

The Syria Civil War: Managing Inevitable Trade-offs

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Abstract

The complex and multi-faceted geopolitical environment created in Syria and the Middle East today makes it extremely difficult for the United States and its Western and regional allies to continue its policy of calling for the removal of the Assad regime. Arguably, Assad's departure from power at this time would prove to be a critical mistake, with the scope of its ramifications largely unknown. In this essay, we will engage first in discussing the lack of a detailed and comprehensive day-after strategy by Western powers to be implemented in Syria, should Assad be removed, and how this could lead to a multitude of complicated problems. We will then analyze Syria's role as a showground of strategic competition between many regional and world powers, and how Assad's departure could result in a much more intensified rivalry between and among these powers. We conclude that there are many inevitable trade-offs involved in ending the Syrian civil war, but that for now the growing threat ISIS poses to the world renders defeating the Islamic State a higher priority over advocating a regime change in Syria. Moving forward, the essay examines nonviolent alternatives to the military intervention/strike in Syria.

Keywords: Ba'thism, Alawites, Uprisings, Civil War, Free Syrian Army, al-Nusra Front, Salafi-Jihadists.

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Since the Ba’th Party and its military allies seized power in Syria on March 3, 1963, the struggle between Ba’thism and political Islam has continued unabated. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood incited several violent insurrections against the Ba’th regime. The Islamist rebels, however, failed, in large part because they were fragmented and lacked a robust leadership base. By contrast, the regime remained cohesive, utilizing its nationalist militancy and its populist social contract to legitimize its rule—a regime that was hoisted by its potent security apparatus originally led by Alawite troops who, as a political and demographic minority, had a massive stake in its survival.¹ This tension reached its pinnacle in 1982 when Ba’thist leader Hafez al-Assad leveled the Islamists in Hama, killing fifteen to thirty thousand rebels.²

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In the context of the 2011 uprisings, Islamism—in its various moderate and radical forms—became the key mobilizing ideology of the insurgency. Sectarian actors and their various discourses were increasingly used to mobilize support and disparage opponents.³ As a result, sectarian relations and identity politics have since entered their most dangerous phase, perhaps none more intense than in Iraq and Syria.⁴ Whereas the 2011 Arab uprisings initially obscured the underlying importance of religious and ethnic cleavages, in the subsequent stages, sectarian identities proved to be the most dominant feature of such uprisings, especially in states where territorial and ideological nationalism took the backseat to sectional tribalism.

When the Arab Spring protests initially began in the Middle East, it was largely viewed as a democratic uprising against years of suppression, brutality, curtailing of freedoms, and a pronounced lack of economic prosperity under ruling dictators. Yet, the turbulent aftermath and chaotic political context created in many of the countries affected have left behind a tarnished democratic imprimatur, and has injected a great deal of uncertainty regarding the already volatile geopolitical situation in the Middle East.⁵ Specifically, the situation ensuing in Syria today clearly highlights this, inasmuch as what began first as a peaceful uprising against Bashar Al-Assad's regime in the country ultimately transformed into a protracted and atrocious conflict, which has plunged the nation into a full-blown civil war affecting many of the states in the region, and converting Syria into a base of operation for various terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or locally known as Da'esh).⁶

As violence continues to rage in Syria, the entire Middle East has descended into greater uncertainty than ever before, and the search for a viable solution by the United States, its allies, and the international community in ending the conflict there has intensified. Yet, Syria's civil war is much more complex and multi-layered than many think due to the country's diverse ethnic and religious demographics, regional players influencing and supporting various sides of the conflict, and the growing political vacuum filled by terrorist groups hostile to the West. Consequently, this has prolonged finding a viable solution to the crisis, placing the Western world in an untenable dilemma. On the one hand, the Assad government's repressive actions and brutality against its own people warrant external intervention to

remove him from power and establish some form of legitimate democratic rule in Syria. On the other hand, despite repeated calls for his ouster, the Assad regime's collapse at this juncture could unravel into several unintended consequences, potentially affecting the entire Middle East region. Regardless of one's position on the future of President Assad or his role in Syria, it is clear that should this scenario succeed in unfolding presently, a calamitous outcome might ensue.

