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Deconstructing Syria

Towards a regionalized strategy for a confederal country

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INTRODUCTION

U.S. policy towards Syria since the Arab spring uprisings of 2011 has been a litany of miscalculation, frustration, and tragedy for the people of that ill-fated land. The ascendance of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as the major element of the opposition to the Bashar al-Assad regime may not amount to an imminent threat to American security; indeed, very few Americans have died to date at the hands of ISIL or affiliates. But ISIL's rise does place at much greater risk the security of Iraq, the future of Syria itself, and the stability of Lebanon and Jordan.[1] It could jeopardize the safety of American citizens as well, given the possibility of attacks by "lone wolves" inspired in their western home by ISIL propaganda, or by westerners returning from the Syrian jihad to carry out attacks at home. Massacres on a par with the Charlie Hebdo tragedy, or worse, could easily occur in the United States. The potency of the al-Nusra organization, al Qaeda's loyal affiliate, within the Syrian opposition is also of considerable concern.

This is not a situation that requires an invasion of Syria by tens of thousands of Western ground forces. But nor is it a situation that can be allowed somehow to burn out on its own. Even if the Assad regime falls this year to combined opposition forces, as seems possible at this juncture in mid-2015, the problem will hardly be solved, since ISIL might then be in a position to dominate an entire country rather than just half. With the 10 to 15 percent of the population made up of "apostate" Alawites then potentially within reach of ISIL and associates, and the 10 percent of the population that is Christian (according to pre-war tallies) also at risk, the bloodbath that has already cost a quarter million lives and displaced half the country's population could intensify. And ISIL would have further validated its apocalyptic narrative of a caliphate beginning in Syria—a narrative that, even if it has no chance of being realized, could aid the group in its already impressive recruiting efforts, which are currently bringing about 1,000 new fighters a month from all over the world to the battlefield.[2] This pace is adequate to replenish the loss rate from U.S.-led airstrikes, estimated by one U.S. official to have killed 10,000 ISIL fighters dating back to 2014 (explaining why the U.S. government's

[1] See for example, Will McCants, "Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad," Brookings blog, November 12, 2014, available at http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/11/12-baghdad-of-al-rashid-mccants.

[2] See Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), p. 17; and Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

upper-bound estimate of some 30,000 ISIL fighters has not changed for months despite the air campaign).[3]

This paper makes a case for a new approach to Syria that attempts to bring ends and means more realistically into balance. It also seeks to end the Hobson's choice currently confronting American policymakers, whereby they can neither attempt to unseat President Assad in any concerted way (because doing so would clear the path for ISIL), nor tolerate him as a future leader of the country (because of the abominations he has committed, and because any such policy would bring the United States into direct disagreement with almost all of its regional allies). The new approach would seek to break the problem down in a number of localized components of the country, pursuing regional stopgap solutions while envisioning ultimately a more confederal Syria made up of autonomous zones rather than being ruled by a strong central government. It also proposes a path to an intensified train and equip program. Once that program had generated a critical mass of fighters in training locations abroad, it would move to a next stage. Coupled with a U.S. willingness, in collaboration with regional partners, to help defend local safe areas using American airpower as well as special forces support once circumstances are conducive, the Syrian opposition fighters would then establish safe zones in Syria that they would seek to expand and solidify. The safe zones would also be used to accelerate recruiting and training of additional opposition fighters who could live in, and help protect, their communities while going through basic training. They would, in addition, be locations where humanitarian relief could be provided to needy populations, and local governance structures developed.

The strategy would begin by establishing one or two zones in relatively promising locations, such as the Kurdish northeast and perhaps in the country's south near Jordan, to see how well the concept could work and how fast momentum could be built up. Over time, more might be created, if possible. Ultimately, and ideally, some of the safe zones might merge together as key elements in a future confederal arrangement for the Syrian state. Assad, ISIL, and al-Nusra could have no role in such a future state, but for now, American policymakers could otherwise remain agnostic about the future character and governing structures of such an entity.

[3] Associated Press, "U.S. Official: Airstrikes Killed 10,000 Islamic State Fighters," *New York Times,* June 3, 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/06/03/world/middleeast/ap-ml-islamic-state.html?ref=world.

