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BUILDING A BETTER SYRIAN OPPOSITION ARMY

The How and the Why

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BUILDING A BETTER SYRIAN OPPOSITION ARMY*

What a difference a year makes. In the fall of 2013, Syria dominated the headlines, in part from fear that its spillover would destabilize its neighbors, Iraq first among them. Sadly, those fears proved prophetic. Sparks from Syria, in the form of the Salafi terrorist group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), helped reignite the Iraqi civil war. And the implosion of Iraq has pulled the Syrian conflict which triggered it back into the spotlight of America's foreign policy debate.

Yet throughout that year, the notion of increased American involvement, and in particular, ramped up assistance to the Syrian opposition was effectively off the table. The Administration and most of its critics regularly scoffed at the idea. Now, thanks to the crisis in Iraq and the belated recognition that spillover from Syria is an important element of the problems there, what was once ridiculed is now policy.

In his speech to the nation in September 2014, President Obama finally pledged to build a moderate Syrian opposition, one capable of taking on both the Asad regime and Sunni extremist groups like ISIS.¹ Weeks later, the Congress passed bills appropriating \$500 million for that mission.²

As of this writing in the early fall of 2014, the Administration's plans are not completely clear. Nevertheless, from what has become publicly available, it does appear that Washington has adopted the strategy toward Syria presented in this paper. Consequently, this study should be seen as an effort to explain in greater detail how such a policy should be implemented, why it makes sense for the United States, and why it is a reasonable (perhaps even necessary) move by the U.S. government.

WHY GET MORE INVOLVED?

To some extent, this question has already been asked and answered: because the President has decided to get more involved. However, when designing any strategy, especially one that will involve military operations, it is critical to understand the strategy's goals, which are ultimately derived from the rationale for action itself. For that reason, it is important to recognize what it is that the United States is trying to accomplish in Syria so as to tailor a strategy to those motives.

The case for a more active American role rests on three different arguments. The first of these is the humanitarian one. Over 200,000 Syrians have died

¹ President Barak Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," The White House, September 10, 2014, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/remarks-president-barack-obama-address-nation>.

² Jonathan Weisman and Jeremy W. Peters, "Congress Gives Final Approval to Aid Rebels in Fight With ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2014. See also, Helene Cooper, "Obama Requests Money to Train 'Appropriately Vetted' Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2014; Mark Landler, "Obama to Detail a Broader Foreign Policy Agenda," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2014; Michael R. Gordon, "Kerry Says Obama Wants new Options for Syria Strife," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2014.

in the first three years of the conflict—twice as many as those killed in almost four years of fighting in Bosnia, where the death toll was cited as a key motive for intervention by the U.S. and European powers.³ Only a fraction of that number had died in Libya when the United States and NATO intervened there in 2011 to prevent a humanitarian calamity. Absent decisive foreign assistance, the Syrian civil war will probably roil on for years, perhaps even decades, and will kill hundreds of thousands more. Over 3 million Syrians are overburdening Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, creating dangerous political problems for all three of those American allies. Millions more have been displaced internally.⁴ While most Americans believe that the United States does not have the responsibility to intervene to prevent *all* humanitarian tragedies, most also believe that the United States should intervene to prevent the worst humanitarian disasters, and many have argued that Syria constitutes just such a case.

The second argument revolves around the problem of terrorism. Intercommunal civil wars often spawn horrific terrorist groups and horrific terrorist groups find comfortable bases and breeding grounds amid civil wars. The PLO, Hizballah, the Tamil Tigers, al-Qa'ida, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and countless others were all born of civil wars. Al-Qa'ida in particular has joined civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and now Syria and used them as launching pads for operations elsewhere, including against the United States. Now Syria has become just such a safe haven. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper warned in early 2014 that Syria has become a breeding ground for Salafi terrorists, some of whom have begun to set their sights on American targets.⁵ According to various press reports, ISIS has not yet begun to actively

target U.S. interests and citizens abroad, but we're on their list and it is probably just a matter of time and opportunity before they begin to operationalize those aims.⁶ Moreover, the brutal beheadings of several captured American journalists is itself an act of terrorism against the United States. Other groups in Syria are more actively planning attacks against American targets, underscoring the point that ending the terrorism threat from Syria requires ending the civil war itself, not just defeating ISIS.⁷

Finally, there is also a more basic strategic argument. The U.S. may not have any strategic interests in Syria, but it does have them in nearly all of Syria's neighbors. Turkey is a NATO ally. Iraq is now the second largest oil producer in OPEC, whose future oil production is critical to keeping oil prices low and stable in the future. Moreover, civil war in Iraq threatens other oil producers like Kuwait, Iran and even Saudi Arabia. Jordan is a fragile ally whose stability is closely linked to Israel, and Israel itself is America's closest friend in the region. (Lebanon cannot be included in this list if only because it was consumed by civil war in 1975-1991 and that did not have a severe impact on U.S. interests).

Another constant of civil wars like Syria's is that they cause spillover that can destabilize neighboring states: refugees, terrorists, radicalization of the neighboring populations, the spread of secessionism, economic dislocation and interventions by the neighbors that themselves prove disastrous. At its worst, spillover from civil wars can cause civil wars in neighboring states (as Lebanon did with Syria and as Rwanda did with Congo) or can lead to regional wars (as Lebanon provoked wars between Syria and Israel, and as Congo did for seven of its neighbors).

³ Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Death Toll in Syria Estimated at 191,000," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2014. The article notes that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights had had another 52,000 deaths reported to them, but without sufficient detail to include in their official count. Thus, the figure of 191,000 deaths should be seen as the minimum, not the most likely number of deaths.

⁴ Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Syrian Refugees Surpass 3 Millions, UN Says," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2014.

⁵ The transcript of Clapper's remarks is here: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-senate-intelligence-hearing-on-national-security-threats/2014/01/29/b5913184-8912-11e3-833c-33098f9e5267_story.html.

⁶ Mark Mazzetti and Helene Cooper, "U.S. Officials and Experts at Odds on Threat Posed by ISIS," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2014.

⁷ Mark Mazzetti, Michael S. Schmidt and Ben Hubbard, "U.S. Sees Other, More Direct Threats Beyond ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2014.

Already, spillover from the Syrian civil war is causing serious problems for all of its neighbors and threatening the stability of Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. The longer the war goes on, the worse the spillover is likely to get.

Obviously, the most dangerous manifestation of Syria's spillover so far has been in Iraq. After 2011, the last remnants of al-Qai'da in Iraq fled to Syria, seeking sanctuary in the spaces left ungoverned by its civil war. There they reinvented themselves as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (abbreviated as ISIS, or ISIL depending on your translation of the Arabic word "Shams" as either "Syria" or "the Levant"), developed new tactics, nurtured new commanders, and recruited new fighters. In late 2013 they re-invaded western Iraq, waging pitched battles with the Iraqi Army at Fallujah and Ramadi. Most dramatically, in June 2014, ISIS opened a new front in Iraq, assaulting from Syria into northern Iraq, overrunning Mosul and routing surprised and demoralized Iraqi army formations down all the way to Samarra, barely 50 miles north of Baghdad. While their success was more a product of Iraq's own perverse internal politics, it was spillover from Syria that struck the match. And Iraq's reignited civil war has a direct bearing on American interests because expected increases in Iraqi oil production are the single most important factor in the projections of future oil price stability (more so even than North American shale).⁸

There is no question that Iraq is of far greater significance to American interests than Syria. But that is not to suggest that we can afford to ignore Syria. Whether we like it or not, the two civil wars have effectively merged and there is no solving the one without ad-

ressing the other. If the United States were somehow to cure all of the ills of Iraq but leave Syria to fester, Syria would probably re-infect Iraq all over again at some point in the future. The President has signed up for a viable-but-difficult strategy to restore stability in Iraq. But that Iraq strategy cannot work in isolation. Because the two civil wars are meshed, it requires a complementary Syria strategy as well.

Finally, there is the looming threat of a region-wide Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Across the Muslim world, the civil wars in Syria and Iraq are widely seen as a single (if fractious) Sunni insurgency fighting a pair of Shi'a dominated governments. In response, regional powers have taken it upon themselves to back their co-religionists in the conflict and that has added fuel to the flames. Left unchecked, the problem threatens to spread the Sunni-Shi'a antagonism to other, unrelated fields and conjures the possibility of an even larger war.

For many Americans, none of these arguments—nor all of them together—is a slam dunk in favor of intervention.⁹ Yet, the dilemma we face is that all of these problems are getting worse, not better, and there is nothing in the offing that might change Syria's trajectory. Even if we were to somehow eventually douse the civil war in Iraq, if we left Syria to burn, the flames would probably return at some point. The trend lines are all there and they are all very bad. There is no reason to believe that these problems will solve themselves, but as we have already seen in Iraq, ignoring them only means that at some later date we will have to make an even greater effort to protect our interests. The smart, sober move would be to deal with them sooner rather than later.

⁸ For instance, see International Energy Agency, Iraq Energy Outlook, 9 October 2012, available at <http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/media/weowsite/2012/iraqenergyoutlook/Fullreport.pdf>. Page 12 of the Executive Summary states, "The increase in Iraq's oil production in the Central Scenario of more than 5 mb/d over the period to 2035 makes Iraq by far the largest contributor to global supply growth. Over the current decade, Iraq accounts for around 45% of the anticipated growth in global output."

⁹ For instance in a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center September 11-14, 2014, 41 percent of those who disapproved of President Obama's new strategy for Iraq and Syria did so because they feared that it would "go too far in getting involved in the situation." It is worth noting that the same poll found that Americans supported the President's policy by 53 to 29 percent. See "Bipartisan Support for Obama's Military Campaign Against ISIS," The Pew Research Center, September 15, 2014, available at <http://www.people-press.org/2014/09/15/bipartisan-support-for-obamas-military-campaign-against-isis/>.

A HIGH BAR FOR GREATER INVOLVEMENT

Despite all of the motives for intervention, there is no escaping the simple fact that Syria is a very hard problem for the United States. The arguments in favor of a more active U.S. role there seem perfectly counterbalanced by the arguments against. Especially in the aftermath of America's painful experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, prudence would seem to weigh against greater involvement without a more compelling rationale.

The cons begin with the simple, critical fact that the United States has no interests in Syria itself. Syria is not a major oil producer. It is not a major trading partner of ours (or anyone's for that matter). It is not a democracy. It has never been a U.S. ally and has never even been a friend to America's other allies in the region.

The conflict in Syria is an intercommunal civil war like Bosnia, like Afghanistan, like Iraq, Lebanon, Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, and countless others. Historically, such conflicts tend to end in one of two ways: one side wins, typically accompanied by horrific slaughter and "ethnic cleansing" of its adversaries; or a third party intervenes to halt the fighting and forge a power-sharing arrangement among the combatants, and helps to build a new political system. Peaceful, negotiated conclusions to such civil wars are rare and typically occur only after years and years of killing.

Because there are persuasive arguments against greater involvement in Syria and because the American people are leery of another major commitment in the Middle East, any proposal for the United States to play a more decisive role in Syria must meet four criteria:

1. **It cannot require the employment of American ground combat forces—no "boots on the ground."** Funds, advisors and potentially air power all seem fair game, but only in so

far as they do not significantly raise the risk of a commitment of ground forces.

2. **It must provide for the defeat of both the Assad regime and the Salafi terrorists.** Both represent serious threats to American interests. Any proposal that only entails the defeat of one would not satisfy America's vital interests and therefore is not worth pursuing.
3. **It needs to provide a reasonable expectation of a stable end state.** This is a corollary to the 2nd requirement. U.S. interests in Syria are threatened by the civil war itself because of its spillover effects. Thus, merely defeating the regime but allowing the civil war to rage, or even defeating both the regime and the Salafists but allowing other groups to keep fighting would also fail to secure American interests. Destroying ISIS is not enough to secure America's interests. If the civil war is left to burn, other groups will take its place and pose an equal or greater threat. Moreover, only such a stable end state would end Syria's humanitarian nightmare, an important rationale for greater American involvement for at least some segment of the American populace. There are no certainties in warfare, but any plan for greater American involvement must include a reasonable expectation that it will leave Syria stable to eliminate the threat to American interests from spillover.
4. **It needs to have a reasonable chance of success.** This last criterion has two meanings. At the most obvious level, it means that we should not adopt a far-fetched scheme for which there is little evidence it could succeed—no matter how well it might fit our interests in other ways. We have a great deal of historical evidence we can employ to assess the likelihood of various options and it is crucial that we do so. However, this criterion also means that the plan needs to be properly resourced. There is no point in announcing that the United States

will pursue a new, more ambitious policy for Syria only to fail to devote the necessary resources to give it a chance to work. Not only would that be self-defeating and a waste of resources (including, potentially, American lives) but it would further undermine our interests by convincing friends and foes alike that we lacked either the strength or the will to defend our interests.

OTHER OPTIONS FOR INTERVENTION FALL SHORT

Judged against these criteria, every other plan so far offered for greater American involvement in Syria fails on at least one count.

