to the United States because it's important. I think there was a little bit of a problem with both of these proposals with respect to political will. So if you accept Dan's point that the political will simply isn't there for Ken's proposal, which was a concern I raised as well, then Dan's saying that instead of doing it in a halfhearted way, don't do it. Do something more modest because that's what the will is there for. And I think in some ways the last few years have given us a taste of what that looks like. And what it looks like is a slippery slope to more engagement and more investment because the limited investment is woefully insufficient to deal with the security consequences of this ongoing war. And so I suspect that if one pursued Dan's vision of containment, limited, hardnosed, realistic, we would still end up on that slippery slope. It might just not be as steep a slope.

MR. O'HANLON: So I'm sure we all want to respond to each other more, but we're going to restrain ourselves and do it in the context of also responding to your thoughts and questions. I'm going to take two at a time. Please wait for a microphone and identify yourself. And then also if you could direct the question ideally towards one or two people. That's not an absolute requirement, but it would be preferred.

We'll start here in the middle with the woman in the yellow and then the gentleman in front of her in the red tie.

SPEAKER: Hi. I'd just like to know from Tamara what would be your expectations of the outcome of the regional sort of conferences you suggested?

MR. CLARK: Yeah, I'm Charlie Clark with Government Executive. Mr. Pollack or Tamara, whose policy is the administration's in general? Is it the president's, John Kerry, is it Susan Rice, is it Ben Rhodes, is it the Pentagon? Thanks.

MR. O'HANLON: So let's start with those two. Do you want to go ahead?

MS. WITTES: Sure. So what can a regional conference or a regional dialogue accomplish? Ken said about 10 minutes ago that if the United States leads that these regional actors will follow. And I guess I see things a little bit differently because the state of the region today is so disordered. And it's so disorienting and frightening in many ways for regional governments and non-government actors, that they are reacting to what they perceive as existential threats; they are behaving in ways that don't take much account of anyone else's preferences but their own. They're not very persuadable. All of them feel themselves with their backs against the wall. And so I don't think we're in a situation where if the United States just had a clear vision and we stood up and pointed in the right direction they would all get behind and march.

I think therefore what we need to do is get them to a place where they can talk about their existential threats and how to address them. Now to some degree this may already be beginning to happen *sub rosa*. And I think John Kerry would say, well that's part of the Vienna process, is that we got the Arab states to the table and the Russians got the Iranians to the table, and for the first time they're at the same table, and that's a good thing. And I think the question is whether the Vienna table, which is about ending the Syrian civil war, is the right table because they need to talk about much bigger issues.

Within the Arab world there have been efforts, over the last couple of years in particular, to try and overcome a number of the divisions that we've all been talking about, within the GCC, between the GCC and other Arab states, between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. So some of this is already going on, but I think we need intensified engagement, and I don't know that it's the United States sort of twisting everybody's arm

to sit down at a table together as much as it is a more sustained kind of back and forth so that over time they can see if there are ways to reduce their sense of existential threat and accommodate to a degree one another's interests. There's not a specific format I have in mind.

MR. O'HANLON: Ken.

MR. POLLACK: Let me start by answering Charlie's question which is -- because it's really simple. Barack Obama. Period. Full stop. It's his policy.

Now let me come to Tamara's remarks. I want to start by -- it's Washington, right -- I want to revise and extend my remarks. (Laughter)

MS. WITTES: Very good.

MR. POLLACK: I think that Tamara is absolutely right. That first I will stick with my point, if we lead they will follow, but they will only follow if we want to lead them in a direction that is at least -- roughly corresponds with where they'd like to go. That's my second point.

As Tamara very aptly pointed out, they don't know where they're going. They all have very different specific ideas, which is why I think that the idea that we could get them together and have them come to a consensus I think frankly is impossible. In my own experience with the Gulf states, the Arab states more broadly, is we never get that. What we do is we find out where all the different positions are, we come at it, we say all right, we think that this is more or less a position consistent with both our needs and yours, this is where we're going. Who's on board? And I think that's what we're going to wind up having to do this time because if do simply open it up to a democratic forum we're never going to get an answer.