A BRIEF REVIEW

American policy towards the conflict in Syria over the past four years has gone through several stages. The first approach was primarily centered on rhetorical support for regime change. The Syria uprising seemed to be yet one more manifestation of a then-promising Arab spring that was taking primarily peaceful form in the region and leading to the relatively painless abdication of dictators starting in Tunisia and Egypt. Even though Washington had partially made its peace with President Assad by then, with John Kerry even calling him a reformer on a visit several months before, the temptation to call for his ouster was ultimately irresistible.[1] By the time the United States did so in August of 2011, the Libya conflict was proving a challenge—beginning to sober those who had hoped for an immaculate and rapid process of political transitions in the region. Then, over the ensuing 18 months or so, President Obama resisted recommendations from his top national security team to arm and train the Syrian opposition, unsure that a reliable and cohesive opposition could be found that was capable of not only winning the war, but unifying and stabilizing the country thereafter.

This calculation may have proven to be incorrect, but it was not unreasonable in its basic logic. Aware of what had happened after regime overthrow in Iraq, the president was reluctant to make the overthrow of Assad the central goal of his policy, since it did not answer the question of what would happen thereafter.[2] The Obama Administration also hoped that dwindling financial assets, as well as defecting soldiers, would force the Assad regime to accept some kind of new power-sharing arrangement that would include as a central element the departure of the president. Even as military momentum stalled, and the regime pushed back against the opposition, the Obama Administration placed its main hopes in diplomacy. Even in 2013, Secretary of State Kerry made a Geneva-based process of negotiation the centerpiece of his own strategy. U.S. arms flows and other assistance to the opposition may not have been paltry in magnitude—by some accounts, they have totaled at least $1 billion in resources, and had some role in training and equipping up to 10,000 fighters. But the visibility and the effectiveness of the effort have been severely limited for various reasons.[3] The effort to help build an

[1] Patrick Goodenough, "Syrian President Assad Regarded as 'Reformer,' Clinton Says," CNS News Service, March 28, 2011, available at http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/syrian-president-assad-regarded-reformer-clinton-says.
[2] Jeremy Shapiro, "The U.S.'s 'Yadda, Yadda, Yadda' Doctrine for Syria," The Daily Beast, September 15, 2013, available at http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/09/15-syria-us-yadda-yadda-yadda-shapiro.
[3] Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, "CIA Faces 20% Cut in Syria Funds," *Washington Post,* June 13, 2015, p. A1.

integrated, well organized opposition has been generally unsuccessful. In the early years at least, the United States seemed primarily to be trying to stay somewhat above the battlefield fray in seeking a new government of national unity through negotiations.[4]

But Syrians themselves were hardly interested in the kinds of compromises that would have been needed for such an outcome. Nor were their major patrons abroad—Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah for the Assad regime, Turkey and Qatar and Saudi Arabia and others for the various elements of the opposition. By that point, moreover, the so-called moderate opposition under the name of the Free Syrian Army, in principle complemented by a political organization known as the Syrian National Congress, was increasingly proven to be a collection of groups with no unity, common vision, or survivability on the battlefield. If America was hesitant about arming its friends, no other major outside player seemed to be. U.S. friends found themselves outgunned. Increasingly, they either died on the battlefield, switched sides to stay alive, or tried futilely to forge new coalitions that did not hold. Meanwhile, the United States found itself increasingly at cross-purposes with its major Sunni allies, who doubted Washington's commitment to the regime change it had long advocated.[5]

Since June of 2014, when Mosul fell in Iraq to an ISIL onslaught, it has been evident that U.S. policies towards the Syria conflict have clearly failed. Not only has Syria still been in the throes of devastating civil war, not only were ISIL-inspired lethal attacks against western countries increasing in number, but a quarter of Iraq fell to the group. Only the intervention of Iran-backed Shia militias together with Kurdish peshmerga forces and American airpower prevented the takeover of Iraqi Kurdistan and possibly even Baghdad by ISIL. The Obama Administration promised finally to devote a half billion dollars a year in overt, DOD-administered aid to the Syrian opposition and to train up to 5,000 fighters a year for a three-year period—though concerns about vetting opposition fighters and uncertainties about where to base such an effort were enough to ensure that very little progress could be made even a full year later. Indeed, it took until spring 2015 for that DOD program even to begin, and in its early months only some 150 individuals found their way into training programs (in Turkey and Jordan).[6] Even once such a moderate opposition force could be created, hypothetically in 2017 or 2018, it would possess little more strength than Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front—and only about half the estimated fighting strength of ISIL according to U.S. intelligence.

