



COMBATING TERRORISM AND ALLEVIATING HUMAN SUFFERING IN SYRIA

■ ANDREW J. TABLER

Executive Summary *Washington's objectives in Syria are to defeat U.S.-designated terrorist groups and stem the outflow of refugees. By no means is Syrian president Bashar al-Assad the right leader to entrust with these missions. In practical terms, he lacks the manpower to retake and hold the two-thirds of Syrian territory outside his control any time soon, even though he does have sufficient Russian and Iranian support to maintain control in large parts of Syria. More important, Assad is an avowed adversary of the West, undeserving of its cooperation. Given these realities, Washington, while acknowledging that Syria is de facto partitioned, should establish safe zones in non-Assad-controlled areas, drive a wedge between the Russian-Iranian alliance in the country, and isolate and pressure the Assad regime.*

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PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP has prioritized defeating the Islamic State (IS), which today controls a third of Syrian territory. He has advocated combating terrorism in partnership with Russia, whose aviation in Syria supports both the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and Shiite militia forces funded, trained, and organized by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet the president has vowed to roll back Iran's growing influence in the Middle East, for which its operations in Syria are vital. He has likewise ordered plans for the establishment of safe zones in Syria to "give people a chance."

President Assad does not have the manpower to retake the two-thirds of Syrian territory outside his control any time soon. Still, Assad is not going anywhere absent a major military intervention by U.S. and other Western forces. This is essentially a redo of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1990s, when the country was divided and unstable. The Syria situation, however, is far more precarious and complex than Iraq of two decades ago: as compared to Saddam's military then, Assad's is much weaker, leading Iran to deploy up to 50,000 Shiite militia members to prop up the Syrian president and emboldening the Islamic Republic to establish a new but rickety regional order. The only way for Assad to bridge the manpower gap is through considerably softening his position in political talks, a surge of Iran-backed Shiite militias, or Russian ground forces. With all three options looking unlikely, President Trump faces an unstable Syria in which U.S.-designated terrorist groups play a considerable role on every side and regional powers view the country as an arena for contestation of power.

To address this situation and ultimately piece together a new Syria, the Trump administration should:

► **ACCEPT THAT SYRIA IS DE FACTO PARTITIONED AND ESTABLISH SAFE ZONES:** The United States should deal with Syria's component parts in order to alleviate human suffering, stem the flow of refugees, and combat terrorism. Establishing "safe areas" in opposition-held buffer zones bordering Turkey and Jordan would be the best means of giving Syrians "a chance," in President Trump's

words. Turkey's establishment of a de facto safe zone north of Aleppo, with an understanding from Russia, represents a new and potentially powerful opportunity to protect Syrians and serve as a military and political basis for uprooting the Islamic State southward along the Euphrates River Valley. Kurdish areas and southern Syria are other options.

► **SPLIT RUSSIA FROM IRAN IN SYRIA OVER FOREIGN MILITIAS:** The Trump administration should dangle the prospect of resurrecting and renegotiating the September 2016 Joint Implementation Center (JIC) agreement for combating terrorism in return for Russia's support for safe zones and the goal that all foreign militias should leave Syria. This would test Russia's commitment to combating terrorism in Syria, restrain the Assad regime, and help bring about a workable political settlement. It would also put Moscow at odds with Iran, whose Shiite militias keep Assad in power and rigid at the negotiating table.

A key to this approach will be establishing clear parameters for determining Moscow's intentions. The United States should thus build on the August 2016 Turkish-Russian "understanding" in Syria, according to which Russia has accepted Turkey's de facto safe zone in exchange for Ankara's acquiescence to the Assad regime's capture of Aleppo. But more targeted diplomacy with allies will be necessary, including efforts to prevent the Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield rebel group from fighting the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

► **ISOLATE AND PRESSURE ASSAD:** The United States should continue to isolate and pressure the Syrian president, not just on account of his mass atrocities and resulting battlefield deficiencies, but because of the constraints these have placed on countering terrorist groups. Any direct U.S. cooperation with Assad will undermine the potential for cooperation with Sunni peoples and states essential to liberating Raqqa, governing broad swaths of Syria and Iraq, and preventing the rise of the next generation of even more radical Sunni jihadists.