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that the complex and multi-layered geopolitical environment created in Syria and the Middle East more generally makes it extremely difficult for the United States and its Western and regional allies to continue its policy of calling for the removal

of the Assad regime. Arguably, Assad's departure from power at this time would prove to be a critical mistake, with the scope of its ramifications largely unknown.

In the sections that follow, this essay will engage first in discussing the lack of a detailed and comprehensive day-after strategy by Western powers to be implemented in Syria, should Assad be removed, and how this could lead to a multitude of complicated problems. The essay will then shift its focus to analyze Syria's role as a showground of strategic competition between many regional and world powers, and how Assad's departure could lead to an augmented and much more amplified rivalry between and among these powers. Furthermore, the essay will briefly describe the growing threat ISIS poses to the world, and why defeating ISIS must be prioritized over deposing Assad from power.⁷ Finally, in the concluding section, the essay will offer a brief critical analysis of what needs to be done in order to reach a potential political solution to the crisis.

Assad's Departure: What to Expect?

Since the beginning of President Bashar al-Assad's crackdown and repression against his own people in February of 2011, Western leaders from President Obama to former French President Sarkozy and many other American allies have called for him to step-down from power.⁸ Nevertheless, what many of the leaders have failed to articulate clearly to the world is the implementation of a day-after strategy following Assad's departure, and how they intend to address

the potential complications resulting from a tumultuous post-civil war order. One observer argues that, “Western intervention to depose the Assad regime is likely to leave the United States and its allies stuck in a quagmire since they do not seem to have a plan for post-Assad Syria or the diplomatic capabilities to back up a plan even if they had one.”⁹ The description here eloquently summarizes the outcome the West faces in any potential attempt to remove Assad from power, and why it must resist pressure for intervention into this potentially endless quandary. Moreover, the lack of a comprehensive plan addressing all the potential complications can lead to unmitigated disasters of epic proportions, potentially sinking America and its allies into another long-term military imbroglio in the Middle East.

One potential complication is Syria’s ethnic heterogeneity, which continues to pose a problem for any Western intervention, and makes it difficult to unify and govern the country after the potential fall of Assad. Syria today is one of the most diverse and heterogeneous countries in the Middle East, and has dozens of ethnic and religious sects and minority groups scattered all throughout the country. The nation’s population contains Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Kurds, Ismailis, Druze, Shiites, Greeks, Maronites, and Armenians, with approximately 90% of the population being Muslim, and the remaining 10% being Christian.¹⁰ The Syrian government today is controlled by the minority Alawites, which have ruled over the majority Sunni population for decades, and as a result, this has created the conundrum facing any political solution to the Syrian war, and why Assad’s departure may prove to be highly consequential. The Alawites and other minority groups in the country could be subjected to ethnic-cleansing and other forms of persecution and harassment after Assad’s potential demise. This is not difficult to foresee given that ethnic politics play a significant role in shaping the geopolitical atmosphere in the region, and how the Syrian crisis has manifested itself into a wider Sunni-Shia war.¹¹

Given Syria’s diverse population and the uncanny political circumstance the country has been entrenched in for decades, the United States and the Western world must take a fine line in addressing the precarious political situation facing any long-term solution for Syria.¹² Assad’s hasty removal from power could potentially pour gasoline on an already combustible state of affairs, and enflame the entire region into greater pandemonium. One expert further illuminates this nightmare

situation by noting that, “There is a better than even chance that if the Assad regime falls, Syria will be divided up into ethnic- and sectarian-based mini-states in constant conflict with each other.”¹³ The arbitrary borders drawn up by colonial powers after the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916) would be wiped away, and Syria would potentially be sent into an irrevocable death spiral, with its long-term effects largely unknown.¹⁴ Again, the immediate partitioning of Syria is not difficult to see, given that the various ethnic groups, such as the Alawites, are heavily concentrated in various regions of the country, and a potential spark could transform this idea into a conflagration.¹⁵