[4] Andrew J. Tabler, "Syria's Collapse: And How Washington Can Stop It," *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 92, no. 4 (July/August 2013), pp. 90-100.
[5] See Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising,* pp. 67-104.
[6] Missy Ryan, "Dempsey Cites Syrian Training Issues," *Washington Post,* June 4, 2015, p. A4.

American forces returned in modest numbers to Iraq. But their efforts to help retrain the Iraqi army were hamstrung by these limited numbers, as well as constraints on their freedom of movement, and also the limited availability of Iraqi recruits. As of May 2015, the recent progress of the Iraqi state in retaking Tikrit from ISIL had been more than outweighed by the fall of Ramadi. Predictions that Mosul would be liberated by the spring of 2015, voiced the previous winter by Central Command, were revealed to have been badly optimistic at best. The fall of Palmyra, Syria to ISIL at about the same time further underscored the dilemma. Iraq continued to demonstrate some elements of hope, especially with the government of the more conciliatory and inclusive Prime Minister al-Abadi who had replaced Maliki in the summer of 2014. But his government was increasingly seen as feckless in light of its military ineffectiveness. Basic choices such as whether to promote development of an Iraqi National Guard that would allow individuals to be individually recruited, vetted, trained, and deployed near their home communities wallowed; key decisions were not made and key actions were not taken.

The Obama Administration's official policies remained ambitious through it all, with a call for both the defeat of ISIL and the replacement of Assad. But realistically, such outcomes do not appear within reach—and it is dubious that Washington is even committed to its own policies at this stage, especially in Syria. Implicitly, the administration seems to view the dangers of any substantial U.S. involvement as not only risking Mr. Obama's preferred narrative of ending wars on his watch, but also (and more significantly) risking a quagmire that would involve enormous U.S. costs and casualties. Thus, the immediate policy seems to be one of limiting involvement, while using the occasional air strike or special forces raid to disrupt ISIL when possible. Assad's own policy, of painting the opposition as a jihadist monster, had largely succeeded in diverting much of the U.S. focus from seeking his ouster to countering the more imminent ISIL threat. Longer-term U.S. policy is probably to hope that success against ISIL in Iraq creates a shift in momentum and thus new possibilities in Syria as well—even if those new possibilities cannot now be easily discerned or described. Meanwhile, the broader campaign against ISIL orchestrated by retired General John Allen and including attempts to clamp down on the flows of foreign fighters to and from Syria, and flows of money to ISIL, seems worthwhile but hardly likely to be decisive. ISIL's influx of foreign fighters appears adequate to sustain its fighting strength. Its financial assets appear ample for its current needs as well, with a continuing income of perhaps $1 million a day or more, largely from extortion and taxation in areas it controls.[7]

[7] Sarah Almukhtar, "ISIS Finances Are Strong," *New York Times,* May 19, 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-finances.html.

DECONSTRUCTING SYRIA—TOWARDS A REGIONAL, INK-SPOT STRATEGY

In fairness to the Obama Administration, a realistic comprehensive plan for Syria seems elusive at this stage without even factoring in self-imposed U.S. political constraints. American "allies" in the war together constitute perhaps the fifth-strongest fighting force in the country, after Assad's own military, ISIL, al-Nusra, and even Hezbollah. Some of these so-called allies may not be so moderate, or dependable, after all. The peace process appears in tatters. Any willingness by Assad to defect now as part of an integrated plan to produce a new power-sharing government (perhaps backstopped by an international peacekeeping force) would likely be seen as evidence of weakness by his enemies. It would probably fail to produce a durable and stable outcome. An actual large-scale U.S. military intervention is off the table, in light of what the nearly decade-long effort produced in Iraq; not even the most conservative and hawkish candidates in the GOP field for president in 2016 are calling for such an approach. Imaginative and constructive proposals from the think tank world for radically different measures are not particularly promising either. Partition of Syria along ethnic/sectarian lines, for example, would not address the question of how to handle the mixed cities of the nation's center, nor produce a viable means of countering ISIL. Development of a new Syrian army of tens of thousands, able to take on Assad as well as ISIL, may be theoretically appealing. But seems hugely ambitious in a situation where the United States has failed to train even a few thousand moderate fighters a year, and where there are few individuals who could provide political or military leadership of an integrated Syrian opposition.[1] An integrated army may be the right long-term plan, but it is not a realistic goal with which to begin.