Policy Options

U.S. policy has remained committed to the “unity” of Syria under UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and the Obama administration held up its stillborn JIC deal with Russia as the last chance at creating a united Syria. But Syria has been divided for half a decade, and dealing with the threats emanating from it will require uprooting extremists and providing humanitarian protection in its component parts with an eye toward somehow reassembling the country. The main policy options for dealing with a divided Syria are well known and have been debated nearly to death. In choosing any combination of them, the goal should be to reduce vulnerability from extremist groups and refugee outflows in exchange for increased U.S. tolerance for risk.

► **ESTABLISH SAFE ZONES:** Should the Trump administration declare its intention to create safe zones, it would immediately signal U.S. nonbelief in Assad’s stated goal of retaking “every inch” of Syrian territory. Because of Russian military operations on behalf of the Syrian regime, implementing a no-fly zone over all Syria would require a U.S. attack on Russian and regime air-defense systems. The August 2016 Turkish-Russian understanding has changed the equation, however, with Russia accepting Turkey’s de facto safe zone north of Aleppo. The United States should build upon this trend. Limited no-fly zones along border regions of Syria with Turkey and Jordan already exist practically speaking, due to arrangements concerning deconfliction of Syrian regime and Russian aircraft with anti-IS coalition and neighboring countries’ aircraft. Indeed, Turkey’s de facto safe zone north of Aleppo and Jordan’s buffer zone along the Syrian frontier constitute models for providing protection without necessitating military confrontation. A smart U.S. strategy would involve shoring up these areas via U.S. Special Forces and protecting them with aircraft against all enemies: the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, regime aircraft and artillery—the regime’s preferred and most lethal method of attack—and Iran-backed Shiite militias.

► **CONDUCT AIRSTRIKES TO ENFORCE SAFE ZONES AND CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES:**

Ceasefires work when positive incentives encourage each side to negotiate and parties violating the ceasefire are punished. Positive incentives do exist, but the Assad regime and Russia have been able to punish the opposition while being spared punishment in return. In order to bolster ceasefire attempts, the United States could punish the Assad regime and supporting Shiite militias for safe-zone and cessation-of-hostilities violations via cruise missiles or standoff air-launched missile strikes on regime airfields. To be sure, the presence of Russian military personnel in Syria increases the risk of inadvertently killing Russian soldiers. But Russia needs to be warned discreetly that if Syrian regime violations occur, the United States will inflict punishment; moreover, the precision of U.S. munitions and the relative concentration of Russian forces ensure that multiple targets exist throughout the country—whether runways to be cratered, Syrian-exposed helicopters and other aircraft, or artillery positions.

► **BOOST SUPPORT TO THE NON-ASSAD OPPOSITION:**

Controlling territory requires manpower. Given the Assad regime’s limited numbers and the spread of extremists in opposition areas, the United States will need to better arm what remains of the vetted Syrian opposition (VSO). The experience of Turkey’s Euphrates Shield and Jordan’s U.S.-backed covert support program shows that providing sustainable support attracts Syrian oppositionists while keeping them away from jihadists. Accepting that Salafists (whose impact has risen on the battlefield) and jihadists are close ideologically, a smart strategy for reducing U.S. vulnerabilities could include boosting support for the VSO against both Assad and the jihadists in the short term, with the goal of squeezing out Salafists, such as Ahrar al-Sham, in the long term. Such support would only work if the United States demonstrated a commitment to the opposition’s desire to fight the Assad regime and Iran-backed Syria militias—something the Obama administration did not do. U.S. support would also need to

continue for the SDF, the Kurdish-based alliance fighting the Islamic State in eastern Syria.

► **INCREASE SANCTIONS:** The Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian sponsors, with the ostensible aim of funding the country's reconstruction, are calling on the United States and the European Union to drop sanctions targeting Syrian oil production, trade, and individuals participating in Assad's overall campaign of aggression. Doing so, however, would only reward Assad's militaristic approach, Iran-backed Shiite militias, and by extension the military component of Russia's involvement in the Middle East. Deepening sanctions, on the other hand, would help deliver much-needed leverage for the United States in future negotiations, allowing Washington to pursue a real political transition in Syria that would unite the country. A missing but vital aspect of this diplomacy should be prosecution of the Assad regime and Shiite militias for war crimes, particularly for the continued use of chemical weapons.