Increased arming of the opposition. Prior to the President's September 10 speech, the Administration's favored option was merely to provide more, more powerful and more sophisticated weapons to the Syrian opposition—especially anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons that would help them against the regime's armor and air power. Indeed, that appears to still be the preference for at least some of the new policy's critics. As part of that approach, the Syrian opposition is already receiving American TOW (for tube-launched optically-tracked wire-guided) anti-tank missiles from U.S. allies and it is widely believed that Washington has already blessed these deliveries as part of just such a strategy.¹⁰

Over time, providing large numbers of advanced anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons can certainly help attrite enemy formations and increase the cost of regime victories, but they are unlikely to significantly affect the battlefield outcomes themselves. In Afghanistan in the 1980s, Stingers and Milan anti-tank weapons caused losses among Soviet forces that Moscow was unwilling to bear, but they did

not lead to even tactical battlefield defeats for the Red Army. For the Soviets, Afghanistan was a “war of choice” and they had the option of walking away, an option they exercised when the costs got too high. For Asad and the Alawis, the Syrian civil war is a “war of necessity” and they are unlikely to give up and risk slaughter at the hands of the opposition simply because they are losing more tanks and helicopters in each battle, especially if they keep winning the battles. Thus, this option is unlikely to lead to the defeat of the regime—let alone the Salafi Jihadist groups.

Moreover, this strategy also fails on the crucial issue of ensuring a stable endstate. Providing weapons and very limited training to the opposition simply improves their ability to kill things. It will do nothing to unite them, create a viable power-sharing arrangement among Syria's fractious ethno-sectarian communities, or build strong institutions on which a new Syrian government might rest. That was also what happened in Afghanistan. Once the Soviets were gone, the victorious Mujahideen groups turned on one another in a new, but equally bloody civil war that lasted until the Pakistan-backed Taliban rolled in to crush them and conquer most of the country.¹¹ In Syria, even if such a strategy could bring about the fall of the regime, it would just shift the conflict to an equally vicious fight among the opposition groups that could itself drag on for years and produce the same problems of spillover.

A No-Fly Zone. A traditional No-Fly Zone (NFZ) that prevented hostile aircraft operating over Syria could help in two respects, but both would only contribute modestly to opposition fortunes. First, a NFZ would prevent aerial resupply of the regime. While this is not inconsequential, the vast majority of the war material and other goods that the regime requires come by sea, so shutting down aerial re-

¹⁰ Liz Sly, “Syrian Rebels Who Received First U.S. Missiles of War See Shipment as ‘an Important First Step’” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2014.

¹¹ For an argument that the role of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in convincing the Soviets to pull out of Afghanistan has been greatly exaggerated, see Alan J. Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No. 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 219-263.

supply on its own would not be decisive. And while a NFZ would prevent the regime from employing its own fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft to wage the war, regime air power has been greatly overrated as a factor in the conflict. Regime airstrikes get lots of attention, but do not appear to contribute nearly as much to their combat operations as artillery, mortars and other ground-based fire support.¹² Thus, a traditional NFZ would have little impact on the regime, and none on the Salafists. In addition, it too would do nothing to create a more stable Syria after the fall of the regime and could drag on accomplishing little for many years while the civil war rages.

An air campaign in support of the existing opposition. For several years, the administration's bravest critics argued for a large-scale air campaign similar to that now being contemplated, but one that would simply support the existing Syrian opposition groups as prior American air campaigns supported the extant Afghan opposition in 2001 and the existing Libyan opposition in 2011. Under such a scenario, western air forces would likely inflict significant damage on regime ground forces, speeding the attrition of the regime's combat power. It might also help demoralize the regime's troops if the United States intervened directly in the conflict and targeted them specifically. Moreover, western air forces could provide on-call fire support for opposition operations, they could hinder or prevent enemy forces as they shifted from one sector to another, and they could greatly complicate the regime's operations, all of which could result in tactical victories for the opposition and tactical defeats for the regime.

Nevertheless, without a complementary force on the ground, even this level of air power would not be a guarantee of success. Setting aside the various costs and potential requirements of such a campaign (which could be very sizable), it is not clear if it would be able to hurt the regime's ground forces enough to enable the opposition to prevail. During the six weeks of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Coalition air forces flew 38,000 interdiction sorties against an Iraqi army in the Kuwait Theater of Operations that began with over 500,000 men.¹³ Although those strikes did tremendous damage to Iraqi forces, key units (principally Saddam's Republican Guard) still fought fiercely against the overwhelming Coalition ground offensive and retained the strength to crush both the Kurdish and Shi'i revolts that broke out after the end of Operation Desert Storm. In Kosovo, NATO air forces flew 3,400 interdiction sorties over 78 days against roughly 100,000 Serbian troops, and caused much less damage than against Iraq.¹⁴ Moreover, that air campaign failed to enable the Kosovo Liberation Army to make any significant headway against Serbian Forces. Finally, in Libya in 2011, NATO flew over 9,700 interdiction sorties over 203 days that helped Libyan rebels defeat 20-40,000 Libyan regime troops and paramilitary forces.¹⁵

It is difficult to get a handle on the Asad regime's forces, but military and paramilitary forces combined seem to number over 100,000 personnel. At this point, after most of the weak links have long since deserted and the rest have been hardened by protracted combat, we should assume that those remaining are staunchly committed to their cause and unlikely to crack easily—like Qadhafi's military in 2011 or

¹² Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2013.

¹³ Eliot A. Cohen, General Editor, *The Gulf War Air Power Survey, Volume V, Part I: Statistical Compendium*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1993), p. 233.

¹⁴ Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After Action Report*, (Washington, DC: DoD, 2000), p. 86.

¹⁵ "Fact Sheet: Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR Final Mission Stats," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, November 2, 2011; Simon Rogers, "Nato Operations in Libya: Data Journalism Breaks Down Which Country Does What," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/may/22/nato-libya-data-journalism-operations-country>. In addition, the daily break down of sorties is available as a link to this article at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aq-FnOoJcl-ndG9KUHFFNDgyNENWRW5TTU16QnFDcXc&authkey=CPeKjPMB&hl=en_US&authkey=CPeKjPMB#gid=1.

Iraq's line infantry formations. Instead, it would be prudent to expect that those remaining would remain committed, like Saddam's Republican Guard and the Serbians in Kosovo. Thus, we should not assume that this option has a high likelihood of success unless it could work in conjunction with a ground force more capable than the KLA or the Libyan rebels.

Moreover, this strategy makes no provisions for a stable, postwar Syria. The 2001 Afghan and 2011 Libyan examples make the case eloquently. The U.S. pursued this strategy in both countries, and in both countries we successfully removed the regime, only to have the country slide into civil war between other groups, including the very opposition forces we aided. This is not a strategy for ending the spillover from Syria, but rather to prolong it.

All of the Above. Finally, there are those who recognize the shortcomings of each of these options and so have instead advocated for the United States to adopt all of them at once. While that would certainly bolster the prospects of success, even then the historical record suggests skepticism is in order. The U.S. employed all of the above against Serbia in Kosovo and it proved inadequate. The evidence from that war indicates that it was only the threat of an American ground invasion—and Russia's warning that it could not stop one—that convinced Milosevic to back down. And again, Milosevic could retreat from Kosovo, whereas Assad cannot retreat from Syria. Moreover, even all three tactics together lack any mechanism to create a stable, peaceful Syria after the regime's defeat and, as in Libya and Afghanistan, could just change the nature of the civil war, but not its magnitude or its spillover.

LESSONS FROM THE BALKANS

In 1992, the Croatian Army was the gang who could not shoot straight. They, and their Bosnian

Croat allies, were hopeless and hapless, repeatedly beaten up by Bosnian Serb forces and their Serbian Army backers. They were the Free Syrian Army of the Balkans.

Yet, by 1995 the Croatian Army had been completely transformed. In a series of savage combined-arms campaigns, the Croats crippled their Serbian rivals with only modest help from either NATO airstrikes or the Bosniak Muslims. The Croats drove the Serbs out of the Krajina region of Croatia and then pushed on into Bosnia, smashing Serbian forces to overrun roughly a third of the country and threatening the critical Serbian city of Banja Luka. In just three years, the Croats had become world-beaters.

More than anything else, it was the stunning transformation of the Croatian military forces and the equally stunning victories they achieved over the formerly-dominant Serbs that shut down the Bosnian civil war. What brought the Serbs to the negotiating table and convinced Milosevic and Karadzic that they had to agree to the Dayton Accords was the fear that the Croatian military forces were about to conquer the remainder of Bosnian Serb territory. In the words of the CIA's peerless, unclassified military history of the Balkan civil war, "A close look at the events of the time suggests that it was actually the combined [Croatian-Bosniak] ground offensive, rather than the NATO air campaign, which finally drove the Bosnian Serbs to sit down and negotiate a peace settlement. . . . Overwhelmed and rapidly losing territory to its combined opponents, the Republika Srpska was by mid-October on the verge of losing an even greater fraction of its land area and was in serious danger of losing the ability to defend Banja Luka itself. It was the stark reality of diminished land and power, and not the lightning bolts of the NATO air campaign, that really forced the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiating table at Dayton."¹⁶

¹⁶ Office of Russian and European Analysis, *Balkan Battlegrounds* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 2002), p. 396.

Too little is available in the unclassified literature to fully explain the transformation of the Croatian (and Bosniak) armed forces. However, enough is known to draw some analogies to the current situation in Syria. The Croats themselves made a determined effort to reform their military. They took this task seriously, devoted significant resources to it and did what needed to be done—including sacking incompetent commanders and promoting their best, even when it was politically difficult. But the Croats also had help. The United States and its NATO allies mounted a covert program to provide them with weapons, training, and eventually military leadership as well. Indeed, in 1994, Washington arranged for a group of former senior American military officers, working under the auspices of Military Professional Resources, Inc., to advise the Croatian armed forces. The evidence suggests that these experienced former American generals played a critical role in the planning and command of the war-winning Croatian-Bosniak offensives.

BUILDING A NEW SYRIAN ARMY

The success of American and NATO efforts to transform the Croatian military, coupled with lessons from other American covert military support campaigns, suggest that it would be entirely realistic for the United States to build a new Syrian opposition army. A force capable of defeating both the regime's residual armed forces and the militias of the various Islamist extremists, compel all of them to come to the negotiating table, and exert enough leverage to enable a diplomatic solution to the conflict by brokering a new power-sharing arrangement among the competing factions. Doing so will not be quick or easy, but the evidence suggests that it is entirely feasible.

Adopting such a strategy would mean first and foremost that Washington would have to commit itself

to building a new Syrian army that will rule Syria when the war is over. Although the President's description of his new Syria policy was more modest and tepid than his explanation of the Iraq piece of the strategy, he does appear to have committed the United States to just that course. More than that, it will mean putting the resources, prestige and credibility of the United States behind this effort. The \$500 million now appropriated is a good start, but it is only a down payment on a much larger project.

Everyone—both our allies and our adversaries—must believe that the United States is determined to see this succeed. It cannot have the tentative and half-hearted support of every prior initiative toward Syria since 2011, all of which doomed those efforts from the start.¹⁷ If the rest of the world believes that the United States is determined to see a strategy succeed, fewer will try to resist it and more will be willing to support it. This will mean both more money—to pay recruits, train them, support them and arm them properly—and more manpower, in the form of much larger numbers of American advisors to do the training and help guide the combat operations themselves, when those eventually get started.

The next step will be for the United States to begin recruiting Syrian soldiers. These recruits can come from anywhere, as long as they are Syrians and they are willing to fight, and to fight within the new system we would be building. However, everyone that joins must agree to integrate into the new Syrian army and follow its rules, its doctrine, its training. In particular, that will mean taking the individuals out of their pre-existing militias and re-assigning them to new Syrian army units without regard for religion, ethnicity, geographic origin or other social ties. The goal would be to break down all of the warring identity groups and build a new Syrian army around Syrian nationalism alone.

¹⁷ Frederick C. Hof, "Syria: Is There a Conscious Administration Strategy?" The Atlantic Council, April 16, 2014.

The ethos of the new Syrian army must be neutral and professional in the matter of ethno-sectarian divisions. This does not mean that it would insist that its members were “secular.” A great many of those recruited may well be religious, even highly religious, including Salafist. That is not the issue. In Iraq the United States trained a great many highly religious and even Salafist soldiers and officers who served ably and loyally in the ISF. It does mean, however, that all who join must be willing to act in a disinterested and professional manner. The new Army should have a code of conduct that would-be members must sign upon enlistment, and then would be held to throughout their service.

As soon as we recruit them, we would need to train them. That training needs to consist of a rigorous program of conventional military education and socialization. The recruits need to be integrated into a conventional military hierarchy. This would require a major shift in the current covert American training program, which has so far consisted of 4-6 weeks of weapons-handling and small unit tactics for any militiamen who want them.¹⁸

A revamped program should be a roughly year-long regimen beginning with basic training and progressing on to small unit tactics, basic logistics and life-support skills, followed by further training for specialized military skills. Some of the statements by senior Administration officials regarding the new Syria strategy seem to indicate that this will be the case, with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stating that the new Syrian opposition training program will last 8-12 months.¹⁹ As in any conventional army, this training should organize the soldiery into basic units subordinated to larger formations in a standard military hierarchy. It should also include additional training for those chosen for leadership.

The duration of the training will be critical to build the unit cohesion, discipline, soldiering skills, and leadership qualities that are the key to an effective conventional military. However, this lengthy period of training will also be important to allow American advisers and trainers to sort out the good from the bad—those soldiers and officers that can be trusted to fight for a new Syria as part of a new Syrian army, and those that cannot.

There is a common misperception that one “vets” personnel for such a force by running an individual’s name through various databases to see if it turns up any links to known terrorists or criminals. That accomplishes little. The right way to vet people is to train, work and fight with them day after day after day. Only then can you learn who are the good guys and who the bad.

That is what the U.S. military eventually learned in Iraq. It is the reason that the U.S. military was able to transform Iraq’s military between 2006 and 2008. During that period, as part of “the Surge,” American personnel worked in tandem with Iraqi units and saw which Iraqis were working for the militias and insurgents, which were criminals, which were determined patriots, and which ones were simply trying to survive. That allowed American military personnel to slowly weed out the bad seeds, promote the good ones, and create an incentive structure in which most Iraqi recruits would do the right thing. The same needs to happen with a new Syrian army, which would start off just as infested by militiamen, insurgents, regime agents, thugs and felons as its Iraqi counterpart.

