

The Case for Reassessing U.S. Strategy Toward Syria and Against ISIS

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Nov 18, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alsy-laadt-tqym-alastratyjyt-alamrykyt-tjah-swrya-wdd-tnzym-aldwlt-alaslamyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alsy-laadt-tqym-alastratyjyt-alamrykyt-tjah-swrya-wdd-tnzym-aldwlt-alaslamyt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Bashar al-Assad's departure would not by itself solve Syria's problems, but it could pave the way for the return of refugees and a regional ground force to combat ISIS.

As French authorities hunt those responsible for last week's terror rampage in Paris, the United States would be remiss if it did not soberly examine U.S. strategy in the campaign against Islamic State, as well as in Syria and Iraq more broadly. In the wake of the attacks, the U.S. must avoid being provoked into action or deterred from it, lest we play into the aims of those who attacked France. While our first order of business is coming to the aid of our ally and providing the support it needs -- as the French have done for the United States in the past -- this is a moment to stop, reassess, and regroup.

In a news conference Monday, however, President Barack Obama maintained that his strategy is the right one and "ultimately is going to work." His assurances have found an increasingly skeptical audience at home, with high-ranking Senate Democrat Dianne Feinstein among those who have criticized his approach. But the president's own inconsistencies also give reason for pause.

Asked last week if Islamic State was growing in strength, President Obama said that the group has been "contained" territorially. Yet in 2014, the president described containment as an insufficient goal, saying that even if the group's territorial advances are halted, its predations continue to be felt far and wide through the displacement of innocents and terror attacks.

In January 2013, President Obama was asked in an interview how he "wrestled" with the Syria conflict. He would judge options, he said, based on whether they, among other things, "trigger even worse violence or the use of chemical weapons" or "offer the best prospect of a stable post-Assad regime." Since then, however, the violence has

become worse, chemical weapons have been used repeatedly, and a stable future for Syria seems more remote than ever.

There is good reason to think that intensifying some aspects of President Obama's current approach could pay dividends. Examples of this include steps to ease the restrictions on the U.S. military effort in Iraq, to address the domestic counterterrorism deficiencies alluded to by CIA Director John Brennan this week, and to increase support to regional allies and international organizations providing assistance to Syrian refugees.

But simply doubling down on our current strategy is unlikely to be sufficient, and the most important change the U.S. should consider is not tactical but a strategic shift, focusing on Syria.

Administration officials have asserted time and again that Bashar al-Assad is at the root of Syria's problems. Secretary of State John Kerry said the day after the Paris attacks that Syria's "war can't end as long as Bashar Assad is there" and described Mr. Assad and ISIS as "symbiotic." Mr. Assad's departure would not by itself solve Syria's problems, but it could pave the way for the return of refugees and for building a local and regional ground force to roll back ISIS and secure areas it now holds.

Yet there has been little in the U.S. strategy designed to compel Mr. Assad to step aside or to incentivize his supporters to abandon him. Instead, Mr. Assad's military position appears stronger than it did months ago, and a recent diplomatic declaration from Vienna is, if anything, weaker on the question of his departure than preceding statements.

There are some signs that the administration recognizes the need for a change of approach: a small contingent of special forces was reportedly dispatched to coordinate with the Syrian opposition, and an earlier train-and-equip plan that required rebels to renounce any intention of fighting Mr. Assad was apparently scrapped. But until the accumulated effect of such steps is to convince Bashar al-Assad and his supporters that he cannot possibly prevail militarily, diplomacy will not achieve our aims.

President Obama has complained that critics have not produced a plan that would accomplish this. So far, he hasn't produced one either; and quite a few serious ideas have been proposed for Syria. With the danger from ISIS rising -- this week it threatened Paris-style attacks in Washington and Rome -- the president should stop merely defending his strategy and dismissing critiques but engage with outside perspectives and appropriate the best ideas.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog "[Think Tank](#)."

[\(http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/11/18/the-case-for-reassessing-u-s-strategy-toward-syria-and-against-isis/\)](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/11/18/the-case-for-reassessing-u-s-strategy-toward-syria-and-against-isis/) ❖

Wall Street Journal

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)