Counterintuitively, the only credible path forward may be a plan that in effect deconstructs Syria. A comprehensive, national-level solution is too hard even to specify at this stage, much less achieve. Instead, the international community should work to create pockets of more viable security and governance within Syria over time. With initial footholds in place, the strategy could develop further in a type of "ink-spot" campaign that eventually sought to join the various local initiatives into a broader and more integrated effort. This approach builds on the idea of classic counterinsurgency

[1] Kenneth M. Pollack, "An Army to Defeat Assad," *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 110-124.

efforts but has a much different application in this case—because in this case, the United States and foreign partners are taking the side of the insurgents rather than the government, and the goal is not to defeat the insurgency but to support and empower it.

This strategy might produce only a partial success, liberating parts of the country and then settling into stalemate. But that should not be seen as failure, even if it happens. One possibility is two or three safe zones in more remote parts of the country, backed up by perhaps 1,000 American military personnel and other countries' special forces in each (with an implied annual cost of perhaps several billion dollars[2]), rather than a snowballing and successful nationwide campaign. Generalizing the strategy from, say, places such as Kurdish areas of the country in the northeast to the heavily populated and intermixed population belt from Idlib and Aleppo through Homs and Hama to Damascus could be very difficult. It would be substantially more dangerous, and also much more logistically challenging. It would be important that Washington not pre-commit to comprehensive regime change on any particular time horizon, since the number of available "moderate" partner forces may not prove adequate to that task, even once recruiting and training begin within the safe zones. Yet even a partially successful strategy would have major benefits. It would help the United States and other outside powers protect several million Syrians who would no longer have to fear being overrun by Assad or ISIL, allow them to collectively attack and pressure ISIL from other locations than is possible today, send a clear message of U.S. engagement to regional partners, and create new opportunities that may not presently be foreseeable.

This approach builds on current U.S. strategy, but with a much less glaring mismatch between means and ends. Requiring ideological purity of opposition fighters would no longer be quite as high of a bar. Requiring that they were untainted by past associations with extremists would no longer be a central element of the vetting process either. Ideally, the U.S. Congress would explicitly endorse these changed criteria, in order to accept ownership of a policy that would have its own risks.

Training opposition fighters in the safety of Turkey, Jordan, and other friendly countries would still be the first step. But it would not over time be sufficient, either, since many opposition fighters are reluctant to leave their home territories—and thereby leave their

[2] The requisite number of supplies for such a combined force might total in the range of perhaps 100 to 300 tons a day for the forces themselves—the equivalent of roughly 2 to 10 C-17 payloads or 5 to 25 C-130 payloads, which could if necessary be provided by airdrops for certain periods of time, though overland routes would likely be available for those areas near Turkey and Jordan. See Michael O'Hanlon, *The Science of War: Defense Budgeting, Military Technology, Logistics, and Combat Outcomes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 145-150.

families and communities unprotected—in order to go abroad for training. The idea would be to help moderate elements establish reliable safe zones within Syria once they were able. American, as well as Saudi and Turkish and British and Jordanian and other Arab forces would act in support, not only from the air but eventually on the ground via the presence of special forces as well. The approach would benefit from Syria's open desert terrain which could allow creation of buffer zones that could be monitored for possible signs of enemy attack through a combination of technologies, patrols, and other methods that outside special forces could help Syrian local fighters set up.

Were Assad foolish enough to challenge these zones, even if he somehow forced the withdrawal of the outside special forces, he would be likely to lose his airpower in ensuing retaliatory strikes by outside forces, depriving his military of one of its few advantages over ISIL. Thus, he would be unlikely to do this.