MS. WITTES: I didn't say a democratic forum. (Laughter)



MR. POLLACK: Last point. And this is a related point. It's not what Tamara is actually saying, but it's something that you hear about a lot, which is -- it's a related point, I just want to make it -- it is always the case that when you have one of these civil wars, outside actors immediately say the problem is the outside actors, let's get the outside actors together and if we can agree on a solution everything will be fine. No it won't. That doesn't work. Until you do the three things that I talked about, you're not going to end the civil war. You've got to change the battlefield dynamics, you've got to come up with a power sharing agreement, and you've got to come up with long-term guarantees. Now outside actors can play a critically important role in that. That was my point. But it's simply not the case. One of the things that Secretary Kerry seems to be focused on -- and it's kind of a great idea given the tools he's been left to work with, but it ain't gonna work -- is well if I could just get everyone to stop providing weapons to their favorite groups in Syria, somehow that will be like removing all the oxygen and it would douse the fire. It won't work. This is not the first time this has been tried. It's been tried countless times, especially in Africa. It doesn't work. First, there's always tons of weapons around and they will fight with whatever they have at hand. You know, if they've got tanks they'll use them, if they don't they'll use Kalashnikovs. You know, if they haven't got that they'll use spears. There have been civil wars long before there have been firearms.

And second, the actual powers just don't do it because their interests are too heavily involved. So they'll agree and then they cheat.

MS. WITTES: (Inaudible).

MR. POLLACK: Right. And then they think that the other is cheating, so they do it. So it's lovely in theory if we all agreed that we're not going to give weapons to

the Syrians then the Syrians would have nothing to shoot at each other with. It won't happen.

MR. O'HANLON: It might lock in military superiority for Assad though. Dan, over to you.

MR. BYMAN: Just very briefly, Ken's point about needing to link external negotiations with internal changes is to me vital. And one of the kind of great but painful Twitter moments was they were showing the only Syrian who was at the Vienna talks, who was a waiter. (Laughter) And if you think about trying to negotiate the end of a brutal civil war without the people fighting the brutal civil war does show that there are going to be limits to this approach.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, two more. Gary and then the gentleman here in the middle.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks very much. I'm going to ask a basic question which you think I would know the answer to having listened to this. And that is whether the takeaway from this discussion this afternoon, our takeaway should be there are no good solutions, or there are no good solutions that can be actually pulled off. There is a difference. In other words, if you said here is what you would do ideally, so if perhaps it's Ken's three points, you get a military stalemate, you get the power sharing deal, and you hang in there, if you could get that is that a good solution? But it isn't good because it can't be done or the U.S. doesn't -- it's -- I think it would help to sharpen just a little the distinction between -- there are only suboptimal solutions, there are no good solutions, from saying well there are a couple of good solutions, you know, the most optimal solutions, but here are the barriers to achieving those.

MR. O'HANLON: And then the gentleman back in the sixth row. Yes, with the beard. Yes. And then we'll respond and then I'll let you take the next round.

MR. MONTGOMERIE: Thank you. Tim Montgomerie from The Times of London. I think American leadership and the absence of it does seem to be one of the key issues. I agree with Tamara says about the shifting nature of the president's position. But I sort of wanted to focus perhaps on what Dan said about the lack of American appetite to do anything at the moment. You know, what can change that? There is clearly appetite in France at the moment for something to happen. God forbid something like that happens here to create a similar mood. But will it take that?

I also note that Pew finds that 75 percent of Republican voters think overwhelming force is necessary, and I think under a third of Democrat voters. Is the answer therefore a change of president? Is nothing going to happen until a change of president?

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Will, do you want to start this round?