► **USE DIPLOMACY TO RID SYRIA OF FOREIGN MILITIAS:** Recent Syrian peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, organized by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, focused on getting the Assad regime and other armed groups to agree to a cessation of hostilities and return to the negotiating table. For Washington, pressuring the Assad regime to agree to anything resembling a plan to piece together the country should include supporting Turkey's call to expel all foreign militias from Syria. This would include foreign fighters supporting the opposition as well as Iran-backed militias supporting the regime. Such a move would provide incentives to Washington's regional Sunni allies to more thoroughly combat Sunni extremist groups, support Russia's goal of preserving a nonsectarian Syrian state, and be useful in splitting Tehran and Moscow in Syria.

Key Decision Points

The Syrian situation is particularly complex. Early on, the Trump administration may face a number of inter-related decision points. This section lays out options for dealing with six of these points in particular, informed by the general principles laid out earlier: (1) what to do about the Islamic State in Raqqa, (2) how to achieve a sustainable settlement of the war, (3) how to relate to the Turkish role in Syria, (4) what to do if Turkey attacks the SDF or People's Defense Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish force, (5) how to relate to a Turkish-established safe haven, (6) how to relate to a southern safe zone, and (7) what to do if a cessation of hostilities collapses.

DECISION POINT 1 What to do about the Islamic State in Raqqa/Middle Euphrates River Valley.

OPTION 1. Apply the current policy more vigorously. Deepen military support for YPG/SDF military operations against the Islamic State's capital, in Raqqa, and expand Special Forces support to the Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield. Deconflict military operations with Russia in Syria and keep the Assad regime at arm's length. Continue support for the VSO.

- **PROS:** Effective way of combating IS in a fragmented Syria.
- **CONS:** Slow pace, alienates Turkey.

OPTION 2. Work more closely with Russia in Syria. Build on the Turkish-Russian "understanding" supporting Euphrates Shield and implement the September 2016 JIC agreement, which allows "synchronized strikes" on agreed terrorist groups in Syria, including the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates.

- **PROS:** Whole-country effort against IS that encourages Assad and Russia to actually fight the jihadist group.
- **CONS:** Burden borne by the United States. Cementing of Iranian influence in Syria, given

that lack of Russian and Assad-regime manpower would require additional Iran-backed Shiite militias. Deep negative implications for broader U.S. Middle East policy with Arab states, Turkey, and Israel.

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Obtain a Department of Defense assessment on whether, how, and where the United States could partner with Russia and associated forces in a meaningful way against the Islamic State. Hold consultations with the other members of the anti-IS coalition, especially regional partners, with an eye toward assembling a quick ministerial meeting. Launch a formal anti-IS policy review aimed at strengthening the relevant bureaucratic structures.

DECISION POINT 2 How to reach a sustainable settlement to the Syrian war.

OPTION 1. Continue support for the VSO and SDF/YPG.

- **PROS:** Keeps these groups away from extremists, yields vital intelligence on opposition-held areas of Syria, and pressures Assad, Russia, and Iran.
- **CONS:** Hard to manage without deeper military commitment. Assad, supported by Russia and Iran, still rigid toward a political solution.

OPTION 2. Support Russian, Turkish, and Iranian “Moscow Declaration” and talks in Astana. Cut off U.S. covert support for the VSO.

- **PROS:** Comparatively simple process; may force some opposition forces to jump on bandwagon with Assad regime.
- **CONS:** Cedes U.S. influence and intelligence over up to two-thirds of Syrian territory, deepens Russian-Iranian alliance with Assad regime. Likely prompts increase in bloodshed, refugees, and Syrians joining extremists.

OPTION 3. Carry out options 1 and 2 simultaneously, to the extent possible.

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Request briefing from JIC and DoD on all current programs to aid rebels. Consult with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and the Europeans before making any changes. Hold bilateral meetings with Moscow and Ankara.

DECISION POINT 3 What to do about Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s statements that Euphrates Shield will take Manbij—now held by the U.S.-backed YPG/SDF—en route to Raqqa.