Moreover, it is important to be cognizant of how neighboring countries like Iraq and Lebanon could be affected by ongoing sectarian tensions in Syria, exacerbated by Assad’s potential downfall.¹⁶ Similar to Syria, Iraq and Lebanon likewise have an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous population, and Syria borders both of these countries. Thus, ethnic and sectarian tensions in Syria are bound to affect events in those two countries, and can potentially ignite a highly combustible and volatile situation. Potentially, the partition scenario might not even be limited to Syria, but can spread over even into the fragile states of Lebanon and Iraq.¹⁷

The Unruly Syria

Aside from Syria’s complex demographic issues, the problems of governance and allies on the ground are another lingering problem that would face the West in a post-Assad Syria. In order to create a viable political solution, many elements of Assad’s government must remain intact to continue to preside over at least parts of the country under the regime’s control or else risk a potential repeat of the mistakes made in the US invasion of Iraq.¹⁸ Moreover, the United States and its allies would need reliable boots on the ground, other than the Syrian military and the Kurdish militias, which are heavily concentrated in Northern Syria, to manage the parts of the country not under the regime’s control.

The West has spent tremendous amounts of money attempting to bolster moderate Syrian opposition forces, yet relying on these forces is a non-starter option for the United States and its allies. Some scholars have further described the crisis affecting the Syrian

opposition by stating, “We know little about the opposition in Syria and to what extent its governance of the country would be based on the rule of law and respect for human rights. There are increasing reports about rebel atrocities as well as the role that al-Qaeda operatives play.”¹⁹ The Syrian opposition continues to be very diverse and contains a loose structure, rendering them impotent in manifesting potential Western goals in Syria.²⁰

In fact, the Pentagon established an arm-and-equip program to train Syrian rebels to be a potentially reliable ground force, but after spending nearly five hundred million dollars, it was announced that the program failed to succeed. It was ultimately abandoned and left behind in shambles, as embarrassingly, fewer than one hundred Syrian rebels had been trained for such a complex and important responsibility.²¹ The report goes on to establish that the West’s only hope of controlling and transitioning through a post-Assad Syria is inconceivable without serious support on the ground. Given that the Syrian opposition forces were what the United States and its allies were primarily relying on, this present problem should give the West pause before any considerations for potential intervention in Syria are seriously considered.

Syria: More Than a Regional Battleground

As the conflict continues to rage on in Syria, it is equally important to understand that regional and extra-regional, strategic rivals have pronounced ambitions to mold the tumultuous situation taking place in the country. Given that the war’s potential outcome could completely reshape the entire balance of power in the Middle East, the United States and its allies must continue to approach the question of removing Assad with extreme caution, in order to prevent turning regional skirmishes into a chaotic global contest between world powers. This point is further illustrated by one expert who explains that one of the sources of potential combustion in the region is increased rivalry among the various powers supporting different sides of the Syrian civil war, specifically: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and Turkey.²²

While Qatar used Al Jazeera and attempted to fuel the uprising from the outset, the Saudis funneled money and arms to the Sunni

tribes opposing the Assad regime. Turkey used its long border with Syria (500 miles) to help arm opposition groups seeking President Assad's overthrow. A failed coup attempt in Turkey (July 15, 2016), however, accelerated the rise of anti-Americanism in Turkey, as well as a renewal of ties between Ankara and Moscow. President Putin, who has tended in the past to pursue policies that both exploit opportunities to weaken NATO and drive a wedge into any potential European unity of purpose in foreign and domestic policy, and seeks to forge a new, closer relationship with Turkey. Russia expects Turkey to seal its borders with Syria to stem the flow of fighters and weapons to the insurgents, as well as reverse its repeated demand that President Assad should resign. Ankara, in turn, would like Moscow to stop bombing its insurgent allies; to eschew support for the Kurds; and to halt the bombing of civilian populations, which pushes refugees into Turkey.²³