MR. McCANTS: Sure. I think the challenge with reading the polls is that after any of these kind of high profile attacks you get a spike in support for overwhelming military reaction. And I'm sure you would find the same thing in France today if you were to poll there. The problem is, is that support going to be there over the long-term because the dysfunction in Syria and Iraq is so deep. Unless you are able to commit for the long-term, once you remove a problem like ISIS -- and I think we would all agree if you go in with overwhelming American military force you will get rid of the ISIS government, but will you get rid of the organization long-term? And more importantly, will you get rid of the underlying dynamic that's giving rise to -- as Ken likes to call it -- would give rise to son of ISIS if you'll still got the same dysfunctions there. And one of the drawbacks of a major military engagement is that it leads to the governments in the region, particularly the governments in Baghdad and Damascus, not making the hard

choices they have to make to address those underlying dysfunctions and reach the compromises that they're going to have to reach if the ISIS phenomenon as a government, as a state, is going to be driven away for good.

MR. O'HANLON: I'm just going to say a couple of things here and then others may wish to as well. First of all, if we have many more months -- in regard to the political will -- many more months like the last month, things are going to change, and even if they don't happen here right away. And by the way, if we have a lot more months like the last month, at some point they will happen here. You know, there is this big debate. Mike Morrell is out there this weekend saying it's inevitable. Our former colleague, Dan Benjamin, is in the *New York Times* today saying no, it probably won't happen here. They both can't be right. They're both making valid points. One of them is going to be proven right, one wrong. This last month is, as I think Will said, a change in the dynamic. And so I don't think we should make any assumptions about where political will will be necessarily in six to 12 months. We should stay open to different possibilities.

Just two other points. One, even though I'm sort of supposed to be debating him, I want to make a point in defense of my good friend, Ken Pollack, because most people are saying he's proposing something too ambitious, and I want to underscore with just a couple of examples from civil wars, and we can I'm sure bring a lot of others into the equation, cases where what he's talking about really did happen in the real world. And the 1994 Rwanda genocide comes to my mind, where Paul Kagame led a force -- and admittedly this was sort of a simpler pure ethnic war, Hutu-Tutsi -- but he led a force that had been based abroad and they came in and they won very fast and disbursed the genocidaire government. Now the whole thing wasn't over then, but there was a military victory. And in my former Peace Corps country of former Zaire, DRC, unbelievably a force that the first Kabila put together in the east of the country, which is

1000 miles of rain forest away from Kinshasa, he somehow managed to move west and overthrow what was left of the remnants of the Mobutu regime. Now admittedly it wasn't a very potent force, but as Ken is pointing out we have to avoid overstating the capabilities of Assad too. With Russia there it's a little more complicated, but I'll just point out those historical analogies.

And then finally in regard to Gary's question, I think this is a partial response, and also to something that both Ken and Will had said earlier about potential weakness of the confederation approach. I guess what I would want to clarify is the areas that I would propose that we work in are areas that are contiguous to foreign allies. So it's the Kurds with Turkey, admitting that your point it's going to be hard to get them to buy in, but if we have a little bit more skin in the game it might be a little easier to be persuasive with the Turks. One of the problems is we've been trying to convince them to do what we want and we minimize our role. They take in two million refugees and we're supposed to call the shots and they're supposed to fall in. That's not a good way to make your allies fall in. And I think we're going to have to up our role to get the Turks to contribute and go along with this. But also in the southern region, along the Jordanian border. These are the two main places I would begin, which I would hope at least mitigate the vulnerability to either ISIL assassinations or military overrun of these zones.

I admit on the -- and I'll give you the floor in a second -- I admit that there still is the broad question of how do you make it happen, but that's how I would begin to try to address that. So even if we got stuck in sort of a halfway -- this is maybe getting to Gary's point -- I think -- I'm not advocating half measures, but this strategy does allow you to get to a point where maybe Syria looks a little bit more like Somalia -- Somalia of 2015, not Somalia of 1992 or 1994 or 1995 -- where in parts of Somalia today things are governing and going okay. And the international community has access and

humanitarian problems are mitigated, and there are some real structures that are beginning to work. And this is not nirvana, but it is certainly better than the Somalia of 20 years ago or the Syria of today. So that might be a place where we're sort of into a halfway zone, where even if we don't succeed completely it's better than what we've got right now.

Over to you.