For all of these reasons, building a new Syrian army is best not done in Syria itself. At least not at first. The program would need the time and sanctuary to perform the necessary training, re-organization, sorting and socialization into a new Syrian army

¹⁸ Greg Miller, “CIA Ramping Up Covert Training Program For Moderate Syrian Rebels,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2013.

¹⁹ David S. Cloud and W.J. Hennigan, “Airstrike list awaits Obama after Congress OKs Syria plan,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2014.

without the distractions and pressures of Syria itself. The Saudi offer to provide facilities to train 10,000 Syrian opposition fighters is one of reasonable possibility, although one of Syria's neighbors would probably be preferable. Jordan already serves as training ground for America's current training program and it would be an ideal locale to build a real Syrian army. However, Turkey could also conceivably serve that purpose if the Turks were willing.

If the administration ultimately eschews the Saudi offer in favor of one of Syria's neighbors, some horse trading may be required. Given how ardently the Turks and Jordanians have lobbied Washington to ramp up its support for the Syrian opposition, there is every reason to expect that either would be willing to host a nascent new Syrian army while it organizes and trains. However, both will want to be compensated for doing so, Jordan in particular. Amman receives about \$660 million in aid from the United States annually and in February 2014, President Obama pledged \$1 billion in loan guarantees to help Jordan bear the burden of Syrian refugees (and to host the current American covert military training program).²⁰ In addition, both Jordan and Turkey would likely seek American guarantees of support in the event that the Syrian regime and/or the Iranians retaliate against them with terrorist attacks.

Building a new Syrian army should not mean bolstering the existing "Free Syrian Army." Whatever the new force is called, it needs to be categorically different from that stillborn and ridiculed amalgam.²¹ If the commanders of the militias currently affiliated with the FSA were willing to submit themselves and their personnel to incorporation into the new Syrian army, that would be fine: but only if they are willing to become part of the new

organization on its terms. The militias would have to agree to be broken up, their personnel assigned to new formations, retrained in the methods and culture of a conventional army, and the bad apples removed.

In addition to being armed, trained and officered like a conventional military, a new Syrian army would also have to be equipped like one. That would mean not just small arms and crew-served weapons, such as the United States and its allies are already providing, but heavy weapons and logistical support. Like the Croats and Bosniaks, a new Syrian army will need the wherewithal to defeat both the regime and the Islamist extremists. That will require tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, surface-to-air missiles and the like to match the regime's own heavy weapons—and so eliminate the firepower imbalance that the regime's forces have employed to such advantage so far. It would also mean providing a new Syrian army with all of the communications equipment, transportation, medical gear and other supplies it will need to mount sustained offensive and defensive operations, something that neither side has really had during the civil war and a major reason why neither side has been able to generate more than local battlefield successes in a wider war of attrition.

As a final caveat on the creation of a new Syrian opposition, it is important to understand that while such a force obviously needs to be armed, arms are not its greatest need. What will matter most and what is most lacking among the "moderate" Syrian opposition groups today is not so much weapons as training, organization, doctrine and leadership. Without those critical components, no military can win. With them, even rudimentary weapons can become devastating.

²⁰ Mark Landler and Sarah Wheaton, "Obama Promises New Aid to Jordan in Refugee Crisis," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2014.

²¹ For two insightful commentaries on the fragmentation and infighting of the Syrian opposition see, Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, "The Rebel Alliance: Why Syria's Armed Opposition has Failed to Unify," Center for Naval Analysis, DRM-2013-U-004125-1REV, March 2013; Charles Lister, "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape," The Brookings Doha Center, May 2014.

PLAN OF BATTLE

At some point, such a new Syrian army would have to move into Syria, but only when it was ready. Only when a force large enough to conquer and hold territory—something on the order of two to three brigades—were ready should it be sent in. Again, initial statements by Obama Administration officials noting that they hope to start by training a force of roughly 5,000 Syrian oppositionists is very much in line with this projection.²² Moreover, being “ready” is critical. Only when the new Syrian army has developed the unit cohesion, tactical skills, leadership and logistical support to give it a high chance of defeating both the regime’s forces and those of the Islamist extremists should they be sent in. And when they go, they should go with a heavy U.S. advisory complement to further ensure success. The force needs to be seen as succeeding and, like the Croats in 1995 or the Taliban in 1994 for that matter, their victory needs to appear inevitable.

Once the forces of a new Syrian army had secured a chunk of Syrian territory, they could declare themselves to be a new, provisional Syrian government. Doing so would allow the United States (and our allies) to recognize that new government and expand our military, political and economic support to it.

Even after a new Syrian army took control of a chunk of Syria, it would have to keep growing. It would need to be built out to a force structure capable of smashing the regime’s army and any militias that challenged it, and eventually securing all of Syrian territory—a job that would ultimately require several hundred thousand personnel.²³ However, it is not the case that a new Syrian army could not or should not begin the task of securing the country and defeating the regime (and any other militias that tried to oppose it) until it can field that number. Quite the contrary. Moreover, not

all of those personnel need to be trained to the same standards, and many could be recruited and trained after the initial force had entered Syria or even after a ceasefire and a new power-sharing arrangement had been worked out.

Finally, and as a necessary part of declaring its newly-conquered territory “liberated” Syria, the new Syrian army would have to restore law and order; bring in international humanitarian organizations (and protect them) to feed and care for the populace; and establish a functional, egalitarian local political system to govern the liberated territory. The vast majority of Syrians want no part of the tyranny of the regime or the fanaticism of the Islamist extremists. As in every intercommunal civil war, they will most likely rally to any group that can provide them with security, the rule of law, and an equitable share of economic benefits and political rights. Consequently, a new Syrian army needs to be ready to care for civilians in whatever terrain it conquers right from the outset.

The lessons of other postwar experiences demonstrate that it is best that such a new political system grow from the bottom up. When imposed from the top down (as in Iraq in 2003) the outcome typically ranges from bad to catastrophic. But allowing the system and its new leaders to grow from the bottom up takes time. In the interim, the areas of Syria controlled by the new Syrian army will require a political authority to govern it. Ideally, this should be provided by a Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, who would govern and hold sovereignty until a properly constituted new Syrian government is ready.

At that point, when the new Syrian army had inflicted defeats and conquered territory from both the regime and from the Islamist extremists; when it was seen as administering those territories fairly,

²² Cloud and Hennigan, “Airstrike list awaits Obama after Congress OKs Syria plan,” op. cit.

²³ The canonical figure for securing a country is 20 security personnel per thousand of the population. Syria’s (remaining) population of 18 million therefore yields an ultimate requirement of 360,000 security personnel. James T. Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations,” *Parameters* (Winter 1995), pp. 56–69.

and as it became clear that the United States and its allies were not going to allow the new Syrian army to fail, more and more Syrians would likely flock to its banners. That would mean more recruits for its ranks, more informants for its intelligence wing, and more mouths to feed. However, it would also create a groundswell of momentum that can prove decisive in such a war. The same momentum carried the Croats to victory and ultimately made the Dayton Accords possible. Likewise, when the Taliban rolled into Afghanistan in 1994 (having been recruited, trained and armed by the Pakistanis) their superior morale, cohesiveness, and weapons skills, coupled with their commitment to creating orderly, albeit Islamist, governance created a similar snowball effect in their favor.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF A NEW SYRIAN MILITARY

One of the other baleful legacies of these kinds of civil wars is the difficulty in creating a stable political system when it finally ends. It should also be a requirement for greater American involvement in Syria. Building a strong, independent and apolitical new Syrian army is our best shot at solving this dilemma too. Historically, transitions from an intercommunal civil war to a peaceful, stable post-conflict state require a pluralist system with strong guarantees of minority rights.²⁴ Put simply, everyone has to believe that they will have a fair say in governance, no one group will be able to unfairly manipulate the government, and all will be safe from government oppression.

A strong, independent, apolitical military is therefore critical to such a system, and the best way to create such a military is to train it as one right from the start. It is a military's political (or institutional) culture that governs its political behavior, not laws or

the strength of any other institution.²⁵ A post-civil war Syria would need such a military culture to reassure all of its communities that whoever holds power in Damascus will not be able to use the military as an instrument of oppression against other groups. That is the kind of thing that can only be taught as part of a long-term process of military socialization.

It was also another lesson of Iraq. By 2009, the United States had succeeded in building a strong (in the context of Iraq), independent and apolitical military. In 2005-2006, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) had been a source of fear for most Iraqis. When ISF units moved into an area, local residents never knew if it was there to protect them, kill them or shake them down. By 2009, ISF units were welcomed, even sought after, across the country. In 2008, mostly Sunni units of the ISF were greeted as liberators by the Shi'a of Basra when they drove the Shi'a Jaysh al-Mahdi militia from southern Iraq.

However, Iraq holds another important warning. It is not enough just to build such a military, because ruthless politicians will fear its independence and will try to subvert it, politicize it and bend it to their will. That, of course, is precisely what Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki did to the ISF starting in 2009 as the United States began to disengage. By 2014, the Iraqi military had again become a sectarian force with few Sunni Arabs or Kurds. Instead it was feared by them (and by some Shi'a) as an instrument of Maliki's will. Consequently, it is not enough for the United States just to build such a military and help it win the Syrian civil war. If the United States wants to see Syria develop into a stable, new polity, we will have to continue to support and guide the Syrian military. That is the best chance that it would remain the kind of strong, independent, apolitical institution around which a pluralist Syrian political system could be built.

²⁴ Barbara Walter, "Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, forthcoming in print, available online at <http://jcr.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/03/30/0022002714528006.abstract>.

²⁵ Kenneth M. Pollack and Irena Sargsyan, "The Other Side of the COIN: The Perils of Premature Evacuation from Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2010), pp. 17-32.

KEY QUESTIONS

There are many reasons for skepticism with a proposal such as this one, and many questions. It is important to address them as best as the historical evidence allows, recognizing that there is a certain amount of uncertainty inherent in any military undertaking.

Can it Work? There is certainly no reason that it cannot and strong evidence that it can. Historically, the United States has made programs like this one work in a number of places, at a number of times. The Croatian example is the obvious one. It is particularly apt since the Bosnian Serbs were a fairly competent conventional force—far more formidable than the Syrian regime’s forces—whereas the Croats were hapless before 1994.

Iraq also furnishes a useful example. In 2006, the ISF were an unmitigated disaster: riven with sectarianism (including all manner of Salafists and other Islamists), riddled with corruption, and hopelessly incompetent. As in Syria, Iraqi militias fought one another as often as they fought their sectarian rivals, while the ISF was little more than a façade for militias and insurgents. By 2008, the United States had turned it into a professional, apolitical and semi-competent force. One that had gone from being its people’s bane to their benefactor. The Iraqi military of 2008 was hardly the Wehrmacht, but it was certainly capable of taking on any of Iraq’s internal security threats with less and less need for American support.

Many have pointed to the collapse of Iraqi forces in Northern Iraq in June 2014 to claim that the U.S. investment in Iraq’s armed forces during the Surge was a wasted effort. They dismiss the Iraqi military as hapless without American ground troops, and use that interpretation to dismiss the idea that the Syrian opposition could ever amount

to anything. These claims, however, badly misrepresent the history of Iraq’s military and the reasons for its failure in June 2014. First, the offensive by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) enjoyed three key advantages: tactical, if not strategic, surprise; tremendously high morale derived from its religious zeal; and a Sunni population that hated the sectarian Maliki government more than it feared ISIS. Meanwhile, the Iraqi forces in northern Iraq had been hollowed out by three years of Maliki’s relentless politicization. To secure the Iraqi military’s loyalty, Maliki had sacked huge numbers of the competent, apolitical Iraqi officers and replaced them with hacks dependent on him for their positions. Perhaps not surprisingly, Maliki’s incompetent loyalists effectively stopped training their forces, going so far as to close many of the training facilities built by the United States and used to train the ISF between 2006 and 2009. Maliki forced out many Sunni and Kurdish soldiers and officers, and used the increasingly Shi’a force as an instrument of repression against Iraq’s Sunni community. All of this demoralized what had once been a proud, professional force.

It should be little wonder then, that the remaining Sunnis and Kurds in the ISF refused to fight on Maliki’s behalf when ISIS attacked. Or that Maliki’s loyalist officers would desert their posts. Or that the under-trained Shi’a soldiery would then flee en masse when they were surprised by a determined and experienced foe and after they had been abandoned by their officers and their Sunni and Kurdish brothers-in-arms.²⁶

Vietnam provides another useful example of a pathetic indigenous force the United States turned into something far more competent. In 1968, at the end of the Westmoreland era, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the South’s military, was derided as politicized, corrupt and militarily useless.

²⁶ See Kenneth M. Pollack, “Iraq Situation Report,” June 14, 2014, available online at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/06/14-iraq-military-situation-pollack>.

Then Creighton Abrams took over and invested in rebuilding and reforming it. By 1971, the ARVN still faced many problems, but it had improved markedly. So much so that during the North's 1972 Easter Offensive, it was ARVN ground forces that stopped the North's invasion. They were backed by extensive American air power and advisory support, but nevertheless accomplished a feat that no one would have believed possible four years earlier. In the words of Andrew Wiest, one of the most balanced and thoughtful authors on this period, the fight against the Easter offensive, "Represented the ARVN at its best and served to vindicate the American war. Even without American ground support, the ARVN had fought long and well, aided by the remaining U.S. advisers and lavish use of air power. The Easter Offensive left many believing that the ARVN's future was bright."²⁷

In all of these prior cases, what appears to matter most is the willingness of the United States to commit itself to make the strategy work. Where and when we have done so—Bosnia, Iraq until 2011, South Vietnam, even South Korea—the result has been positive. Far more positive than the poor state of each of these armies suggested possible when we started. Of course, all of them also illustrate that unless that commitment is retained, even miraculous progress can be undone.