OPTION 1. Support Euphrates Shield to roll back the Islamic State, but make clear that air support is for battling IS only, not the SDF. Stress the importance of Turkey working out a modus vivendi with the SDF so that both can battle IS, rather than fighting each other. In return, support Ankara’s formal safe zone—now tacitly supported by Russia—in areas held by Euphrates Shield. Make clear that U.S. Special Forces backing the SDF will remain on the ground.

- **PROS:** Should preserve U.S. access to the important Turkish/NATO Incirlik Air Base, which Erdogan has threatened to close off absent U.S. air support for Euphrates Shield.
- **CONS:** Could shake resolve and political coherence of SDF, taking focus off battling IS.

OPTION 2. Refuse to give air support to Euphrates Shield due to threats against the SDF in Manbij. To take away Erdogan’s Incirlik card, plan for carrying out airstrikes against IS in Syria from aircraft carriers, Jordan, or Iraq, or perhaps from the Kurdish zone. Provide the SDF with sufficient capabilities to seize the al-Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates, which would make a Turkish advance on Manbij problematic at best.

- **PROS:** Essentially a continuation of current policy.
- **CONS:** Will anger Ankara, likely forcing it further into Moscow’s arms.

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Make clear to Ankara, Moscow, Kurdish YPG commanders, and the VSO that the U.S. priority is combating the Islamic State and that those who help will be helped, while those who hinder will lose U.S. support. Offer to mediate among these parties to work out a modus vivendi. Make clear Washington will undercut any diplomatic process conducted without it.

DECISION POINT 4 Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield attacks U.S.-backed SDF, either as part of a strike on Manbij or moving south in a drive toward Raqqa through SDF positions. In response, SDF suspends operations against IS. U.S. Special Forces deployed in support of the SDF face risks associated with the Turkish advance.

OPTION 1. Back the SDF to repel Euphrates Shield so that the SDF—the largest, most capable force fighting the Islamic State in Syria—can return to targeting the jihadist group.

- **PROS:** Essentially a continuation of current policy.
- **CONS:** Could escalate into a major crisis with Turkey, although it would be a little less likely if the United States claimed to be supporting the SDF only when it fights IS—even if such a statement amounts to a diplomatic fig leaf.

OPTION 2. Allow Euphrates Shield to capture Manbij, in line with former vice president Joe Biden’s high-profile insistence that the YPG must leave the city, but at the same time insist to the Turks that they too must leave—that Arabs alone should control Manbij, with the only remaining question being whether these Arabs are pro-YPG or pro-Turkey.

- **PROS:** Would help reassure Arabs in IS-controlled regions that the U.S. government will resist either Kurdish or Turkish efforts to seize ethnic Arab areas, which could do much to encourage Arabs to turn against IS.

- **CONS:** Would likely anger the YPG, possibly undermining its commitment against IS in Raqqa.

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Make U.S. intentions crystal clear to Turkey and the YPG. Engage in obvious preparations to carry out whatever policy is decided on, irrespective of Turkish and YPG reactions.

DECISION POINT 5 Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield establishes a formal safe zone north of Aleppo. Ankara has long described its sphere of influence as comprising a “de facto safe zone” in this area, but such a declaration and the movement of Syrian Arab residents and opposition figures into the zone make clear Ankara’s intention to permanently block the SDF from uniting with the Kurdish-held Afrin canton. Russia voices measured support for the move.

OPTION 1. Support the Euphrates Shield safe zone, given that this offers the best means of protecting civilians and facilitating humanitarian relief. Urge Turkey to welcome international humanitarian organizations and offer to fund such groups’ activities and to generate broad international support for the effort. Offer Special Forces and airstrikes to counter threats to the zone, which could well come from both Iran-backed elements and radical Sunni Islamists. Turkey, which wants a free hand in going after Kurdish forces, could well resist such a move and correctly suspects the U.S. agenda is different, entailing broad support for Kurdish elements in Syria. This also explains why Turkey may be cool to international humanitarian aid. Make clear to the SDF/YPG that they need to accept the safe zone; offer to mediate a modus vivendi between the groups and Turkey.