The Assad regime's sole chance of escaping this compressing stranglehold was its links with Hizbollah, Iran, and Iraq. By 2013, Hizbollah was heavily involved in openly fighting anti-Assad forces.²⁴ Meanwhile, Russia and China, alienated by the West's use of a UN humanitarian resolution to change the Qaddafi regime in Libya, safeguarded Syria from a similar eventuality, and Russia kept up the flow of arms to the regime.²⁵ While some Western scholars and lawyers have underscored the legal responsibility to combat genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes under the various conventions of international humanitarian law, Russia and China have shown considerable unwillingness to support a legal or political basis for military interventions such as what transpired in Libya.²⁶ In addition to the regional rivalries present in the conflict, the United States also faces potential confrontations with Russia over Assad's future, as the latter continues to reinforce the Assad regime. Accordingly, Assad's removal from office will likely raise the likelihood of reigniting post-Cold War era tensions with the Russians, a very unpalatable state of affairs if that proves to be the case.

Several other regional countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region are unequivocally and categorically opposed to the Assad regime's survival, putting them in the same boat as the United States and its European allies. Many of these countries have provided weaponry and support to Syrian opposition forces seeking to oust Assad from power, often times

turning a blind eye to the identity or affiliation of the opposition fighters receiving these weapons. Yet, President Assad's grip on power has proven to be much more tenacious and obstinate than many of these countries predicted, and thus, ousting his regime from power has been futile up until this point. Additionally, many of these countries have conflicting reasons for wanting to oust Assad, making their goals in Syria all the more difficult to achieve.

On the other hand, President Assad today continues to be backed heavily by Iran and Russia, another major obstacle thrown into the calculus of solving the Syrian crisis. Iran is a major regional player in the Middle East, with a strategic relationship with Syria, and has a heavy hand in influencing events unfolding in the country and the region.²⁷ Meanwhile, Russia, Damascus's other stalwart ally, is a global player with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and with superpower capabilities including the possession of nuclear weapons. Russia remains heavily invested inside Syria, maintaining a significant military base in the Mediterranean coast of the country (Tartus), and making the survival of the Assad regime a top priority for Russian foreign policy.²⁸ Russia has also continued to use its leverage as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council by vetoing several resolutions, authored by the United States, condemning and sanctioning the Assad regime's brutality.²⁹ Both these countries have a vested interest for various reasons in keeping Assad in power, and bolstering their influences in Syria and the region, regardless of the positions or interests of other countries.

This stark contrast between enemies and allies that are supporters and opponents of the Assad regime has already led to diplomatic tensions. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have forcefully and categorically condemned Russian involvement in Syria and tensions are at a tipping point in the region.³⁰ Because of this diplomatic tension, any attempted intervention to remove Assad could potentially engulf the Western powers, and other regional countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, in a detrimental conflict with Iran and Russia.³¹ Ultimately, given the current state of foreign influence in Syria, Assad's departure cannot possibly remedy the heartbreaking situation entrenching the country today.

ISIS: The Common Threat

Although a multitude of complex problems on the ground and the heavy involvement of foreign powers in Syria make a compelling case against deposing Assad from power, the growing presence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a trans-state jihadi movement bent on changing the post-war territorial divisions of the region, and their persistent threat not only to the region but to the Western world, also further underscores this notion. Some experts warn that every passing day, ISIS continues to grow in strength and expand its reach beyond Syria and Iraq, into neighboring countries as well as into Europe and potentially the United States.³² Others suggest that according to recent reports ISIS is losing territory, moving instead to a franchise model like its predecessor Al Qaeda.³³ How effective it is at global recruitment would seem to have everything to do with the impression of disaffected Muslims worldwide, something undoubtedly exacerbated by the potential of a continuing Assad regime.

Moreover, recent terror attacks in Turkey, Paris, Belgium, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia underscore the terror group's capabilities to capitalize upon soft target overseas and in the region. With this in mind, the United States and its allies must immediately focus their attention on eradicating this festering threat, before it is able to continue on its trail of death and destruction. Furthermore, ISIS poses a dangerous threat to the countries seeking to overthrow Assad as well, mainly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as the waves of recent terror attacks have revealed.