Moreover, both the Bosnia and Iraq cases illustrate an important point about how best to resolve an intercommunal civil war. In both of these cases, the United States built-up a force (the Croatian armed forces, the ISF) that was clearly well on its way to defeating all other forces in the country, but then was able to restrain those victorious armies to prevent them from finishing off their rivals. Defeat at the hands of the U.S.-backed force gave those rivals every incentive to compromise and accept a role in a new power-sharing arrangement, while American support for the victorious side ensured that they

did the same. That is also the only realistic path for Syria to reach peace and stability without massive further bloodshed.

Of course, no one should accept historical analogies as unimpeachable proof of the wisdom of similar actions in the case of Syria. There are always important differences. Croatia was a proto-state fighting another proto-state. The ISF benefitted from a massive American ground presence that went well beyond anything envisioned here for Syria. Despite its improved performance in 1973, the ARVN still collapsed without American air support in 1975. As always, there are never guarantees in war, but there is more than enough history to suggest that this approach is entirely plausible—and better than any other option for intervention.

How Long Will it Take? The history of similar operations in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya suggests that it would probably take 1-2 years to train the initial force of 2-3 brigades, at which point they would enter Syria, take control of some territory, begin to recruit and expand further with increased American assistance. It is then likely to take another 1-3 years for the new Syrian army to defeat both the regime's forces and those of any militias that choose to oppose it. Altogether, that suggests a campaign of two to five years.

At that point, the new Syrian army would have to reorganize into a traditional state security apparatus, and might still have to expand further to meet the needs of long-term security in Syria. It would doubtless have to continue to enforce security against residual terrorist elements on all sides, but these are far less demanding tasks—akin to those of Iraq in 2009-10 rather than Iraq in 2006-2008. Moreover, the United States would likely continue to contribute to Syrian security, economic and political reconstruction thereafter, albeit at reduced levels.

²⁷ Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York, NY: NY University Press, 2008), pp. 270-272.

Isn't that too long? Isn't it too late? In March 2005, I was invited to speak before a small group of senior former and serving U.S. government officials. The topic was Iraq and I was asked to present the strategy for Iraq I had been advocating since early 2004: a shift to a true population security strategy (often incorrectly referred to as a counterinsurgency, or COIN, strategy), an effort to reach out to the Sunni tribal leadership of western Iraq, an increase in U.S. forces to the extent feasible, and a bottom-up process of political reform to build a new power-sharing agreement among all of the different Iraqi factions.²⁸ After I made my presentation, this group of distinguished policy makers thanked me for my insights, but explained to me that what I was proposing probably would have worked had the United States started to implement it in 2003 or even 2004, but by early 2005 it was already too late to do so. Of course, what I was arguing for was precisely the strategy that General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker would employ in the Surge that began in early 2007, two years *after* many of the most eminent policy-makers in the land had dismissed it as too late.

In Vietnam in 1968 it was also widely believed that it was too late to turn the ARVN around. And yet Abrams and a dedicated team of Americans (and Vietnamese) did just that.

There is no reason to believe that would not be true for Syria too. Unfortunately, the Syrian civil war isn't going anywhere. It is unlikely to end anytime soon, although the increase in Russian and Iranian assistance since the fall of 2013 has certainly allowed

the regime to make important local gains. Nevertheless, the most likely case is that the regime's gains will prove limited and the additional assistance now flowing in from the opposition's backers is likely to stalemate them again at some point soon.

Of course, many tens of thousands of Syrians are likely to die in the 2-5 years it would take to make this strategy work, if it worked at all. Another version of the same question would be to ask whether we can, in good conscience take our time while Syria continues to burn. That is a tragic necessity of this approach. Unfortunately, there are no other alternatives. The only way to prevent those deaths would be for the United States to intervene with its own ground forces immediately. Since no American seems willing even to entertain that possibility, the strategy I have proposed here is the only realistic alternative. It may not save those Syrian lives, but it should save hundreds of thousands of others, lives that would be lost in the future if we continue with our current policy toward Syria, or adopt an alternative that might bring the regime down, but do nothing to prevent the civil war from rolling on without it.

How Much Will it Cost? Projecting the cost of this strategy is difficult. It depends on three key factors, all of which can vary widely. The first is the cost of building the new Syrian army itself—at first covertly, but then overtly once it has begun to occupy and secure territory inside Syria itself. The second is the extent of the American air campaign in support of the new Syrian opposition army. The last is the extent to which the United States could expect its allies to defray the costs of such an operation.

²⁸ For those interested, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "After Saddam: Assessing the Reconstruction of Iraq," Analysis Paper No. 1, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, January 7, 2004; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Securing Iraq," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 21, 2004; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Saving Iraq," in *The Road Ahead: Middle East Policy in the Bush Administration's Second Term*, edited by Flynt Leverett (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, March 2005); Kenneth M. Pollack, "Five Ways to Win Back Iraq," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2005, p. A19; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraq's Security," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 18, 2005; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Insurgent Dilemma: Finding the Right Strategies in Iraq," *The Berlin Journal*, No. 11 (Fall 2005), pp. 4-9; Kenneth M. Pollack and others, *A Switch in Time: A New Strategy for America in Iraq*, Analysis Paper Number 7, Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, February 2006; Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Right Way: Seven Steps Toward a Last Chance in Iraq," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 297, No. 2 (March 2006), pp. 104-111; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Saving Iraq," Testimony before the House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, July 11, 2006.

Recognizing the many uncertainties, a reasonable estimate of the costs for such a policy would be about \$1-2 billion per year to train, organize and equip the force itself, another \$6-19 billion per year for air support, and perhaps another \$1.5-2.75 billion per year for civilian aid.²⁹

These figures provide a range of estimates of total costs for such a campaign. They vary from about \$3 billion per year if no U.S. air power is required; to about \$9-10 billion if an air campaign on the scale of Bosnia, Afghanistan and Libya is required; to as much as \$20-22 billion per year if the United States has to make a considerably greater effort than in any of these other wars. By comparison, Afghanistan has cost the United States roughly \$45 billion per year and Iraq about \$100 billion per year.³⁰ (See the text box, “The Bean Count: A More Detailed Break Down of Costs,” for a more extensive explanation of the costs.)

It is likely that we could count on American allies in Europe, the Far East and especially the Persian Gulf to pay for much or even all of the costs. Many of the European states have loudly pledged their support to President Obama’s new campaign to destroy ISIS, although few have any clue how they might contribute. Suggesting that they chip in for the costs of building a new Syrian opposition army—one that actually has a real prospect of succeeding—could be an appealing way to harness these vague pledges. Regardless of what the Europeans do, it is America’s Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies who are the best candidates to shoulder much or all of the costs of this strategy. In private, senior Gulf officials have insisted for years that they would be willing to

foot the bill for most or all of such an effort, even including the use of American air power. In recent conversations, various Gulf interlocutors continue to insist that they would be glad to foot the bill for this strategy.

Moreover, it seems like a reasonable bet that they would make good on these pledges because they have done so on a number of occasions in the past. They bankrolled the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, U.S. operations in the 1991 Gulf War, NATO operations in Libya in 2011, and the civil war in Syria since 2011. Whenever the GCC states have had a direct interest in an American military campaign, they have paid handsomely for us to wage it.

There is no question that the GCC states see the outcome of the Syrian civil war as vital to their interests. While no one knows the exact amount the Gulf states have spent on various Syrian militias, it is believed to be well into the billions of dollars.³¹ It reflects the Gulf’s commitment to seeing the opposition win this war, a passion equally expressed by their constant demands that the United States increase its aid to the opposition armies to enable them to win—which invariably come with offers to pay for any American increase. Especially if we conclude that this approach would require the commitment of large-scale, direct American air power, we ought to seek the financial support of our allies in the Gulf, and there is every reason to believe that they would come through for us again.

What would the Russians and Iranians do? It will probably depend on what we do, and in particu-

²⁹ This estimate appears consistent with the figures that the U.S. government has already released for the cost of air operations in Iraq and Syria since August 2014. Of course, those figures lump together the costs of the operations in Iraq and Syria, whereas this paper is only concerned with the costs of the Syria elements of the strategy, to make the case for the most robust implementation of what the Obama Administration has outlined for Syria. See “News Transcript: Department of Defense Press Briefing By Rear Admiral Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” August 29, 2014, available at <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5496>.

³⁰ Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” Congressional Research Service, RL33110, March 29, 2011, p. 17.

³¹ See for instance, Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, “Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms,” *The Financial Times*, May 16, 2013.

lar, whether the United States provides air support. All other things being equal, both Iran and Russia would prefer to see the Asad regime win and have done a fair bit to make that happen. However, both Russia's interests and Iran's capabilities are limited in Syria. Neither will want to fight us directly. An American blockade and No-Fly Zone as part of an air campaign would strangle their ability to support the regime, and might be enough to cause both to cut their losses.

Nevertheless, in almost any circumstances, both may provide some degree of covert support to the regime, as the Iranians did to all manner of anti-U.S. groups in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as the Russians did across the Third World during the Cold War. They will certainly target American advisers working with the Syrians. The Iranians might encourage Hizballah to further augment its forces fighting for the regime. The Russians might try to hinder American actions in the Security Council, although in both Bosnia and Kosovo, when Washington made clear it would act without UN approval, the Russians became far more amenable and supportive—even going so far as to participate in the Bosnia peace-keeping mission after the Dayton Accords.

History suggests neither is likely to do much more than that if they believe that the United States is determined to see its policy through and will invest the necessary resources to do so. That is why the critical first step in adopting this policy option is to commit to it fully. Whenever the United States has done so, Russia and Iran have limited their own involvement to avoid a direct confrontation. In the case of Syria, there has long been evidence that both Moscow and Tehran would be willing to sell out the Asad regime if they ever concluded that the United States was ready to do whatever was necessary to oust it. In private, the Iranians have already said that their approach to Syria is not chained to personalities—meaning that they could imagine dumping Asad as they did Maliki if that became necessary to preserve their interests, which lie with

the Alawi Shi'a community and not necessarily with Asad himself. It is only because Washington has never demonstrated such a determination to bring down the regime that Russia and Iran have remained so recalcitrant and so potent.

Isn't There an Easier/Faster/Cheaper Way? No there really isn't. All of the proposed or conceivable alternatives fail to meet one or more of the requirements for expanded American involvement in Syria. Many also have a low likelihood of succeeding on their own terms, based on the historical evidence available. For better and worse, the United States needs to see a stable Syria emerge from the civil war. That will require a commitment not just to toppling the regime, bleeding Iran and/or driving out the Salafi terrorists, but to secure the country and build a functional political system to take its place. Like it or not, it means nation-building. Merely toppling the regime and then walking away, as we did in Afghanistan in 1989 and Libya in 2011 (and to a great extent in Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003 and again in 2011), will only produce the same kind of chaos and renewed civil war as it did in those instances.

IRAQ AND SYRIA

Since the fall of Mosul, the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars have become intermingled. Any strategy to deal with the one must also deal with the other. Compartmentalizing them would be foolish and dangerous as any strategy toward one devised in isolation would be likely not just to fail, but to backfire. President Obama implicitly recognized these essential facts in laying out a strategy to “degrade and defeat” ISIS that matches an effort to stabilize Iraq with a complementary effort to create a force that could defeat both the Asad regime and Syrian extremist groups and end the civil war there as well. It is absolutely critical that we remain committed to both parts of that strategy because neither is likely to be able to succeed and endure without the other.

At present, both because of the steps that Iraq's leaders have taken toward remedying its political ills and the military successes enjoyed by Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces backed by American air power, Iraq seems like the more hopeful front in this two-front war. That's a good sign given how much more important Iraq ultimately is to American interests. However, Iraq is hardly on the road to victory. Its progress could easily falter, especially given the deep divisions and mistrust among its different communities.

If that proves to be the case, and progress in Iraq is derailed, the best strategic fallback option would be to shift to a "Syria First" approach employing the same strategy outlined in this study. In this case, it would seek to stabilize Syria and deny ISIS and other Sunni militant groups a sanctuary there while simultaneously building a military force that moderate Sunnis in both states could rally behind—and which the United States could back for operations on both sides of the border. It would also mean finding ways to appeal to both moderate Shi'a and moderate Sunnis in Iraq, help them to defeat their own radicals and then convince them to make peace with one another—and ideally forge a new power-sharing arrangement that would preserve a relatively unified Iraq. (Or a relatively unified *Arab* Iraq since it is unlikely the Kurds will refrain from independence under conditions of all-out civil war in Arab Iraq.)

Why Use Syria as a Springboard to Iraq? Syria offers an important clarity lacking in current Iraq. If the current effort to broker a new, inclusive Iraqi government fails, the most likely scenario will be a prolonged, violent civil war in Iraq effectively merged with that in Syria. In those circumstances, in which Iraq is engulfed in full-scale civil war with no hope that political change in Baghdad could end the conflict, the United States will have a particularly problematic dilemma: we will have mixed feelings about both the Shi'a-dominated government and the Sunni-dominated opposition. We will hate

ISIS and the Sunni radicals, but not the Sunni tribes and moderates allied with them. We will hate the Shi'a radicals and mistrust their Iranian allies, but not the Shi'a moderates who will inevitably have to join their co-religionists. Supplying both sides in any civil war is a non-starter, but in Iraq those circumstances will make it (or *should* make it) impossible to decide which side to back.