- **PROS:** Would help establish safe zones where Syrians can be protected.
- **CONS:** The distinct risk that the Turks and SDF/YPG will come to blows in and around the safe zone, especially if Turkey pushes the zone far into territory now controlled by the SDF/YPG.

OPTION 2. Support the Euphrates Shield safe zone while simultaneously backing greater autonomy for the Kurdish self-declared Rojava enclave. Make clear that the United States will provide the same generous humanitarian support for Rojava as for the safe zone; urge Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds to allow such support to flow to Rojava.

- **PROS:** Increased humanitarian relief options for Syrians, while also preventing the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political wing of the YPG, from running to Moscow, with which it has allied historically before its recent turn toward Washington.
- **CONS:** Could anger the Turks, so backup plans must be prepared to provide the support to Rojava—and airstrikes elsewhere in Syria—without relying on access via Turkey.

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Rally Europeans and Gulf states to provide humanitarian aid; hold international pledging conferences; push international agencies to get involved. Make clear to Moscow that aid will proceed with or without Russian involvement and that if Assad, with Iranian and Russian backing, reacts by moving into rebel-held Idlib province, in northwest Syria, the United States—either alone or with Turkey—will ensure this province enjoys the same protection as the Turkish zone. Take credit—and publicize it globally—for addressing Syrian suffering.

DECISION POINT 6 Facing potential refugee, Jihadist, and Iranian proxy spillover, Jordan (with tacit approval from Israel) supports the establishment of a safe zone in southern Syria via indirect military support to the opposition Southern Front coalition.

OPTION 1. Provide diplomatic, economic, and military support to Jordanian activities to assist the Southern Front coalition, a grouping of approximately fifty opposition factions in southern Syria.

- **PROS:** Would help protect Syrian refugees, keep them out of Jordan, keep Iranian-backed Shia militia off the Jordanian (and Israeli) frontiers, and keep pressure on Assad from the south.
- **CONS:** Could require more extensive and possibly direct military support to the Southern Front when the Assad regime and Iran test the zone via symmetric and asymmetric attacks.

OPTION 2. Urge Jordanian (and Israeli) restraint in southern Syria while continuing covert support to the Southern Front.

- **PROS:** Continuation of current policy
- **CONS:** Increased risk of refugee outflow as Assad continues to attempt a military push into the south.

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Deepen consultations with Jordan and Israel on support options ranging from self-protection zones to buffer or full-fledged safe zones. Make clear to Moscow that establishing a southern zone would further a negotiated settlement and strengthen their hand vis-à-vis Tehran and the Assad regime. Task intelligence community and DoD for latest Southern Front strength versus jihadists and the Assad regime.

DECISION POINT 7 What to do about the collapse of a cessation of hostilities or about ceasefire violations. Russia, the Assad regime, and Iran-backed militias likely resume bombing and attacks on Idlib and besieged pockets near Hama, Homs, and Damascus, or in southern Syria, the Turkish de facto safe zone, or SDF/YPG areas.

OPTION 1. Give Russia an incentive to cooperate by offering to revive the JIC agreement. But make clear that this is contingent on Russia not striking VSO elements or the Turkish zone. Make clear that if Assad engages in such strikes, U.S. forces will hit Syrian air bases, presumably with missiles launched from the Mediterranean. If Iranian militias make such strikes, the United States reserves the right to attack Iranian assets in Syria.

- **PROS:** Tool to strengthen cessation of hostilities
- **CONS:** Requires willingness to use high-profile military strikes in the likely case the ceasefire falls apart, thereby potentially prompting international tensions.

OPTION 2. Urge Russian restraint, but essentially allow Moscow and the Assad regime to determine which groups are terrorist in nature. Permit Russian operations to occur without protest.

- **PROS:** Comparatively simple process
- **CONS:** Feeds the widespread narrative that the United States is in retreat from the Middle East and can be ignored, which could embolden Russia and Iran to move against U.S. interests

ACTIONS OVER FIRST HUNDRED DAYS. Either option would have to be carefully explained to regional and European allies, either to win support for bolder actions or to give reassurance that Washington remains committed to their security but does not believe this is the place to do battle. Consultation should include the secretaries of state and defense, if not the president, and meetings with leaders throughout the region, along with a clear articulation to Moscow of what Washington intends to do.