MR. POLLACK: Yes, Mike. I wanted to make a few points. First, I want to make very clear I am not recommending large numbers of American combat formations in Syria. I think Will was saying some things -- I don't know if he meant to associate it with my position, that's not my position at all. I'm talking about building a Syrian opposition army. It will require American trainers, American advisors, air power, Special Forces, not large American ground forces. For that reason I think where Dan and I have a disagreement is over exactly what the costs are. I would actually argue that it's less than Dan has suggested. I have cost it out. It's always dangerous to cost it out, but as I've cost it out this an effort that costs a hell of a lot less than what we spent in Iraq, even on a daily basis, and a hell of a lot less than even what we're spending in Afghanistan on a daily basis.

And I think in some ways this is kind of an answer to Gary's question, but I'll start with my point there is I also think that where the American public is, I'm not convinced that we actually know about that. The polls have actually been very consistent over the past eight months that show an American public that is far more interested in intervention in both Syria and Iraq than the American elite, which is something that I experience. When I go out and I give talks in real America I'm actually struck by what I get from people. The American elite is dead-set against this. The American public is in a very different place and it's simply a way of saying that I believe -- and this is just for the

moment an un-provable difference among us -- but I believe that if we actually had a president who was interested in doing it, at least pursuing my approach or Mike's -- that that president, he or she, could build that support if they wanted to. And I'm really struck by the fact that every time Obama announces another increase, you get some folks from the Hill saying oh, slippery slope, you get just as many saying inadequate. And the American public mostly doesn't register a blip. You know, it passes without a whole lot of fanfare. We're not getting protests in the streets or anything like it. So I think that the American public is deeply torn the way that we are all deeply torn, and again looking for leadership. And it's why I think the next president will have that chance.

But, Gary, to come to your point, again I can make points in response to each of Dan's points, Will's points, Mike's points, Tamara's points, in defense of my argument that is going to make my argument look better. It's why I think mine is the least bad option. Dan can do the same, Will can do the same, Mike can do the same. And that's part of the problem is it's not just that these are all bad options, it's also that we all have to come to independent judgments about some of the probabilities. So I would argue that my solution is going to give you the best possible outcome. And I think that they would agree with that insofar as it is a relative statement, the best, how much better, and what is the likelihood that you get there. That's where we all disagree. And at the end of the day unfortunately it is unknowable, it is un-provable. I can give you lots of evidence to support my point, so can Dan, so can Mike, so can Will. You know, we're all smart people. We have different perspectives on this. It's what makes this so difficult. If anything, I think the real lesson from this is the next time we start headed down in this direction, and people like us all start saying this is where we're headed, don't get into this situation, that's when I hope somebody listens.

MR. O'HANLON: Dan.

MR. BYMAN: I want to go back to the question of political moments. If you look at polling -- and I would agree it's very shallow in a general sense -- there's a difference between what people are saying and what we're talking about up here. We are talking about Syria; they are talking about the Islamic State. So is the question do you want to be tough on the Islamic State? Many people will say "hell, yeah." And each terrorist attack, you know, that number is going to go up. But we're not just talking about the Islamic State. In fact many of us are saying explicitly that more comprehensive solutions require solving or at least mitigating Syria's problems in a deep way rather than just focusing on one sliver of them. And what's fascinating, the confirmation of this to me is actually looking at the criticism of President Obama. So if you look at the positions of many of the Republican candidates, of some of the Democrats, this is election season, this is when you over promise, where you say of course I'll solve this problem. What are people saying? They're saying we should bomb more, meaning we should bomb the Islamic State more. You know, we're skeptical of the efficacy of that in the abstract, but they're not talking about a comprehensive action against the broader forces in Syria. They might be saying that we should deploy more Special Forces to go after these guys.

Again these are very limited things. So even at a time when over promising is common I think people are still very focused on part of the issue. And to me since the comprehensive approaches are the ones that are more likely to work I'm skeptical the political support is there.