In that one respect, Syria is much easier. There the United States unequivocally backs the Sunni-dominated opposition against the Shi'a-dominated regime.

Organizing, training and arming a new Syrian Army would create the best conditions for a stable Syria, which would eliminate the spillover into Iraq, including the ability of ISIS and other radical groups to employ Syria as a base and recruiting ground to support operations in Iraq. Moreover, it would create a moderate, non-partisan but largely Sunni force that could appeal to moderate Sunni tribesmen in Iraq. Indeed, a moderate, mostly Sunni, opposition army triumphing in Syria would be a tremendous draw for the Sunnis of Iraq—a model of what they might become if they rid themselves of ISIS.

The new Syrian army would also be a natural ally for moderate Sunni Iraqis in that fight. Many of them are tribesmen who both fear the Shi'a-dominated government and loathe Salafi Jihadists like ISIS. They are the key to defeating ISIS and its brethren in Iraq. With the Sunni tribes, it is possible to drive the radicals out, as the U.S. military and the tribes did in 2007-2008. Without them it will be impossible.

Finally, if the United States were to help create such a new model Syrian opposition army, one that could then serve as a conduit for American assistance to Iraqi Sunnis as well, Washington would be ideally placed to reach out to moderate Shi'a groups in Iraq. The defeat of the Asad regime in Syria would doubtless terrify many Iraqi Shi'a that the Syrian opposition army planned to turn on them as well.

As their trainers, advisors, paymasters, and weapons suppliers, the United States could then offer to rein in the new Syrian army and even to provide similar assistance to moderate Iraqi Shi'a groups to enable them to defeat their own radicals. If they accepted, and they would have strong incentives to do so, they too would be beholden to the United States, creating the best circumstances possible for the United States to broker a deal between the moderate Sunnis and the moderate Shi'a (of both Iraq and Syria).

Thus, if Washington hopes to bring these twinned civil wars to an end before hundreds of thousands more die and the region is further destabilized, doing so requires building a new Syrian opposition army—whether Iraq continues to move down the right track or not. Such an army, fighting both the Asad regime and the Salafi jihadists, can serve as a model for and a conduit to the moderate Sunnis of Iraq. The more that the United States is seen supporting the Syrian brothers of those Iraqi tribes, and seen building the kind of inclusive, pluralist and equitable state in Syria that the moderate Sunnis seek in Iraq, the more likely that the United States can turn moderate Sunni Iraqis against ISIS and its ilk.

LOOKING FORWARD TO LOOKING BACK

At some point in the future, Syria may look better in the past than it did today. Some day, we may

know whether it was right to intervene or not. But we do not know the future. We can only use the lessons of the past to guide our actions in the present, in spite of the excruciating imperfection of our knowledge. The difficulty is that in the case of Syria, our choices are so stark.

That conundrum plagues all of our decisions about Syria. If the Obama Administration backs away from its new commitment to a more active involvement in Syria (and Iraq), we cannot be certain that the spillover will continue to threaten our vital interests in a way that will make us wish we had intervened more decisively before then, meaning today. Nor if the Administration hews to its new path can we know for certain that the spillover would not have abated had we done nothing, making all of it unnecessary. Most of all, we cannot know today whether the decision to build a new, capable Syrian opposition army will succeed.

Yet whatever choice we make, we should not make it in the mistaken belief that there is no plausible strategy for victory that still falls within the scope of American latitude. The Obama Administration seems, finally, to have recognized this reality and chosen to pursue the only strategically viable course. Let us hope that it succeeds.

THE BEAN COUNT: A MORE DETAILED BREAKDOWN OF COSTS

Even estimating the costs for this strategy is difficult. There are a variety of different components to it, and each of those components could vary widely based on assumptions that will remain impossible to know for certain until the United States embraces the policy and puts it into action. Nevertheless, it is important to provide at least an approximate estimate of the cost because it will inevitably play a major role in debating whether to adopt this, or any other, strategy for Syria.

Building a new Syrian Army. The uncertainty starts with the most basic element of the strategy: building a new opposition army. There are few unclassified figures for the cost of similar kinds of operations. The Croats spent \$1 billion on weapons in 1994 and presumably a comparable number in 1995, along with \$100,000 in overt U.S. military assistance.³⁵ There are no figures—not even estimates—of how much the United States or other countries might have provided covertly.

The closest recent analogy for which unclassified figures are available is probably the American effort to build a new Iraqi military, especially after the dramatic shift in that program starting in 2006 as part of the Surge. At that point, the United States stopped trying to build a new Iraqi military quickly and cheaply, and instead made a long-term investment in doing it right. The products of that effort were a critical but often-overlooked element of the success of the Surge. The United States spent roughly \$24 billion on the Iraqi Security Forces between 2003 and 2011—roughly \$3 billion per year, and only \$1 billion per year after FY 2008. If one includes only Fiscal Years 2007-2011 (the years that the United States was actually handling the rebuilding of the ISF properly, along the lines of this

strategy), the total was \$12.6 billion (or an average of \$2.5 billion per year).³⁶

Of course, there are some important differences between the two countries. On the one hand, Iraq is a larger country than Syria (30 million vs. about 18 million people), requiring more troops to secure it than Syria. On the other hand, especially in later years, Iraq was able to pay for much of the cost of its security forces on its own from its oil wealth, something a new Syrian army would lack. Using Iraq to give some sense of scale, it suggests that \$1-3 billion would be needed per year until the new Syrian army had secured the country.

An Air Campaign. The biggest cost by far will be the extent of American air support. The less that a new Syrian opposition army is able to do, the more that will be required of American air forces to ensure its victory.

Three recent American military operations provide some insight into the costs of such an effort: the U.S. air campaigns in support of indigenous ground forces in Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011. In Kosovo, NATO faced a far more formidable foe in the Serbian armed forces than the remnants of the Syrian regime would pose, but in that war NATO was supporting a far weaker indigenous force in the Kosovar Liberation Army than the proposed new Syrian Army. Not surprisingly, the mission failed. In Afghanistan, the foe (the Taliban) was weaker than the current Syrian regime, and America's indigenous ally (the Northern Alliance) was fairly strong, albeit not as strong as the proposed new Syrian Army should be. That operation succeeded. Finally, in Libya, both the foe (the remnants of Qadhafi's military) and NATO's

³⁵ Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 107; Roger Cohen, "U.S. Cooling Ties to Croatia After Winking at Its Buildup," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1995.

³⁶ Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Congressional Research Service, RL33110, March 29, 2011, pp. 17, 29-30.

indigenous ally (the Libyan opposition) were weaker than their Syrian analogues, and again the United States succeeded.

Those balances of forces are largely what drove the scope of the air campaigns that accompanied them. In Kosovo in 1999, NATO flew 38,004 sorties (including 19,484 strike sorties) over 78 days, for an average of 487 sorties per day. In Afghanistan, during the initial 85 days it took to bring down the Taliban in 2001, the United States and its Coalition allies flew 18,957 sorties (7,017 of them strike sorties), for an average of 223 sorties per day. The lower number reflects both the lesser competence of the foe and improvements in American air power. By 2011, when NATO helped engineer the triumph of the Libyan opposition over what was left of Qadhafi's army, it took 26,500 sorties (including 9,700 strike sorties) over 220 days, for an average of just 120 sorties per day, again reflecting the further weakness of the foe and further increases in air power.

To get a sense of what an air campaign in support of a new Syrian army might cost, the best analogue

are the expenditures, on a per sortie basis, for these other conflicts. Generating average costs per sortie requires slightly different numbers because we do not have figures for all NATO expenditures in any of these wars, only figures for American expenditures. Those figures are shown in the table below.

An example of a less-demanding air campaign is the no-fly zones over Iraq from 1991-2003. These averaged roughly 30,000 sorties and \$1 billion per year, yielding a cost per sortie figure of \$33,000. However, only a very small number of these sorties engaged in combat of any kind. Thus, they are useful to understand how much less routine, non-combat sorties in a combat zone cost, but are very much at the low end of the cost spectrum because an air campaign to assist a new Syrian opposition army would doubtless require far more combat sorties annually than was the case for the two Iraq no-fly zones.³⁷

It is important to note that these figures actually overstate the costs of each air campaign because the costs represent the *total* costs of the operation. So they include the costs of any U.S. ground forces

RECENT U.S. AIR OPERATIONS IN SUPPORT OF INDIGENOUS GROUND FORCES

Operation	Sorties Flown (Strike Sorties)	Days	Sorties per Day	Cost (in billions of 2014 dollars)	Cost per sortie	Cost per Day (in millions of 2014 dollars)
U.S. in Kosovo, 1999	30,018 (10,000)	78	385	\$2.85	\$95,000	\$36.5
U.S. in Afghanistan, 2001	18,957 (7,017)	85	223	\$5.0	\$264,000	\$22.4
U.S. in Libya, 2011	6,522 (1,673)	125	52	\$1.16	\$178,000	\$9.3
Simple Averages					\$179,000	\$68.2

Sources: Steve Bowman, "Kosovo and Macedonia: U.S. and Allied Military Operations," Congressional Research Service, Issue Brief 100027, July 8, 2003, p. 4; Christopher Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Anthony H. Cordesman, "Air Combat Trends in the Afghan and Iraq Wars," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2008); defenceWeb, "War in Libya Cost United States \$896 million," 24 August 2011; Amy McCullough, "The Libya Mission," *Air Force Magazine*, Vol. 94, No. 8 (August 2011); U.S. Department of the Air Force, "U.S. Air Force Fact Sheet: Operation Allied Force," August 23, 2012, p. 21.

³⁷ Alexander Benard, "Lessons from Iraq and Bosnia on the Theory and Practice of No-Fly Zones," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.27, No.3 (September 2004), pp.454 – 478.

involved, any humanitarian assistance provided, any counterterrorism operations, etc. Of greatest importance, they probably include the costs of the covert support to the indigenous opposition force, numbers which come from the intelligence budget but are buried in the Department of Defense budget to keep them secret. Consequently, it might be double-counting to add expenditures for the training and equipping of the new Syrian Army on top of these costs for an air campaign, since the historical figures we have probably include comparative numbers for the same kind of program. Finally, as Michael O’Hanlon has noted, the buried costs of arming and supporting the indigenous forces might itself be high for a Syria contingency because they rely on Iraq and Croatia as models—both instances where the combatants were heavily armed. Syria might require assistance more along the lines of that which the United States provided to Nicaraguan or Afghan rebels in the 1980s which, even adjusted for inflation were considerably cheaper than the Balkan and Iraqi experiences.³⁸

On the other hand, all of these campaigns represent relatively brief periods of intense combat operations. American air operations in support of a new Syrian Army’s campaign to secure Syria would probably take longer, but would have both periods of intense combat as well as lulls when much less air support would be needed. As an example, in Afghanistan in 2003-2005, the fighting was more desultory than in 2001 (or than it would become again starting in 2006) and as a result, the United States averaged only 40-60 sorties per day. If we assume that U.S. air operations in Syria will average

about 100 sorties per day—roughly 50 per day on quiet days, spiking to about 200 during intense battles—then an air commitment would cost the United States roughly \$6.5 billion per year. If they are more demanding than that, averaging roughly 200 sorties per day, then the annual cost would amount to \$13 billion. Although it is hard to imagine circumstances in which U.S. air operations over Syria averaged 300 sorties per day over the course of a year, that would cost \$19.5 billion.

Non-Lethal Aid. Finally, there is the cost of all of the aid to Syrian civilians, the repair of infrastructure, and the establishment of a new political system. Once again, America’s recent experiences with nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan provide the closest analogies. In Afghanistan, from 2001 to 2011, the United States spent \$25 billion on all forms of non-lethal aid—including the costs of running the programs and diplomatic missions themselves. That is a yearly average of \$2.5 billion. In Iraq, from 2003-2011, the United States spent \$41.4 billion on the same categories.³⁹ That is an average of \$4.6 billion per year. The (residual) Syrian population is about 60 percent of that of either Iraq or Afghanistan—both of which boast roughly 30 million, as opposed to an estimated 18 million Syrians. Using this population ratio, if we assume that Syria will only require 60 percent of what Afghanistan and Iraq required, that amounts to an annual average of \$1.5-2.75 billion per year for non-lethal assistance (beginning only after a new Syrian Army had moved back into Syria).

The Bottom Line. Added to the costs of building the new Syrian Army itself, these estimates suggest

³⁸ Michael E. O’Hanlon, correspondence with the author, September 4, 2014.

³⁹ Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” Congressional Research Service, RL33110, March 29, 2011, p. 17. For these figures, I have simply used the expenditures for State/USAID. I see this as a reasonable approximation for the actual costs. On the negative side, it does not include DoD assistance including CERP money, which was very important in Iraq and Afghanistan and probably reflect a necessary component of spending for a Syrian campaign. On the other hand, these numbers do include the cost of the Embassies and consulates and their security requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were also very expensive but would not have analogues in the Syrian example. I suspect that, in the net, these figures are close to the reality, and they are certainly the best available.

a total annual price tag of anywhere from \$3 billion to about \$22 billion per year, with the size of the air campaign furnishing the greatest variable. For comparison, Afghanistan has cost the United States roughly \$45 billion per year since 2001 and Iraq cost about \$100 billion per year between 2003 and 2011.