Creation of these sanctuaries would produce autonomous zones that would never again have to face the prospect of rule by either Assad or ISIL. They would also constitute areas where humanitarian relief could be supplied, schools reopened, and larger opposition fighting forces recruited, trained, and based. U.N. agencies and NGOs would help in the effort to the extent possible, focusing on health, education, and basic economic recovery in the first instance. Governing councils would be formed, more likely by appointment than election, to help international agencies make decisions on key matters relevant to rudimentary governance. Regardless of details, relief could certainly be provided far more effectively than is the case today. At least one such area should be contiguous to Jordan and one to Turkey, and be created in cooperation with Amman and Ankara. These locations would allow secure transportation lines for humanitarian as well as military supplies. They would also provide bases from which to attack ISIL in its strongholds, a mission that western forces could carry out in conjunction with local allies.

The ultimate end-game for these zones would not have to be determined in advance. The interim goal might be a confederal Syria, with several highly autonomous zones. One of those zones might be for Alawites. But none could be for ISIL, al-Nusra, or Assad and his inner circle. "Accidental guerrillas," to use David Kilcullen's memorable phrase, who had previously been in cahoots with some of these groups could in some cases be forgiven their transgressions, if there were reason to think that they were dependable. Some of the initial safe zones, after growing and expanding, could eventually merge. A future national government, if it could be pieced together through

negotiation, might someday be formed, but would presumably have only a modest role in such a confederal arrangement.

At some point, the confederation would likely require support from an international peacekeeping force. The United States should be willing to commit being part of a force, since without it, it is dubious that the conflict's various parties will have confidence in the stability of any settlement. The challenge of creating governance structures that protected the rights of Syria's various communities would be especially acute in the intermixed central population belt of the country. But in the short term, the ambitions would be lower—they would be, simply, to make individual zones defensible and governable, to help provide relief for populations within them, and to train and equip more recruits so that the zones could be stabilized and then gradually expanded.

As safe zones were created, over time some would eventually coalesce and merge. For example, once appropriate understandings were reached with Turkey, a single Kurdish zone would make sense. Major sectors in the south near the Jordanian border, and in the north near Idlib and Aleppo, could be logical. Over time, if and when feasible, zones near some of the central cities such as Hama and Homs could be envisioned, though the logistical challenges and the safety challenges for western forces could be greater in those cases. Prudence would have to be the watchword. In some cases, even the various members of the so-called moderate opposition might come into conflict with each other; outside parties might have to threaten to withhold support of various types to discourage such behavior.

The plan would be directed in part against Assad. But it would not have the explicit military goal of overthrowing him, at least not in the first instance or the near term. Rather, it would seek to constrict the territory that he governs. And if he delayed too long in accepting a deal for exile, he could inevitably face direct dangers to his rule and even his person. The plan would still seek his removal, but over a gradual time period that allowed for a negotiated exit if he were smart enough to avail himself of the opportunity. In the short term, however, the current tacit understanding with Assad, whereby he chooses not to challenge western airpower in Syria when it is used against ISIL, ideally would continue.

Some elements of the insurgency might not be willing to accept similar constraints on their own actions.[3] A number would want to march on Damascus, whether they

[3] Salman Shaikh, "Succeeding Against ISIS Requires a U.S. Strategy for Syria," Brookings Blog, September 14, 2014, available at http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/09/14-obama-isis-success-rests-on-syria.

admitted it or not. At some point, this might not be preventable. But the opposition would need to accept that a peace deal including post-Assad Alawite elements remained the goal of Washington. This approach, while not ideal for many elements of the opposition who surely seek more systematic revenge against Assad and his cronies, could nonetheless provide a workable basis for making common cause, since it would in fact ultimately aim for an end to Assad's rule. For these reasons, whether they fully endorsed it or not, America's main regional allies in the effort—Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, other GCC countries—would likely find it welcome since it would move significantly in the direction they have advocated. Moreover, it would be more credible than previous American strategies, stated or implied, because its means would better match ends.

