

America's Coming Role in Syria

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Brief Analysis

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Before Congress can reach a conclusion on the administration's proposed budget, President Donald Trump needs to articulate a strategy for counter-terrorism and the ongoing war in Syria. A new policy should specify its political objectives regarding the Syrian government and other actors in the region.

There are some remaining Arab forces on Syrian soil that maintain the minimum principles of the revolution, suffering from immense hardships and life-threatening risks. Their financial resources do not cover their basic needs, and inconsistent military support requires many concessions.

Another great challenge is the Salafist jihadi exploitation of the inconsistent support given to revolutionary factions to subjugate moderate forces. Islamists begin by targeting these factions with arrest and assassination campaigns and executing their leaders, just as Jaish al-Islam did when it decided to destroy Jaish al-Umma in East Ghouta. They may even resort to direct clashes, like when Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) attacked Division 13 – a division of the Free Syrian Army – in Idlib, or when Jaish al-Islam used tanks against Failaq al-Rahman.

The moderate Arab forces that have managed to escape the Islamist beast over the past six years are now convinced that they cannot survive unless they find a line tying themselves to an American state institution so that the relationship has a clear and legitimate shape -- unlike the relationships they have with the intelligence agencies, who use them as cards to be played as needed.

According to White House officials, both the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff oppose sending more troops to Syria, but a military wing is emerging in the Pentagon that seeks to produce a more robust version of the strategy that was adopted by the administration of former president Barack Obama. At the top of this wing is national security advisor Gen. H. R. McMaster, whose plan relies on his experience battling extremist militias in Iraq alongside Gen. David Petraeus. The United States was not then facing a consolidated organization represented by al-Qaeda, but rather a complex fabric of local militias. McMaster and Petraeus both believe in exploiting the differences between these groups to create opportunities to work with potential partners in the face of more-extreme common enemies. Their goal is to marginalize violent extremists, refuting their claims to speak in the name of Islam by highlighting the gap between them and the vast majority of Muslims.

McMaster is working hard to convince the president to adopt Petraeus's 2015 proposal, which tries to separate "groups that can be part of the solution" from al-Qaeda and position them against the Islamic State and the Bashar al-Assad regime. The plan includes sending a large number of American troops, along with local allies, to liberate areas from the control of extremist forces, after which the U.S. military would be present on the ground in a country that has been a Russian proxy for decades. Chief White House strategist Steve Bannon opposes this strategy, viewing it as an attempt to start what he describes as a new Iraq war.

After the missile strike on al-Shayrat Air Base, the features of McMaster's plan became clearer. The American military is now pushing to lift the rules of engagement of their special forces and allow the use of attack helicopters. And since the international coalition is heavily dependent on bases and airfields within Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, where thousands of American, German, Italian, Finnish, and British soldiers are being housed, the process of retrofitting new bases gives the impression that they will not be temporary. Permanent buildings have replaced tents, dining halls, and operation centers for intelligence agencies and special task forces. One base in Iraqi Kurdistan is receiving five types of military hovercraft, used as air bridges to transport soldiers and necessary logistical support to areas of operations in Syria and Iraq. Since the last week of March, coalition forces have had a total of five military air installations in the region. In an interview with Voice of America, one official said that American engineers and crews were working on repairing and restoring the airfield near al-Tabqa dam. Some media reports indicated that American helicopters were transporting commanders and elements of the SDF between regions to avoid any clashes with other forces on the ground. Gen. Carlton Everhart, commander of the Air Force's Air Mobility Command, confirmed to VoA that his men had airlifted SDF forces behind ISIS lines to allow them to launch the attack that captured the airfield.

To allow U.S.-led coalition forces the freedom to make decisions in line with American interests, the administration has emphasized the role of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the battle for Raqqa. The U.S. military has supported and entered into alliances with factions like the Syrian Democratic Forces if the alliance is effective and useful from a tactical standpoint. But this reliance does not completely achieve McMaster's objectives. Allying only with the Kurds lacks the utility of a real strategy, since a Kurdish takeover of Arab territories could give rise to a new conflict in the region, a situation the United States does not wish to see.

The McMaster wing is convinced of the importance of allying with Sunni Arab forces on the ground in Syria to achieve the goals of destroying the Islamic State, eradicating terrorist groups, and establishing safe zones in Syria. But selecting an Arab partner is extremely complicated. Right now, the United States' priority is the Islamic State, whereas Arab forces are focused on the Assad regime. This discrepancy is something that cannot be easily overcome, due to the complicated political and military map in Syria and tense international relations. Moreover, most Sunni Arab factions fighting in Syria depend on their ties to the intelligence agencies of states concerned with Syrian affairs, and these agencies act upon their own interests, not that of the Syrian groups.. Throughout the revolution, these groups' roles have evolved from organized military forces to militias and gangs, some of which even engage in assassinations and infiltrations of other battalions in Syria.

The reality is that U.S. and Arab forces need to meet each other halfway. But forging alliances depends on two things: First, Trump must decide if he wants to actually take action or not. Second, the remaining moderate Arab forces must decide whether or not they are going to seize the opportunity to work with the United States to become an active player in Syrian politics. ❖

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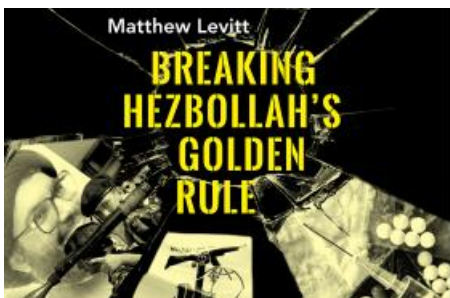
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