Of course, it is important to note that the costs would probably ebb and flow from year to year. They would probably start out low since the only cost would be the covert training, organizing and equipping of the initial contingent of the new Syrian army. Over time, the price tag would grow as the force grew, as it occupied Syrian territory (necessitating non-lethal aid as well) and as U.S. air power were called on to support its operations. Historically, however, air campaigns typically start out very

intense and then taper off to reduced levels as the initial resistance is broken. One reasonable scenario would see the United States spend about \$1 billion in the first year (purely to build the initial cadre of the new Syrian Army), as much as \$18 billion in the second year after the force moves into Syria under a fairly intense U.S. air campaign and continues to expand, dropping to about \$11 billion the next year as the requirements for air power recede and civilian costs climb, and then stabilizing at about \$8 billion per year after that (mostly for security and civilian assistance with some modest air support). That scenario yields an average of \$9 billion per year for 5 years. Of course other scenarios, with higher or lower or comparable costs are easy to generate.

TIMELINE: THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD SYRIA, 2011-2014 by Jennifer Williams and Sarah Collins

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
January 2011	<p>January 28: In the northeastern Syrian city of Al-Hasakah, Hasan Ali Akleh sets himself on fire to protest against the Syrian regime in a manner reminiscent of a similar act by Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, which was seen by many as the spark that ignited the Arab Spring¹</p>	
March 2011	<p>March 6: Schoolchildren are arrested for writing pro-democracy graffiti messages on a wall in Daraa; their arrest prompts massive demonstrations and is seen by many as the beginning of the uprising²</p> <p>March 15: Day of Rage protests held in Daraa³</p> <p>March 23: More than 100 killed by security forces in crackdown on anti-government protesters in Daraa⁴</p> <p>March 25: Day of Dignity protests held in at least a dozen cities across Syria; demonstrations are met with violence from Syrian security forces⁵</p> <p>March 29: Asad accepts the resignation of his entire cabinet in a symbolic concession to protesters⁶</p>	<p>March 24: The Obama administration issues a statement “strongly condemn[ing] the Syrian government’s brutal repression of demonstrations” and calling on the Syrian government “to exercise restraint and respect the rights of its people” and for “all citizens to exercise their rights peacefully”⁷</p> <p>March 27: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in an interview on CBS’s “Face the Nation,” states that “Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he’s a reformer;” two days later, she clarifies that she was talking about other people, not including herself⁸</p>
April 2011	<p>April 4: Asad issues legislative decree to form a new government⁹</p> <p>April 7: Asad issues decree granting Syrian nationality to Kurds living in Syria’s eastern Hasaka region¹⁰</p> <p>April 16: Asad, in a speech to his new cabinet, promises to implement reforms in an attempt to placate demonstrators, including ending emergency laws, building a more “humble” government, and taking action to address unemployment¹¹</p> <p>April 19: Asad ends the “emergency rule” that had been in place in Syria since his father enacted it in 1963¹²</p> <p>April 25: Syrian regime troops lay siege to Daraa; siege lasts 11 days¹³</p>	<p>April 8: Obama calls on Asad to halt the “abhorrent violence committed against peaceful protesters”¹⁴</p> <p>April 22: Obama condemns use of force against demonstrators and calls on Asad to “change course now”¹⁵</p> <p>April 29: Obama issues an executive order “Blocking Property of Certain Persons With Respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria;” the three individuals specifically named in the order are the Brigade Commander of the Syrian Army’s Fourth Armored Division, the director of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, and the former head of the Syrian Political Security Directorate for Daraa Province; the two entities specifically named are the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force¹⁶</p>
May 2011	<p>May 7-29: Syrian military and security forces conduct raids on multiple cities including Homs, Baniyas, Damascus, Moadamiya, Talbiseh, Rastan, and Daraa¹⁷</p>	<p>May 18: Obama increases sanctions “Blocking property of senior officials of the government of Syria” (Bashar al-Asad, VP, PM, Minister of Interior, Minister of Defense, Head of Intelligence, Director of Political Security Directorate)¹⁸</p>
June 2011	<p>June 12: Syrian armed forces take control of northwestern Syrian town of Jisr al-Shughour as thousands of its residents flee into neighboring Turkey; over the next week, more than 12,000 people flee over the Turkish border¹⁹</p>	<p>June 11: The White House issues a statement saying that the Syrian regime’s offensive in northern Syria has created a humanitarian crisis and calls on the Syrian government to stop the violence and allow the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) “immediate, unfettered access to this region” to address the humanitarian crisis²⁰</p>
July 2011	<p>July 1: Hundreds of thousands of people take part in protests against the Asad regime in cities across Syria²¹</p> <p>July 8: Some 500,000 people demonstrate in Hama against the Asad regime²²</p>	<p>July 1: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking during a visit to Lithuania, warns that time is running out for the Syrian regime to usher in reforms and says that Asad will face more organized resistance to his rule unless the country sees “a genuine transition to democracy”²⁴</p>

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
July 2011 <i>(continued)</i>	July 29: Seven officers who defected from the Syrian army announce the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in a video released on the Internet ²³	July 8: Robert Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, makes an unannounced visit to Hama; he does not meet with opposition leaders in the city, but is seen driving through the streets among the demonstrators in a deliberate show of solidarity with the protesters ²⁵ July 12: Obama sharpens rhetoric against Asad, saying the Syrian president has “lost legitimacy” for failing to lead a democratic transition ²⁶
August 2011	August 3: Asad issues legislative decree scheduling elections for February 2012 ²⁷ August 23: The Syrian National Council is formed in Istanbul and declares itself the official representative of the Syrian opposition ²⁸	August 11: Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan speak in a telephone conversation about the violence in Syria and the need for a transition to democracy ²⁹ August 17: Obama signs an executive order that blocks the property of the government of Syria, bans U.S. persons from new investments in or exporting services to Syria, and bans U.S. imports of, and other transactions or dealings in, Syrian-origin petroleum or petroleum products ³⁰ August 18: Obama calls for Asad to step aside: “We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.” ³¹
October 2011	October 4: Russia and China veto a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution condemning the Syrian government for its actions against the opposition ³²	October 24: The United States pulls its ambassador, Robert Ford, out of Syria over threats to his safety ³³
November 2011	November 12: Arab League suspends Syria’s membership ³⁴ November 15-16: FSA attacks Syrian air force intelligence bases in Aleppo and Damascus, demonstrating the growing strength of the FSA and raising its profile in Syria ³⁵ November 22: UN General Assembly’s Human Rights Committee votes in favor of a resolution condemning the Syrian government’s prolonged crackdown against protesters ³⁶ November 27: Arab League agrees to impose economic sanctions on Syria ³⁷	November 12: Obama issues a statement praising the Arab League’s decision to suspend Syria’s membership and says that the United States “will continue to work with our friends and allies to pressure the Assad regime and support the Syrian people as they pursue the dignity and transition to democracy that they deserve” ³⁸
December 2011	December 19: Syria signs Arab League peace plan, agreeing to let observers into the country with the aim of bringing an end to the violence ³⁹ December 23: Back-to-back car bombs near Syria’s intelligence agencies in Damascus kill at least 44 in the first major attack in the capital ⁴⁰ December 27: 70,000 people protest against Asad regime in Homs as Arab League peace monitors visit ⁴¹	December 6: The U.S. State Department announces that the U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, will be returning to Syria ⁴² December 21: The Obama administration issues a statement declaring that “the only way to bring about the change that the Syrian people deserve is for Bashar al-Assad to leave power” and that “neither the international community nor the Syrian people accept his legitimacy” ⁴³
January 2012	January 10: Asad declares he will not stand down and vows to restore order by “hitting terrorists with an iron fist” ⁴⁴ January 28: Arab League suspends its monitoring mission in Syria citing “the critical deterioration of the situation in Syria and the continued use of violence” ⁴⁵	

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
February 2012	<p>February 4: Asad regime shells Homs, killing at least 300 people;⁴⁶ Russia and China veto a UNSC resolution calling for Asad to step down⁴⁷</p> <p>February 23: A UN panel concludes that “gross human rights violations” had been ordered by the Syrian authorities as a matter of state policy, amounting to crimes against humanity⁴⁸</p>	<p>February 4: Obama issues a statement in which he “strongly condemn[s] the Syrian government’s unspeakable assault against the people of Homs” and states that “Assad must halt his campaign of killing and crimes against his own people now. He must step aside and allow a democratic transition to proceed immediately;”⁴⁹ the UNSC rejects a U.S.-led resolution backing a democratic transition in Syria due to opposition from Russia and China⁵⁰</p> <p>February 6: The U.S. closes its embassy in Syria and brings its ambassador home⁵¹</p> <p>February 8: Senators John McCain (R-AZ.), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Joe Lieberman (I-CT) say the Obama administration should consider providing arms for the Syrian opposition⁵²</p> <p>February 24: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attends the first meeting of the “Friends of Syria” group in Tunis; the group works with the SNC discussing humanitarian efforts but does not yet officially recognize the SNC as the rightful opposition⁵³</p>
March 2012	<p>March 1: FSA and other rebel forces withdraw from the Baba Amr district of Homs; the U.K. closes its embassy in Damascus; the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) forms a military bureau to organize and unify the armed resistance to the Asad regime; the UN Human Rights Council votes in favor of a resolution condemning “widespread and systematic violations” in Syria; UN Secretary-General Nabil el-Araby raises possibility of arming rebel forces in Syria if international community fails to end the violence⁵⁴</p> <p>March 15: Thousands rally in Damascus in support of Asad⁵⁵</p> <p>March 21: The UNSC adopts a statement backing UN-Arab League peace envoy Kofi Annan’s peace plan for bringing an end to the violence in Syria⁵⁶</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 33,945 Residents in Homs first to depart: Turkey: 18,306 Jordan: 6,529 Lebanon: 8,594 Iraq: 360 Egypt 156⁵⁷</p>	<p>March 1: Senator John Kerry, speaking as Chair to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting on the Syrian crisis, states, “This is not Libya, this is not Egypt, this is not Tunis, this is a far more complicated and difficult proposition.”⁵⁸</p> <p>March 5: Senator John McCain calls for U.S.-led airstrikes in Syria to create safe zones for the opposition; he is the first U.S. lawmaker to call for U.S. military action in the Syrian conflict⁵⁹</p>
April 2012	<p>April 1: SNC announces that the opposition will be paid salaries for their actions against the regime and soldiers who defect from the Syrian army will be given money⁶⁰</p> <p>April 10: Syria fails to meet deadline to withdraw troops from residential areas as arranged under Kofi Annan’s peace plan⁶¹</p> <p>April 12: UN-brokered cease-fire goes into effect, but breaks down almost immediately⁶²</p>	<p>April 1: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attends the second meeting of Friends of Syria; at the meeting, they recognize the SNC as the “legitimate opposition”⁶³</p> <p>April 23: Obama signs an executive order implementing new sanctions targeting Internet repression in Iran and Syria; the measures freeze assets of foreign companies that help deny free communication via the Internet in Iran and Syria—the sanctioned entities, four Iranian and two Syrian, include the intelligence ministries of both countries and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)⁶⁴</p>

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
May 2012	<p>May 7: Syria elects a new parliament; the opposition boycotts the elections and Asad's Ba'ath party wins 90% of the parliamentary seats⁶⁵</p> <p>May 27: Over 90 people, including at least 32 children under the age of 10, are killed in a regime attack on the Syrian village of Houla⁶⁶</p>	<p>May 1: Obama increases sanctions to "Prohibiting certain transactions with and suspending entry into the United States of foreign sanctions evaders with respect to Iran and Syria"⁶⁷</p> <p>May 18: G8 leaders at Camp David discuss the need for political transition in Syria⁶⁸</p> <p>May 27: Presumptive GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney calls on Obama to begin providing arms to Syrian rebels⁶⁹</p> <p>May 29: The United States joins 10 other nations to expel top Syrian diplomats in response to the Houla massacre⁷⁰</p>
June 2012	<p>June 6: Asad appoints a new prime minister, Riyad Hijab, to form a new government following the May 7 elections⁷¹</p> <p>June 12: UN official Herve Ladsous calls Syria conflict a "civil war," marking the first time a UN official has voiced that view⁷²</p> <p>June 16: The UN suspends its mission in Syria⁷³</p> <p>June 27: Asad declares Syria is "in a state of war"⁷⁴</p>	<p>June 18: Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Mexico agree the violence in Syria must end but show no signs of reaching a deal on tougher sanctions against Damascus⁷⁵</p> <p>June 22: U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta defends the administration's decision not to arm the Syrian rebels against criticism by some Republicans in Congress⁷⁶</p> <p>June 30: UNSC members meet in Geneva to discuss Syria; Russia and China continue to block intervention;⁷⁷ the UN-backed Action Group for Syria issues the "Geneva Communiqué" outlining the key elements required in any future political settlement on Syria⁷⁸</p>
July 2012	<p>July 1: Human Rights Watch first reports Jordan's border pushbacks and forced return of Palestinian refugees trying to flee Syria⁷⁹</p> <p>July 12: Massacre in Syrian village of Tresmeh leaves some 100-200 people dead⁸⁰</p> <p>July 15: The International Red Cross formally declares the Syrian conflict a civil war, a status with implications for potential war crimes prosecutions⁸¹</p> <p>July 18: The FSA bombs the National Security building in Damascus, killing top members of Asad's regime⁸²</p>	<p>July 13: Reports indicate the Asad regime is moving its stockpiles of chemical weapons, including sarin gas; Pentagon press secretary George Little says the use of chemical weapons would "cross a serious red line," which appears to be the first time an administration official has publicly stated that using chemical weapons is a "red line"⁸³</p> <p>July 16: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tells CBS that the U.S. has done "everything we can do and will continue to do everything possible to bring this terrible situation [in Syria] to as early an end as possible"⁸⁴</p> <p>July 19: U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice calls the Russian and Chinese vetoes of a UNSC resolution on Syria "dangerous and deplorable"⁸⁵</p> <p>July 23: Obama warns that the Asad regime will be "held accountable" if it uses chemical weapons; the same day, a Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman says that no chemical weapons will be used against Syrians, but he suggests they might be used against "external aggression"⁸⁶</p>
August 2012	<p>August 2: UN-League of Arab States Joint Special Envoy for Syria, Annan, resigns⁸⁷</p> <p>August 6: Syrian Prime Minister Riyad Hijab defects to Jordan; it is the highest profile defection since the uprising began⁸⁸</p> <p>August 15: A UN report accuses both the Syrian government and opposition forces of having committed war crimes and crimes against humanity⁸⁹</p>	<p>August 1: Reuters, citing unnamed U.S. sources, reports that Obama has signed a secret order authorizing U.S. support for rebels in Syria⁹³</p> <p>August 11: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says in Istanbul that it's clear to the Asad regime the use of chemical weapons is "a red line for the world"⁹⁴</p>