The United States and its allies thus must concentrate on defeating the Islamic State as opposed to overthrowing the Assad regime. Assad's removal from power will only allow ISIS to control the parts of Syria under the regime's governance, and this would only hamper efforts to weaken the group's hold on the country. A scenario like this would only make it much more difficult for the West to continue its anti-terror campaigns, as it would allow for the Islamic State a bigger base of operations to launch attacks against neighboring countries, and potentially to Europe, Africa, and the United States. Accordingly, neither Assad nor his supporters pose any direct threat to the United States or its allies, and they do not possess the capabilities to launch terrorist attacks against anybody in the region. This alone makes a compelling case as to why the battle against ISIS must be sought first

over the toppling of President Assad's regime. Given the concerns about the Islamic State, some experts, such as former diplomat Ryan Crocker, have called for working with Assad, pointing out "as bad as he is, there is something worse."³⁴ From a practical standpoint, the Assad regime could very well offer an undeniable alternative to both the Islamic State and chaos.³⁵

Reviewing the Practicality of Options

Syria faces a difficult path forward in the foreseeable future, and faces no good options (more on that below) in bringing an end to this longstanding conflict. Certainly, removing Assad from power at this juncture would be counterproductive, and exacerbate existing tensions in a region on the verge of implosion. Yet, certain government officials such as former diplomat Dennis Ross are still trying to project their recalcitrant position that we must bomb the Assad regime right now without addressing any of the enduring issues discussed, as well as forgoing any cooperation with the Russians.³⁶ Contrary to what Mr. Ross continues to insist upon, the current geopolitical environment created in the region has left President Assad as the least unpalatable choice.

Several options can be reviewed in terms of feasibility, the likelihood of success, and generating a desirable outcome. Some analysts, who have taken a cynical view of diplomatic and political solutions, have supported the possibilities for military intervention, arguing that the United States must build a new Syrian opposition army, providing it with extensive training, a full range of weaponry, and the backing of a major US air campaign as Washington has done so in supporting other indigenous opposition armies in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya.³⁷ Many experts, however, argue that the 'military logic,' is fraught with grave consequences. The proliferation of weakly organized and coordinated armed groups operating under the Free Syrian Army (FSA), with little command and control authority beyond their small and isolated forces are under no authority of a civilian political wing, which indicates an acute and pronounced danger for a mismanaged and inchoate post-war structure for governance.³⁸

Of all the various armed groups opposing the Assad regime, according to one study, the FSA spurred a noticeable disdain from

some Syrians, as they were seen to be extraordinarily and sadly disconnected from the very people they were meant to be liberating. While many in US foreign policy circles viewed the FSA as a secular and progressive force who, if formalized and trained, might lead Syria to democracy, some in Syria described the FSA as “only a bunch of opportunists and cowards.”³⁹ Many FSA fighters, some armed solely with Kalashnikovs run amok in some cities, raising the question of who will control the Syrian rebels’ guns, once ‘peace’ is restored. It is worth noting that the FSA has never been an established military force with a clear hierarchy and organizational structure. Most of the groups affiliated with it are independent militias who rarely, if ever, take orders from the senior defectors and/or leading armed civilians within the FSA. In fact, many fighters detest the so-called ‘leaders-in-exile’ who too often profess to speak on their behalf. For the most part, any forms of organized relations among the various armed groups are local, provincial, or ad hoc in the most optimistic estimations.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the FSA’s military operations have become more lethal and militarily potent as they have received massive external funding and arms deliveries from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with foreign training adding their lethality coming from Turkey.⁴¹ The enduring military stalemate and violence in Syria has driven young generations into jihadist armed brigades loosely controlled by the FSA. That along with the flocking of foreign Salafi jihadists into northern Syria from Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq has strengthened the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Salafi Ahrar al Sham, who are both al Qaeda-affiliated group, which reinforces the view that the militarization of the popular uprisings has fragmented into an already dangerous and divisive political climate.⁴²

In the past five years, opposition to the Assad regime has grown far more divided than the initial days and months of the uprisings. Opposition politicians residing outside Syria and militant factions fighting from within appear to have followed different plans. Moderate Sunni groups and increasing numbers of jihadi fighters have become alienated along tactical and strategic plans to fight the regime. Yet another gap has widened between those willing to negotiate with the Assad regime and those opposed to doing so, further demonstrating their inability to form a stable anti-Assad coalition.⁴³ Under such circumstances, the Pentagon’s preeminent challenge, as

some experts remind us, “would be to determine which of these groups were friends or foes.”⁴⁴