MS. WITTES: You know, let me just follow up on that very quickly. Our colleague, Shibley Telhami, did some polling on American attitudes towards Syria and also Iran last year and one of his findings was that Americans believe that the United States could be effective in implementing the President's strategy in beating back ISIS, but they also believe that as soon as the United States withdraws ISIS would come back.



In other words, they get that this is a hard problem. And I think we shouldn't assume that the only way one mobilizing political will to invest in a hard solution to a hard problem is by fear mongering and threat. That's not the only way. The other way is by being straight with people. There are a lot of foreign policy issues in this country that if you just poll on them aren't popular, like free trade. But it is entirely possible, and we've seen repeated examples of presidents who are out there making the case to the American public as to why these policies are in their long-term interests. And I don't see anything in the public opinion data, or I haven't seen anything so far, that suggests to me that this is a case where that's just not possible.

MR. O'HANLON: So we have time for one last round and then we'll finish up. So I think we'll go in the back this time. And we've got a woman in the black sweater and then the gentleman in the next to last row on the other side.

MS. KIPPER: Thank you. Judith Kipper. I think the thing I appreciate and commend you all for coming up with, not very good solutions, I certainly agree with you. Each one of you has a point or two that is interesting and positive. But I think the one thing you're leaving out is that the U.S. has no help in this region. The only country that will do what we ask it to do or tell it to do is Jordan. There is no army that can help us in the entire Arab world. There is no consensus of any views. The Saudis have a point of view. The Saudis and UAE are having some problems. UAE and Qatar are not talking at the moment. The tribal dimension, the fear, self-interest, dictatorship-like government, et cetera. We don't have anybody in this region that can help us with Syria. So we have to look at where might we get help. Unfortunately, the only places we could get help are Iran, which is unacceptable at the moment, or Turkey, which is probably not practical because we know that Turkey is confused and confusing. But until we can talk about a strategy that deals with the realities on the ground that the United States and the

rest of the world faces -- and we're all inside the beltway, we're always all inside the beltway, we talk to each other, we agree with each other or we don't, but I wouldn't say us so much. This is happening to Syria, to Syrians, to Iraqis, and now to the French. So where is it that we can find some minimal degree of consensus to cool off the violence, where somebody will help us to do it, because we can't do it. And the only one is Turkey.

MR. O'HANLON: In the very next to last row, and that will be it I'm afraid.

MR. SAKAL: My name is Mohammed Sakal; I'm from the Syrian-American Council and I'm a Syrian-American. And I want to thank you for your passionate question. That was a very good question. And thank you guys for giving this talk.

So basically what I've been seeing from each of your strategies is that the United States ought to kind of escalate before deescalating the situation by kind of uniting for forming an opposition group that can be supported by the United States and kind of push forth its interests. I guess my question is why has the Obama administration been consistently I guess reluctant to act in Syria? Even at the beginning of the revolution when there was only opposition forces and Bashar al-Assad's regime and the opposition forces were defectors of the military, so you know these people -- you know, they're fighting for a noble cause, they're defending their families, they're fighting for freedom, democracy, inclusion, and pluralism in Syria. Why do you think he has been so consistently reluctant to act? As we've seen inaction has kind of caused the situation to spiral out of control.

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. So we've got two questions on the floor, four folks to respond. Let's start with you and this will be it. Will, any concluding

comments that you want to weave in, as well as your responses to either or both of those questions?

MR. McCANTS: Well, I think President Obama was trying to be on the right side of history early in the civil war. He committed this country to the removal of the Assad regime, but I think once the civil war began to drag on and it became clear that Assad wasn't going to fall quickly like Mubarak, his natural skepticism of large military involvements in the region kicked in and he has hampered his military and CIA from getting more deeply involved. He is a politician of course and politicians respond to political stimuli. And when there is deep criticism they move the policy a little bit, but only just enough. I think his default position is to stay out of the conflict. The problem is, as we've seen over the past two weeks, the conflict is coming to us and it's coming to our allies. And these kind of half measures don't produce an enduring and effective outcome that really aligns with our interests. I would say the one place where the administration I think has been trying to show leadership is with regards to the Islamic State. If it has fallen down on the job in Syria, it has been serious about going after the Islamic State. And we may say that well if you're really serious you'd deal with Syria, but nonetheless it's tackling this problem. But as the previous commenter just mentioned, it does not have a lot of allies in this effort and it's really hampered its response to the Islamic State.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Dan.