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
August 2012 <i>(continued)</i>	<p>August 17: Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi is named the new UN-Arab League envoy to Syria⁹⁰</p> <p>Mid-August: Senior officials in Baghdad, citing security concerns, order the al-Qa'im border crossing between Iraq and Syria closed⁹¹</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 461,422 Large exodus from Damascus and northern Aleppo province Turkey 80,410 Jordan 72,402 Lebanon 57,482 Iraq 18,682⁹²</p>	<p>August 20: Obama warns Syria against employing chemical warfare against the Syrian opposition, stating that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized” and that there would be “enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly.”⁹⁵</p>
September 2012	<p>September 18: The al-Qa'im border crossing between Syria and Iraq is re-opened⁹⁶</p>	
October 2012	<p>October 16: UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi calls for a ceasefire in Syria; the ceasefire is broken within hours of going into effect⁹⁷</p>	
November 2012	<p>November 11: The Syrian National Coalition for Opposition is created⁹⁸</p>	<p>November 29: U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford states that “a military solution is not the best way for Syria” and that “efforts to win this by conquering one side or another will simply prolong the violence and aggravate an already terrible humanitarian situation”⁹⁹</p>
December 2012	<p>December 11-23: Syrian rebels capture several key military bases in Aleppo¹⁰⁰</p> <p>December 21: Thousands of Sunnis take to the streets in Fallujah, Iraq, to protest against the Shi'a-dominated government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki following a raid by Iraqi security forces on the office and home of the Sunni finance minister, Rafie al-Issawi, and the arrest of 10 bodyguards¹⁰¹</p> <p>December 28: In what is termed the “Friday of Honor,” tens of thousands of Iraqis take to the streets in Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi, Tikrit, and Samarra, to denounce the sidelining of Sunnis by the Maliki regime and calling for the release of Sunni prisoners¹⁰²</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 577,222 Lebanon 175,042 Jordan 167,959 Turkey 148,441 Iraq 67,720 Egypt 13,001 North Africa 5,059¹⁰³</p>	<p>December 3: In a speech at National Defense University, Obama again warns Asad over chemical weapons, stating “If you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences, and you will be held accountable;”¹⁰⁴ that same day, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tells reporters in Prague that the U.S. is “planning to take action” if the Asad regime launches a chemical attack¹⁰⁵</p> <p>December 7: There are reports that the Pentagon is drafting plans for a preemptive strike against Asad's forces over concerns about the country's chemical weapons stockpiles¹⁰⁶</p> <p>December 11: The Obama administration recognizes the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the official opposition and designates Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorists; at a meeting of the Friends of Syria in Morocco that same day, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns announces an additional \$14 million in U.S. humanitarian aid to the Syrian people¹⁰⁷</p> <p>December 12: Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns announces that the U.S. is providing \$14 million in additional humanitarian assistance to Syrians for nutritional support for children and emergency medical and winterization supplies, bringing the total aid the U.S. has provided to the roughly 2 million displaced Syrians to \$210 million¹⁰⁸</p>
January 2013	<p>January 6: In a globally televised speech, Asad reiterates that he has no intention of stepping down despite calls for him to do so from the international community and will also not make a deal with the rebels¹⁰⁹</p> <p>January 16: Pro-Asad forces attack University of Aleppo, killing over 80 and wounding over 150; UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon calls the attack a war crime¹¹⁰</p> <p>January 29: 65 people found dead in Aleppo as a result of execution-style killings¹¹¹</p>	

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February 2013	<p>February 21: At least three car bombs explode in Damascus, including a powerful blast near the downtown headquarters of Asad's governing party and the Russian embassy¹¹²</p> <p>February 25: <i>The New York Times</i> reports that Saudi Arabia has financed a large purchase of infantry weapons from Croatia and quietly funneled them to anti-government fighters in Syria¹¹³</p>	<p>February 2: <i>The New York Times</i> reports that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former CIA Director David Petraeus had crafted a plan in the summer of 2012 to provide vetted rebel groups with lethal arms and training, but the White House, in the midst of Obama's re-election bid, rejected the proposal¹¹⁴</p> <p>February 7: Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Martin Dempsey tell a congressional panel that they agreed with the plan proposed by Clinton and Petraeus to provide arms to rebel groups; after the hearing, John McCain states: "What this means is that the president overruled the senior leaders of his own national security team, who were in unanimous agreement that America needs to take greater action to change the military balance of power in Syria"¹¹⁵</p>
March 2013	<p>March 18: Lebanese and U.S. officials say Syrian aircraft strike inside Lebanon for the first time, hitting targets near the Sunni town of Arsal; the Asad regime denies responsibility¹¹⁶</p> <p>March 26: The Arab League grants Syria's seat in the organization to the Syrian National Coalition¹¹⁷</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 1,240,790 Lebanon 398,478 Jordan 398,961 Turkey 261,635 Iraq 124,253 Egypt 47,798 North Africa 9,665¹¹⁸</p>	<p>March 18: Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin (D-MI) breaks with the president and says he would go further in Syria, supporting the creation of a safe zone for the opposition. Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), the top-ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, says he is planning legislation to arm vetted Syrian rebel groups¹¹⁹</p> <p>March 19: Reports out of Syria suggest that chemical weapons were used in a town near Aleppo, with more than two dozen killed; the Asad regime and the rebels blame each other¹²⁰</p>
April 2013	<p>April 11: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claims his organization, the Islamic State in Iraq, has merged with Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra and will now be known as "the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS)¹²¹</p> <p>April 23: Israel's top intelligence analyst accuses the Asad regime of using chemical weapons¹²²</p> <p>April 30: Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah announces the group will fight alongside the Syrian army¹²³</p>	<p>April 11: Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Robert Menendez (D-NJ) joins the list of lawmakers who support providing arms to vetted Syrian rebels¹²⁴</p> <p>April 25: Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel says the U.S. "believe[s] that any use of chemical weapons in Syria would very likely have originated with the [Bashar] Asad regime;" a White House letter states that "our intelligence committee does assess with varying degrees of confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specially the chemical agent sarin. This assessment is based in part on physiological samples."¹²⁵</p> <p>April 26: Obama expresses caution toward taking more aggressive action in Syria in his first comments on U.S. assessment that the Asad regime used chemical weapons; he reiterates that it would be a "game changer" but says that more evidence is needed to verify that the Asad regime was behind the chemical attacks¹²⁶</p> <p>April 30: Obama states that the U.S. now has "evidence that chemical weapons have been used inside of Syria" but that "we don't know how they were used, when they were used, who used them. We don't have a chain of custody that establishes what exactly happened. And when I am making decisions about America's national security and the potential for taking additional action in response to chemical weapon use, I've got to make sure I've got the facts."¹²⁷</p>

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May 2013	<p>May 5: Israel launches airstrikes inside Syria¹²⁸</p> <p>May 19: Hizballah fighters aid Syrian military in Qusair¹²⁹</p> <p>May 21: President of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, closes border with Syria after 75 members of the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) are detained¹³⁰</p> <p>May 21-28: Fighting in northern Lebanese city of Tripoli breaks out between supporters of Asad in the predominantly Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and backers of the Syrian uprising in the mostly Sunni neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh, killing at least 29 and wounding more than 200¹³¹</p> <p>May 27: The EU lifts the arms embargo on the Syrian opposition¹³²</p>	<p>May 2: Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel confirms that the administration is reconsidering providing arms for the opposition; Obama says at a news conference in Mexico later that day that Hagel's comments were "what I've been saying now for months, which is we are continually evaluating the situation on the ground;" Obama again cautions that the United States must "look before we leap" in Syria¹³³</p> <p>May 7: Russia and the U.S. agree to work toward convening an international conference to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria¹³⁴</p> <p>May 21: U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee votes overwhelmingly to arm vetted members of the moderate Syrian opposition¹³⁵</p>
June 2013	<p>June 5: Syrian government forces backed by Hizballah fighters re-capture the city of Qusayr on the Lebanese border¹³⁶</p>	<p>June 5: White House Press Secretary: "The United States stands firmly on the side of the Syrian people in their fight for freedom and dignity. We will continue to provide support to the moderate political and military opposition to help them shift the balance on the ground to advance a political transition based on the principles of the Geneva Communiqué. Assad's refusal to step aside is only prolonging the suffering of the Syrian people and postponing the inevitable. Assad's reign will end, and the Syrian people will build a new, democratic Syria without him."¹³⁷</p> <p>June 13: Obama administration confirms that the Asad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, against the opposition, which the administration had previously declared would be a "red line;"¹³⁸ in response, President Obama authorizes lethal aid to the Syrian opposition¹³⁹</p> <p>June 20: President Obama calls the idea that "a few" U.S. arms would have enabled the ragtag Syrian opposition to defeat both Asad and the jihadists "a fantasy": "I think this notion that somehow there was this ready-made moderate Syrian force that was able to defeat [Syrian President Bashar] Assad is simply not true, and, you know, we have spent a lot of time trying to work with a moderate opposition in Syria... When you get farmers, dentists and folks who have never fought before going up against a ruthless opposition in Assad, the notion that they were in a position suddenly to overturn not only Assad but also ruthless, highly trained jihadists if we just sent a few arms is a fantasy."¹⁴⁰</p>
July 2013	<p>July 6: New leader of Syrian opposition, Ahmad al-Jarba, chosen¹⁴¹</p> <p>July 9: A car bomb explodes in the southern Beirut suburb of Bir al-Abed, in the heart of Hizballah territory, injuring 53; there was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the attack aggravated fears that Hizballah or its supporters would face attacks in response to the group's military intervention in Syria¹⁴²</p>	

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<p>August 2013</p>	<p>August 15: A car bomb explodes in the predominantly Shi'ite southern Beirut suburb of Ruwaiss, killing 30 and wounding over 200; no group claims responsibility, but the attack is widely interpreted as retaliation for Hizballah's involvement in Syria¹⁴³</p> <p>August 21: Syria's opposition accuses government forces of gassing hundreds of people by firing rockets that released deadly fumes over rebel-held neighborhoods near Damascus, killing men, women, and children as they slept in what is considered the worst chemical weapons attack in 25 years¹⁴⁴</p> <p>August 23: Two car bombs explode within minutes of each other outside the Taqwa and Salam mosques in Tripoli, Beirut, killing 47 and wounding over 300; the attacks provoke outrage among the Sunni community, as the two Salafist figures who lead Friday prayers at the mosques are both vocal critics of Hizballah—the blasts are later traced back to members of two pro-Assad groups: the Islamic Tawheed Movement and the Alawite Arab Democratic Party¹⁴⁵</p> <p>August 26: UN chemical weapons inspectors reach Damascus¹⁴⁶</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 2,139,366 A pontoon bridge is completed across the river border between Iraq and Syria Lebanon 775,991 Jordan 533,104 Turkey 494,361 Iraq 194,234 Egypt 126,717 North Africa 14,959¹⁴⁷</p>	<p>August 8: Obama says that “This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards.”¹⁴⁸</p> <p>August 11: The U.S. State Department announces it is working in coordination with the Iraqi central government to supply Kurdish forces with arms to fight ISIS militants in northern Iraq¹⁴⁹</p> <p>August 26: John Kerry states that “President Obama believes there must be accountability for those who would use the world’s most heinous weapons against the world’s most vulnerable people”¹⁵⁰</p> <p>August 27: Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel says that President Obama has asked the Defense Department for options for all contingencies, and the department has complied. “We have done that,” Hagel said. “He has seen them, we are prepared, [and] we have moved assets in place to be able to fulfill and comply with whatever option the president wishes to take. We are ready to go.”¹⁵¹</p> <p>August 30: John Kerry states that the primary objective in Syria is “to have a diplomatic process that can resolve this through negotiation, because we know there is no ultimate military solution”¹⁵²</p> <p>August 31: Obama calls for Congress to vote on launching punitive military strikes on Syria for its use of chemical warfare¹⁵³</p>
<p>September 2013</p>	<p>September 9: Russia proposes that Syria give up its chemical weapons arsenal¹⁵⁴</p> <p>September 14: Asad agrees to the complete removal or destruction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal by a joint mission led by the UN and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) by June 30, 2014¹⁵⁵</p> <p>September 25: 11 rebel groups form a new alliance dedicated to creating an Islamic state¹⁵⁶</p>	<p>September 10: Obama states that he “will not put American boots on the ground in Syria. I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan. I will not pursue a prolonged air campaign like Libya or Kosovo. This would be a targeted strike to achieve a clear objective: deterring the use of chemical weapons, and degrading Assad's capabilities.”¹⁵⁷</p>
<p>October 2013</p>	<p>October 31: Syria destroys chemical weapons facilities¹⁵⁸</p>	
<p>November 2013</p>	<p>November 19: At least 22 people are killed in a double suicide bombing outside the Iranian embassy in Beirut, Lebanon; the jihadist group the Abdullah Azzam Brigades claims responsibility and says it will continue attacks until Iranian forces leave Syria¹⁵⁹</p>	
<p>December 2013</p>	<p>December 2: Lebanese authorities place Tripoli under army control for six months after three days of clashes leave a total of 11 dead¹⁶⁰</p> <p>December 27: Mohamad Chatah, Lebanon's former finance minister, and five others are killed by a car bomb in the center of Beirut¹⁶¹</p> <p>December 30: ISIS fighters in Iraq take control of Fallujah and seize parts of nearby Ramadi¹⁶²</p>	