This strategy might soften the opposition to the basic approach by Iran and Russia as well—perhaps reducing their inclination to escalate support for Assad and also possibly even enlisting them in a future negotiated deal about Syria's ultimate future. Indeed, the strategy strikes a balance in its approach to Iran and Russia. It would grant neither a major role. But it would seek to mitigate the risks of escalating rivalry with them by holding out political hope and the prospect of an autonomous region for Alawites (even those previously associated with the Assad regime, as long as they were not from his inner circle). This approach may appeal even more to Moscow and Teheran to the extent that battlefield dynamics go clearly against Assad in a sustained way, as they have been already in the spring of 2015.[4] Damascus and Moscow would be much more likely to support a confederal Syria to the extent they believe that the alternative had probably become the complete overthrow of Assad and his government—and the elimination of meaningful Alawite influence in a future government—or, in a best case, protracted civil war of indefinite duration.

Such a settlement could include outright partition of the country if necessary. However, partition would not solve the question of how to address the mixed cities of the country's center belt. As such, while it should not be taken off the table, it would hardly represent a panacea.

Should Assad fall, the essence of this strategy would still apply, but in a modified way. Moderate insurgents would still need strongholds from which to build up capacity ultimately to challenge ISIL (the presumed main winner in such a defeat of Assad).

[4] David Ignatius, "The Squeeze on Assad," *Washington Post,* June 5, 2015, p. A15.

The basic logic of this ink-spot and regional strategy is not radical. Nor is it original or unique to Syria. In effect, variants of it have guided western powers in Bosnia, as noted, in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and since 1993 in Somalia. The last case is particularly relevant. Somalia, while a site of tragedy for U.S. forces in 1993 followed by withdrawal and defeat in 1994, has wound up showing some signs of hopefulness. The Puntland and Somaliland in the north are largely self-governing and autonomous. Similar types of zones would be the interim goal for Syria as well. And truth in advertising: the interim period, including some type of American engagement in the war effort, could last a long time. For a country weary of long wars in the Middle East, this would constitute an on-the-ground role in yet another. That said, it is worth bearing in mind that while the Afghanistan war today continues to consume American resources and cost American casualties, it is not a major source of domestic political acrimony within the United States. Perhaps Americans are more patient with long military operations that sometimes given credit for, especially if the strategy that the operations are designed to serve is responsive to a real security threat.

This plan would aspire to help recruit, vet, train, equip and support substantial opposition forces numbering ultimately in the tens of thousands of fighters in aggregate. In this sense, it would not be notably different from the scale of effort envisioned, for example, by Ken Pollack's proposal to create an alternative national army for Syria. But unlike the case with Pollack's plan, it would not prejudge the question of whether this force would be a single integrated national army or a group of regional guards.

RISKS AND DANGERS

There would of course be risks associated with this strategy. The most glaring would be the possibility of American casualties—either through "blue on green" insider attacks of the type that have taken dozens of American lives in Afghanistan, or through the overrunning by ISIL or Assad/regime elements of a so-called safe zone in which American forces were located. This is a significant risk, to be sure, and one that would have to be carefully managed, as noted above, by careful selection of where the first safe zones in particular were created. It would also require deployment of American quick reaction forces in the area, perhaps in more locations than they currently are found today, to improve the odds of coming to the aid of such U.S. forces in timely fashion if their positions are brought into danger. In these ways, the operation in Syria would resemble two parts of the long Afghanistan campaign—the very beginning, in which modest numbers of U.S. forces worked in close tandem with the Northern Alliance, and more recent times, in which several thousand Americans are based in country, occasionally participating in raids and occasionally suffering casualties.

If Assad sought to attack the enclaves where moderate forces were being aided by American and other outside powers, for example with its limited remaining air force, the United States would need to be ready to escalate quickly and powerfully—even disproportionately. It certainly could do so, given its prevalence of airpower in the region and its multiple access points to Syrian airspace including from the Mediterranean Sea. But again, as noted, Assad appears already to be on the defensive, and while his imminent demise should not be presumed, it is more likely that Washington would have to be ready to evolve its strategy for a post-Assad Syria in which ISIL and al-Nusra had gained further territory. As noted earlier, the main essence of the strategy would remain applicable even if Assad fell, though the specific geographic and tactical modalities of it might change under such conditions.

