

Best Bad Idea for America in Syria

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Articles & Testimony

As Russia, Iran, and Assad fight to carve out their future spheres of influence in Syria, Washington needs to help its Sunni allies establish their own spheres and retake eastern territory from ISIS and al-Qaeda.

In the spring of 2011, as Syrians were out in the streets demanding dictator Bashar al-Assad step aside, I worked with Obama administration officials on a set of economic and oil sanctions that would help force al-Assad to "step aside." Back in those days, his regime was only using live gunfire on protestors. But I remember telling my administration interlocutor that it would take a lot more than sanctions to get rid of al-Assad, and the sooner it's done, the better.

As al-Assad moved up the escalation chain using mortars, tanks, artillery, and aircraft against his opponents, others came to the same conclusion. Indeed, in the summer of 2012, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, CIA director David Petraeus, and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta put a plan before President Barack Obama to arm the divided, but then primarily secular, Free Syrian Army.

According to several accounts of the principals' meeting on the plan, Obama is said to have thanked his security cabinet for their hard work. But perhaps with an eye on the 2012 presidential election, he is believed to have opposed the United States going to war over an issue only a fraction of the American public cared about.

Now, more than four years later -- and following Washington's empty promises to punish al-Assad for his repeated and continued use of chemical weapons -- most of those working on Syria wished we would have done much more, and much earlier, to achieve the President's goals. Syria has collapsed, is hemorrhaging people and has become the largest generator of Sunni-Shia extremism the world has ever seen. In Iraq, people hated us because we invaded and botched the occupation. In Syria and other majority Sunni countries of the Middle East, they now also hate America because of Obama's choices on Syria. As a result, there seems little chance the brave members of our homeland security and intelligence community will be able to indefinitely prevent the terrorist attacks that are likely on the

way as a result of the indecisiveness and lack of planning that we have seen the past few years.

To top it all, Russia and Iran are moving militarily into Syria, meaning what was once "someone else's civil war" threatens to become a great power confrontation and a major setback for the United States and its allies.

These developments risk being compounded by one of the key steps of the recent nuclear deal with Iran, namely a "rebalancing," which would use the agreement as a key with which to release Iran from the box it had been in since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. President Obama has described the end state of such rebalancing as geopolitical "equilibrium," a state in which Iranian interests check those of Turkey, the Arabs and ultimately the Israelis. But the Islamic Republic is now rapidly filling the vacuum left by a retreating America -- with Russian air cover and deep global implications.

As a result of all this, years of dithering have given the United States not only bad, but worsening options in Syria. U.S. designated terrorist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have mushroomed, as have numbers among Hezbollah and Shia militias propping up the al-Assad regime and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the country's northeast.

How can and should we move forward? Today, the "best bad idea" we have (to steal a line from the movie *Argo*) is to recognize that Syria is a broken country that without concerted U.S. effort with its European and Sunni allies will not go back together again. Russia has intervened to save the al-Assad regime from collapse, creating a Russian-Iranian sphere of influence in Syria. But the odds are very, very long that such an intervention, even with extensive Iranian ground support, will be enough to retake and hold the majority Sunni areas of Eastern Syria that serve as the sectarian and demographic base of the Islamic State or the northern and southern areas of Syria currently under rebel control.

This means the United States needs to develop and execute a plan to develop its Sunni allies' spheres of influence in Syria to help retake and stabilize those areas from ISIS and al Qaeda. However, such an operation will only succeed if Washington not only maintains its goal of al-Assad stepping aside, but adds a military component to the strategy as well. In the short term, that could mean limited no-fly zones over areas controlled by moderate and local forces in southern Syria. Later on, as part of a comprehensive solution in Syria, it could involve something closer to U.S. intervention and diplomacy to end the conflict in Bosnia or Kosovo.

For now, President Obama seems unlikely to choose a more assertive course of action, despite the disaster of his Syria policy to date -- the White House is much more focused on implementing the Iran nuclear deal and rebalancing out of the Middle East. Yet given the threats being generated by the Syria crisis, it is hard not to see the United States finding itself sucked back into the region, with even worse odds of success than when it thought it was on the way out.

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