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<p>January 2014-February 2014</p>	<p>January-February: Seven deadly suicide bombings occur across Lebanon, mostly in Beirut's southern suburbs and the northeastern Bekaa Valley town of Hermel—predominantly Shi'ite areas heavily associated with Hizballah; all but one of the attacks are claimed by the Lebanese branches of either the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, the Nusra Front, or ISIS, and all say the same thing: they will not stop until Hizballah leaves Syria¹⁶³</p> <p>January 20: Assad regime accused of torture and “systematic killing” in a report by three senior international war crimes prosecutors¹⁶⁴</p> <p>January 22-February 15: An international conference aimed at finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis, known as the “Geneva II” peace talks held; no progress is made towards ending civil war¹⁶⁵</p> <p>February 3: Al Qaeda formally severs ties with ISIS¹⁶⁶</p> <p>February 21: Heavy shelling and gunfire erupt between Syrian rebels and Syrian regime forces near the Syrian-Israeli border in the Golan Heights¹⁶⁷</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 2,535,959 Refugee numbers rise again between November and February after a drop in October following the agreement over the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. Lebanon 950,479 Jordan 581,433 Turkey 624,248 Iraq 225,548 Egypt 134,554 North Africa 19,697¹⁶⁸</p>	<p>January 7: The White House announces it is speeding up the supply of military equipment including surveillance drones and Hellfire missiles to Iraq to help the government fight ISIS militants in western Anbar province¹⁶⁹</p> <p>January 22: John Kerry states that Assad “will not be part of that transition government. There is no way—no way possible in the imagination—that the man who has led the brutal response to his own people could regain the legitimacy to govern”¹⁷⁰</p> <p>January 27: Obama downplays the threat of ISIS (as compared to the threat of Al Qaeda), stating, “if a JV team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant”¹⁷¹</p>
<p>March 2014</p>	<p>March 16: The governor of Anbar province in Iraq claims government forces have retaken control of Ramadi from ISIS fighters;¹⁷² Syrian government forces seize Yabroud, a key town on the Syrian-Lebanese border that served as a vital supply line for rebels into Lebanon¹⁷³</p>	
<p>April 2014</p>	<p>April 28: Six suicide bombers strike polling sites around Iraq as security force members vote in advance of nationwide elections, killing at least 27 people¹⁷⁴</p> <p>April 30: Millions of Iraqis vote in parliamentary elections despite threats of violence from Islamist extremists¹⁷⁵</p>	
<p>May 2014</p>	<p>May 9: Iraqi security forces launch major operation against ISIS in Fallujah¹⁷⁶</p> <p>May 26: Results of the Iraqi parliamentary elections are published in Iraqi newspapers; results indicate that incumbent Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition won 92 of the 328 seats in parliament¹⁷⁷</p>	<p>May 16: In a telephone conversation with Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, Vice President Joseph Biden discusses the security situation in Anbar province, stresses “the importance of pursuing a holistic approach that includes political outreach as well as security measures consistent with the goal of gaining local support and cooperation,” welcomes “initiatives that are now underway to mobilize the population” against ISIS, and reaffirms the long-term strategic partnership between Iraq and the United States pursuant to the Strategic Framework Agreement, including their commitment to coordination in the fight against ISIS, which “represents a threat to the entire region”¹⁷⁹</p>

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
May 2014 <i>(continued)</i>	<p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 2,754,637</p> <p>Government forces have retaken most opposition areas in Homs. During a brief cease-fire, hundreds of rebels leave the city.</p> <p>Lebanon 1,044,898 Jordan 594,258 Turkey 735,864 Iraq 223,113 Egypt 136,807 North Africa 19,697¹⁷⁸</p>	
June 2014	<p>June 3: Syria holds a presidential election in government-held areas¹⁸⁰</p> <p>June 10: ISIS militants seize Mosul¹⁸¹</p> <p>June 11: ISIS takes Tikrit¹⁸²</p> <p>June 12: As ISIS approaches Baghdad, Peshmerga forces capture the oil city of Kirkuk;¹⁸³ Iranian president Rouhani states that “The issue of Iranian forces’ engagement [in Iraq] has not been raised so far;” the same day, Iran deploys forces to fight ISIS in Iraq, helps troops win back control of most of Tikrit¹⁸⁴</p> <p>June 13: Iraq’s highest Shi’a authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issues a religious decree calling on all Iraqi Shi’a to fight ISIS militants¹⁸⁵</p> <p>June 15: ISIS takes control of Tal Afar¹⁸⁶</p> <p>June 18: Militants attack the Iraq’s biggest oil refinery at Baiji; Iraq asks the U.S. to conduct air strikes against ISIS¹⁸⁷</p> <p>June 20: Ayatollah Sistani calls for the quick formation of a new and “effective” government in Iraq;¹⁸⁸ Lebanese security chief Abbas Ibrahim is targeted in an assassination attempt during a suicide blast near a check point on the main highway between Beirut and Damascus¹⁸⁹</p> <p>June 21: Al-Qa’im, a strategic border crossing between Iraq and Deir Ezzor province in Syria, and three other towns in western Iraq (Rawa, Ana, and Husaybah) fall under the control of ISIS fighters¹⁹⁰</p> <p>June 22: ISIS militants overrun the Turabil border outpost with Jordan and the al-Walid crossing with Syria; Iran’s top leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, states on Iranian state television that Iran “strongly oppose[s] the intervention of the U.S. and others in the domestic affairs of Iraq”¹⁹¹</p> <p>June 23: Joint OPCW-UN mission announces that the removal of Syria’s chemical weapons material is complete¹⁹²</p>	<p>June 4: Secretary of State John Kerry announces that the United States is providing more than \$290 million in additional U.S. humanitarian assistance to help those affected by the war in Syria¹⁹⁶</p> <p>June 19: Obama announces that the U.S. will send up to 300 military advisors to help the Iraqi military develop and execute a counter-offensive against ISIS but promises the U.S. will not be drawn into another war in Iraq¹⁹⁷</p> <p>June 21: Obama tells CNN that “no amount of American firepower” will “be able to hold [Iraq] together” in the absence of a political consensus that rises above sectarian motivations¹⁹⁸</p>

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
<p>June 2014 <i>(continued)</i></p>	<p>June 25: A Saudi suicide bomber blows himself up in a Beirut hotel to avoid arrest by security forces during a pre-emptive raid of the building; a second Saudi man survives and confesses that the two were supposed to attack a restaurant in Beirut's southern suburbs frequented by Hizballah officials¹⁹³</p> <p>June 29: ISIS announces the establishment of a new caliphate, changes its name to the "Islamic State"¹⁹⁴</p> <p>June 30: UN announces that 1.2 million Iraqis have fled their homes¹⁹⁵</p>	
<p>July 2014</p>	<p>July 3: ISIS takes control of two major Syrian oil fields (Al-Omar and Tanak)¹⁹⁹</p> <p>July 17: ISIS claims to have killed 270 people in Homs after seizing the Shaer gas field²⁰⁰</p> <p>July 3: Massoud Barzani, president of the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, announces plans to hold an independence referendum within the year, given that Iraq is "effectively partitioned"²⁰¹</p>	<p>July 9: State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki issues a press statement stating that "The United States welcomes the July 9 election of Syrian Opposition Coalition President Hadi al Bahra. We look forward to working with him and to continuing to build our partnership with the Coalition."²⁰²</p> <p>July 11: Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel states, "We are aware of the Iranian and Russian efforts to help the Iraqis, but we are not involved in coordinating any missions" and says that the U.S. is assessing the condition of Iraqi security forces and providing advice, "and that's what we will continue to do."²⁰³</p> <p>July 30: Secretary of State John Kerry states that "the United States is providing nearly \$378 million in additional aid to help those battered by conflict. The United States remains the single-largest donor of humanitarian aid for the crisis, and total U.S. humanitarian assistance will now reach more than \$2.4 billion. Of that total, nearly \$438 million is supporting cross-border assistance through non-governmental organizations to reach the children, women, and men residing in areas outside of the regime's control."²⁰⁴</p>
<p>August 2014</p>	<p>August 2-3: ISIS conquers several Kurdish-held towns including Sinjar and Zumar, ousting Kurdish Peshmerga fighters; thousands of civilians seek refuge, most from the Yazidi religious sect²⁰⁵</p> <p>August 2-7: The Lebanese army battles Islamist militants for control of the isolated border town of Aarsal; sparked by the arrest of a newly pledged ISIS commander, Imad Jomaa, members of the extremist group put aside their usual rivalry with the Nusra Front and team up, killing around 20 soldiers and kidnapping at least 29 security personnel—some 100 militants and 40 civilians are also killed. It is the most significant spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon to date.²⁰⁶</p> <p>August 3: ISIS seizes control of Mosul Dam, Iraq's largest hydroelectric dam²⁰⁷</p> <p>August 10: Peshmerga troops retake the Iraqi towns of Makhmur and Gwer from ISIS²⁰⁸</p>	<p>August 8: Obama authorizes targeted airstrikes in Iraq to protect the Yazidis and defend the Kurdish capital of Irbil²¹³</p> <p>August 10: U.S. and U.K. air drop food and water to Yazidis besieged by ISIS militants on Mount Sinjar²¹⁴</p> <p>August 12: U.S. announces it will send 130 more military advisers to Iraq, in addition to the 300 already there²¹⁵</p> <p>August 14: Obama says U.S. airstrikes have broken the siege of Mount Sinjar by ISIS militants but adds that U.S. airstrikes will continue against the militants²¹⁶</p> <p>August 20: Obama calls Iraqi Prime Minister-designate Haider al-Abadi to congratulate him on his appointment and to express support for the formation of a new government in Iraq, consistent with constitutional requirements; the president "emphasized that the United States stands ready to deepen political and security cooperation with Iraq as political leaders seek to implement political reforms"²¹⁷</p>

DATE	KEY EVENTS	U.S. POLICY
August 2014 <i>(continued)</i>	<p>August 11: Iraqi president Fuad Masum formally asks Haider al-Abadi, Iraq's deputy parliament speaker who was nominated by the main coalition of Shi'a parties as an alternative candidate to embattled prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, to form a government; ISIS fighters defeat Peshmerga troops in town of Jawala²⁰⁹</p> <p>August 15: Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki agrees not to seek a third term as prime minister²¹⁰</p> <p>August 19: American journalist James Foley is beheaded by ISIS and a video of the killing is posted on YouTube²¹¹</p> <p>August 24: ISIS militants in Syria seize strategically important Tabqa airbase in Raqqa province²¹²</p>	<p>August 28: Obama states that dealing with the ISIS (ISIL) threat is "going to require us to stabilize Syria in some fashion, and stabilizing Syria in some fashion means that we've got to get moderate Sunnis who are able to govern and offer a real alternative and competition to what ISIL has been doing in some of these spaces"²¹⁸</p>
September 2014	<p>September 2: ISIS releases video of beheading of American journalist Steven Sotloff²¹⁹</p> <p>September 11: Saudi Arabia agrees to host program to train anti-ISIS force;²²⁰ CIA announces the number of ISIS fighters is estimated between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, higher than previous estimates²²¹</p> <p>September 13: ISIS posts video of execution of British aid worker David Haines²²²</p> <p>September 22: U.S. launches first airstrikes against ISIS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated militants inside Syria²²³</p> <p>REFUGEE UPDATE: 3,009,781 Lebanon 1,190,236 Jordan 618,086 Turkey 847,266 Iraq 214,372 Egypt 139,821²²⁴</p> <p>September 19-22: Over 200,000 refugees leave the area around Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani as ISIS advances into the area—at least 130,000 enter Turkey; Turkey reduces the number of open border crossings from eight or nine to just two²²⁵</p> <p>TOTAL REFUGEES (as of September 29): 3,218,303²²⁶</p>	<p>September 4: Obama tells reporters during a White House briefing that "We don't have a strategy yet" for dealing with the ISIS threat in Syria²²⁷</p> <p>September 10: Obama delivers a speech to the American people on threat of ISIS (ISIL), stating that "If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States. While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies. . . Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy. . . I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq."²²⁸</p> <p>September 18: Congress votes to approve Obama's plan to train and equip moderate Syrian rebels to combat ISIS;²²⁹ Obama issues a statement praising the vote and reiterates that "The American forces that have been deployed to Iraq do not and will not have a combat mission; their mission is to advise and assist our partners on the ground."²³⁰</p> <p>September 22: The U.S. launches the first airstrikes against ISIS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated militants inside Syria²³¹</p> <p>September 26: Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Martin Dempsey state that the Obama administration has not ruled out establishing a no-fly zone over northeastern Syria to protect civilians from airstrikes by the Syrian government²³²</p>

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