It is worth noting that two other types of risks associated with this strategy would be no greater, and in most ways probably less, than under current policy. First, there is the matter of U.S. prestige. Some would argue that by declaring itself committed to a change in battlefield dynamics, the United States would lose more prestige if in fact that proved more difficult than anticipated. But this risk must be measured against the real blow to American credibility that has already resulted from four years of an ineffective policy.

Second, some would argue that ISIL and affiliates would have greater incentive to strike the U.S. homeland, and other western countries, if Washington made preparations for direct combat against ISIL. But in fact, the United States already is at war with ISIL—not only as a matter of formal declaratory policy but also in the ongoing bombing campaign underway in Iraq and Syria today. ISIL has already demonstrated its lack of restraint in its dealings with the United States in the 2014 beheadings of American hostages within its reach. Its social media outlets are already trying to encourage lone-wolf attacks against the United States and its civilian population today. ISIL is already encouraged by a sense of sanctuary, and a sense of military momentum. Making western attacks against ISIL more effective seems just as likely to put the group on the defensive as to occasion new attacks. And while ISIL's basic desire to mount a major attack against the United States over the longer term is hard to assess at present, two realities are not hard to discern. First, its ideology is fundamentally similar to that of al Qaeda, which champions such attacks. Second, in its claim to be an Islamic State—a caliphate—its ambitions already explicitly extend to cover most if not all of the broader Middle East where other Muslim populations, and many American allies, are located. Thus, the group must be defeated; there can be no long-term acquiescence in its continued hold on territory, populations, and power.

THE PRACTICAL PATH AHEAD

The above sketch of a strategy sounds fine on paper, perhaps, but how does it mesh with the realities of the real world? Most specifically, which Syrian opposition groups are the most likely candidates for enhanced collaboration with American and other key allied militaries?

Over the years, a number of groups have been affiliated with the so-called Free Syrian Army, and associated political arms of regime opponents such as the Syrian National Congress. But the composition, leadership, capacity, and credibility of such groups has waxed and waned—with a net trend towards less promise over the years.

Key players include the below—though alliances and even names of groups change fast enough that the list should be seen as illustrative and notional rather than precise. Not all may be suitable partners, and even when there is the potential, collaboration will generally have to be conditional, based on the willingness of the groups to coordinate with outside players and also accept some vetting of members.[1]

- Jaysh al-Tawhid, around Homs
- Jaysh al-Islam, around Damascus
- Various Kurdish forces in the country's north
- An "Operations Room" or coalition of insurgents focused on Aleppo
- A similar "Operations Room" focused on Qalamoun, north of Damascus
- Jaish al-Fatah, around Idlib, in coordination with a number of other groups
- A "Southern Front" near the border with Jordan
- The Shai-tat tribe in Syria

As noted, the sizes, loyalties, affiliations, and alliances of these groups are constantly shifting. Indeed, so are there very names. Clearly, vetting and training/equipping will be major challenges.

[1] See Jeffrey White and Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai, "Growing Rebel Capabilities Press the Syrian Regime," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., April 27, 2015, available at www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/growing-rebel-capabilities; Genevieve Casagrande with Christopher Kozak, "Syria Situation Report May 5-12, 2015," Institute for the Study of War, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2015, available at iswsyria.blogspot.com/2015/05/Syria-situation-report-may-5-12-2015.html; Charles R. Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2015), p. 71.

But these are challenges that will be far more surmountable with a believable and viable American strategy to guide future efforts. Aiming for a comprehensive solution in Syria has proven not only unrealistic, but unhelpful to the effort. It now sows cynicism among those who see that American policy does not measure up to its declared intentions. It is time for a major change of approach. No large-scale war effort is required. But a substantial intensification of the American, as well as British and Jordanian and Turkish and GCC roles, in the war will be needed. That said, a U.S. role in a future stabilization force could certainly reach or exceed 20,000 personnel in strength, scaling from the Balkans and other such precedents, should a formal peace accord ever prove possible.

In sum, much greater tactical risk to U.S. forces will have to be accepted in Syria. But the risks are roughly of a magnitude as those now faced in Afghanistan. And the strategic risks of today's failing strategy for Syria are greater than the tactical risks associated with this new, ink-spot approach that envisions deconstructing Syria into a more confederal state. We need not rush into this new strategy. But we do need to get on with it.

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