MR. BYMAN: I'll just conclude by briefly noting in kind of defense of containment, if you will, that it's a necessary policy no matter what other policy you're going to do. So if you're going to work with the Syrian opposition, if you're going to try to create safe zones and so on, if you want to kind of carve off parts of Syria, all of these are longer-term policies even if they're successful and you need to something in the meantime to prevent the violence from spreading and doing worse. So I have made my

arguments about why I think containment had some advantages in the long-term in terms of costs, but I would point out we've kind of got to do it. And we are doing aspects of it, but we're not thinking about it or doing it comprehensively. And I would urge the United States and other countries to move along that road.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Ken.

MR. POLLACK: I'm going to leave both questions to Tamara since I think they were much more in the bailiwick that she was focused on today.

I will simply say that my 27-28 years in Washington, you know, I recognize that Washington has a predilection for what is expedience, for what is easy, for what we can just come up with and use it to push the problems, especially the problems of foreign policy in the Middle East, off to the back burner. I think that's really what Barack Obama has been doing, but again I'll leave that up to Tamara to characterize.

MS. WITTES: You're really setting me up here again. (Laughter)

MR. POLLACK: I'd never do that. But what I've also consistently recognized in the case of the Middle East, that's just made the problems worse and worse. And I think that's especially true with civil wars, where again my read of the history is you try to do it halfway and you will get nothing. And if you want to bring in the Syrians, I think that's absolutely true. I think that we will have Syrians on our side. I think that we will have tons of Syrians on our side if we're actually willing to do the right thing. If we're not, yeah, we're going to get 50 guys, maybe just five who will show up.

MS. WITTES: Thanks. So I think that Will did a good job of laying out some of the reasons why the Obama administration hasn't engaged more forcefully up until this point. And I would add to that everything that Judith said about the fractiousness and disagreement amongst America's putative partners in the region. And those were evident in their approach to the Syrian conflict from the very start. And it

exacerbated divisions that already existed amongst the Syrian opposition and made it very difficult, but not impossible, but difficult to try and forge that kind of opposition alliance or coalition that could have been an anchor for some kind of more concerted regional and American strategy.

But I think Judith just restated the problem that I had tried to lay out in my opening remarks, but she stated it essentially saying it's insoluble. The United States doesn't have anybody it can work with out there. And there I think I would disagree. I think that there are some big gaps as I said in perceptions between the United States and its partners in the region, both in terms of the nature of the problem and in terms of how to solve it. But I don't think those gaps are unbridgeable. I think that there are countries in the Middle East that have been turned very much inward as a result of the events of the last five years, particularly America's strongest Arab partner for the last half century, Egypt, which has essentially been absent from regional political dynamics for the last few years, but may now be trying to reemerge.

I think the fundamental problem for the United States though if it wants to close those gaps, find those partners to be on side with it in whatever policy it advances, is it needs to take their perspectives and their concerns a little more seriously than it has up until this point. And I don't mean that means it needs to accede to those priorities, but it needs to understand them. And so every time an American official gets up and talks about our objectives in our policy toward the Syrian civil war as being all about ISIS, we make that gap wider, we reinforce the problem. And it's not merely a question of rhetoric. As I said, if the United States wants to help close that gap, if it wants to understand that resolving the Syrian civil war is the way to ultimately address the problem of ISIS, it needs to have an answer to Assad's brutality. The reason Syria is so disordered today is because Assad responded to peaceful demands with force and broke his state to bits.

That's how we got here. And that's what's continuing to happen every day. So when they talk about trying to preserve Syrian state institutions -- which I think it might be too late to do -- or when they talk about the suffering of the Syrian people, they need policies to address those things and I think that's what we don't have right now.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you all very much for joining us today.

(Applause)

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