Given Russian involvement in its support of the Assad regime, the option of building a new Syrian opposition army and the risk of a military confrontation amongst intervening actors to resolve the Syrian crisis has not just increased, but will most likely make matters disastrously worse. The implications of such a military intervention could be cataclysmic for the entire region, especially for minorities such as the Alawites, Christians, and Druze, should a Sunni-controlled government take control of the government by force. These minority groups will face either genocide or forced migration. That option is the least appealing and practical option—both militarily and from an ethical standpoint.

Others have defended setting up safe zones in an attempt to create humanitarian areas. These safe zones will be modeled on Operation Provide Comfort, which established a very effective “no-fly zone” in northern Iraq in 1991 shortly after the 1991 Gulf War.⁴⁵ Even those who support “no-fly zone,” warn that any attempt to do so may risk direct military conflict with Russia. To simply design methods for mitigating the risks of escalation or counter-measures may not suffice. Rather the United States must weigh the likely gains of a partial “no-fly zone” against the probable costs of limited conflict with Russia should that become inevitable.⁴⁶

Many military experts in the Pentagon and think-tanks centered in Washington, DC, have raised serious questions about this option. Col. Pat Ryder, a spokesman for US Central Command, has noted that setting up a safe zone “has the potential of becoming a magnet for civilians.” Moreover, the demands on the air assets would confine US options to fight the Islamic State elsewhere.⁴⁷ To further raise concerns about creating a “no-fly zone,” Ryder continues, “You would need a very large capable ground force to defend those civilians, otherwise it would remain vulnerable to attack from the ground. Additionally, an intervening country would require some form of air-superiority capability, constant air-watch capability, and large numbers of logistics. The resources alone would require the United States to commit other resources that are currently being used to fight [the Islamic State.]”⁴⁸

In addition to the demands that a no-fly zone would create on

ground forces, Anthony Cordesman points out that any intervening state must observe the complex rules of engagement, all of which would need to be carefully specified and coordinated among a multitude of actors.⁴⁹ Thus, the cost and complexity of setting up such “no-fly zones” deserve careful and informed assessment, as such operations may demand military contingencies to enforce them. The most difficult question remains: Who will provide such military support: NATO, Russia, and/or the EU? One may immediately discount the UN, of course, as it cannot possibly coordinate between states on the Security Council that could easily veto any attempt to seek official military actions.

Still others have called for a scenario that involves a regional deal. Such a deal, however, is not in the offing for many reasons, but none more obvious than the fact that Syrian regime—backed by Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hizbollah—remains confident that its ability to contain the insurgency is already in hand given the proper support and coordination of allied nations.⁵⁰ Meanwhile Saudi Arabia continues to bombard Yemen with US and UK-made aircraft, an air power built as a result of a recent sale worth \$33 Billion to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).⁵¹ That may explain why both the United States and Great Britain have turned a blind eye to the Russian military entanglements in Syria. More recently, Russia used an Iranian base in Hamadan, a city in the country’s northwest, to launch a fleet of bombers aimed at militants battling in Aleppo, Syria, an indication of the shifting dynamics of the war, and growing Russian-Iranian cooperation regarding Syria. The planes, according to one report, also bombed the ISIS facilities as well as those controlled by al-Nusra Front.⁵²

Given that the region is so fragmented and engulfed in sectarian tensions and competition, this option remains decidedly off the table. Those who support the creation of autonomous zones of governance, appear fixated on the partition of the country—a possibility that regional and transregional actors find problematic at best, given the potential for a broader break up of surrounding countries and the potential for insurgency and terrorism.

Finally, the UN Security Council has pursued a negotiated political solution aimed at ending the war by establishing a coalition government of pro-Assad and opposition forces to rule over the country as Mr. Assad

is gradually eased out of power. This diplomatic route has thus far yielded no tangible results as the conditions on the ground have progressively deteriorated in Syria. In line with such an option, but also separately, the United States and Russia have attempted to revive diplomatic negotiations by proposing a deal under which Syria would stop its bombing of rebel forces, while warring factions would observe a cease-fire, simultaneously American and Russian military and security forces would share intelligence for targeting airstrikes against the al-Nusra Front—now also called the “Levant Conquest Front”—and Da’esh (ISIS).⁵³

Looking Ahead

The rancorous debate over the military intervention (or lack thereof) in Syria has greatly diminished the chances of peace and stability for the vast majority of Syrians who wish to see the end of political stalemate and civil war in their country. As things stand, Syrians are torn between supporting the repressive regime in Damascus and the need for defeating violent extremists, both of which will have ruinous consequences for the country’s future. Yet the theory of removing the Assad regime as the main cause of civil war has long been abandoned as imprudent if not utterly immoral or unjust.

We have attempted in this essay to demonstrate that the critical priority should be given to defeating terrorist groups, while maintaining the country’s territorial integrity and restoring some degree of stability conducive to eventually establishing a prosperous Syria. It may very well be the case that moderate members of the Syrian opposition must sit down with the Assad regime, and try to seek a national reconciliation effort, despite all the carnage, brutality, and turmoil that has ensued. Although this may seem like a quixotic scenario, for the sake of the Syrian people and the millions of refugees abroad wanting to return and the millions internally displaced persons (IDPs), both parties must put aside their vindictive tendencies, and focus on beginning to build a better future for their country. Finding solutions for IDPs and the return of refugees should be seen as an urgent priority for humanitarian reasons, but it could just as well be viewed as a security issue.⁵⁴

The United States needs to continue to demonstrate active leadership, and must lead the reconciliation efforts, along with regional countries and

allies. The future facing Syria remains bleak, yet one cannot overlook the possibility that the road toward ending the conflict and building a better future for the country remains long and arduous. This option seems like the only realistic hope left in light of the fact that opposition to the Assad regime is fragmented and the jihadist project, as experts remind us, has suffered from a massive crisis of legitimacy. “Both militarily and in terms of legitimacy,” writes Fawaz Gerges, “the [radical Islamist] project has reached a conceptual deadlock. There is nowhere to go from here.”⁵⁵

The fact remains that the establishment of security in Syria is a prerequisite for the country to experience democratic change, economic development, social justice, and significant reforms. Establishing security requires ISIS to be immediately defeated, and hence the Assad regime’s survival in order to ensure a timely military victory. To achieve this and other related goals, as one expert has noted, cooperation between NATO, the Syrian army, Russia, and Iran could be absolutely vital.⁵⁶ The United States should approach regional allies and partners to forge a stronger military coalition, as well as with Russia and Iran to coordinate military operations and intelligence-sharing against the Islamic State. A broader coalition would mean the defeat of ISIS at a much more rapid pace, and the higher chance of ending the war in Syria. After ISIS is vanquished, then the United States and the international community must push forward for a political solution in Syria between the warring parties.

Moreover, the United States has to reconsider its policy toward its allies, like Saudi Arabia, in the MENA region that have actually promoted extremist Sunni movements, inadvertently strengthening the hands of radical and violent groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, al-Nusra, and the like, who draw their ideology as well as much of their weaponry and financial support from these closest allies of the West. This has further militarized and radicalized forces struggling to overthrow the Assad regime, contributing to the process of sectarian polarization as never before.⁵⁷

Yet many questions remain unanswered. What would an end to ISIS look like? At this stage they seem to be disaggregating their operational base. This may become a larger and more long-running conflict. Presently we face a global war on terror that has spiraled far beyond the borders of the initial territorial conflict in Afghanistan. There is no simple or definitive answer to this issue. The Obama administration with his metrics and killing of Osama bin Laden, as

well as using drones targeting leaders of these terrorist groups? Or the former President W. Bush in his targeting of illicit funds needed for the promotion and coordination of terrorism? If we cannot say when the war is over, how can we ever say when it is the opportune time to remove Assad from power or address the intelligence communities' abuses of power?

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