

Securing al-Sham: Syria and the Violence in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

For the second time in less than a year, U.S. President Barack Obama is considering military strikes in the Middle East. But they will not fix the region's problems -- especially the ongoing war between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Uprooting the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) from the swath of territory it now holds between Aleppo and Baghdad will take a lot more than airstrikes or a change of government in Iraq. Although the 2003 war in Iraq might have led to the formation of the jihadi group, the chaos in Syria provided it the space to metastasize. To prevent ISIS -- and other such organizations -- from building a permanent safe haven in Iraq and Syria, Washington must help settle Syria by supporting Sunni tribes and other moderate opposition groups there.

FRACTURED FRONT

Over the last week, the Obama administration has focused its attention on pushing Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (or whoever might replace him) to be more inclusive of the country's Sunni Arabs, who make up around 20 percent of the population. Washington is right to do so. ISIS and the other groups fighting alongside it rely on this disenfranchised community for support. Without Sunni backing, ISIS would crumble and Iraq could stabilize. To help that process along, the United States could launch airstrikes against ISIS camps in the country.

Sunni Arabs are an even larger part of the equation in Syria, where they represent between 65 and 70 percent of the population and make up the backbone of the opposition to the Alawite Assad regime. Western mediators have urged Assad to negotiate with Alawites, Shia, and Sunnis. But he has refused, preferring instead to have himself "re-elected" to a third term as president and to make vague promises of dialogue with the opposition groups that succumb to the regime's siege-and-starve tactics.

Assad might seem like he is in control, but his troops rarely tangle with ISIS, preferring instead to take on the more

moderate factions. In fact, his regime has only been able to go on the offensive in western Syria with help from Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and Iran's Quds force. When their support disappears, so, too, will Assad's luck. For example, when Iraqi Shia militiamen were recently recalled from the Lebanese-Syrian frontier to fight ISIS in Iraq, Syrian opposition forces quickly reappeared, retook part of the area, and continued to stage hit-and-run attacks. In other words, Assad and the rebels are at a stalemate and, unless the West and its Arab allies try something new, the conflict will persist.

BORDERLANDS

The best way to permanently uproot ISIS is to follow the example of Jordan. In recent years, Jordan has relied on a two-part strategy to deal with the Syrian crisis: control the border with Syria and monitor and work with the Syrian opposition to keep radical rebel groups out of the country's southern reaches, along the border with Jordan. The U.S. intelligence community, which has a close relationship with Jordan, has reportedly participated in this effort.

Moderate groups continue to hold their own in southern Syria, but, as in other areas of the country, they still rely on coordination with more radical groups to fight the Assad regime. To prevent those radical groups from spilling into Jordan, Amman closed one of its border crossings to refugees and reopened it further east, in uncontested territory. It also worked with Western intelligence agencies to increase covert support for moderate groups in southern Syria. As a result, ISIS has yet to take root there.

For Turkey to strengthen its own border with northern Syria, it would have to follow Jordan's example. So far, though, Ankara has been reluctant to get as strict about people, money, and weapons crossing its frontier into and out of Syria. There is considerable risk that militants could retaliate against Turkey if it decided to clamp down, but surely the Syrians roaming its territory already present such a risk. To help Turkey make the right call, the United States could promise to use drones or airstrikes to help Turkey secure the border.

After closing the borders between Syria and Jordan and Syria and Turkey, it will be time to address the now-gaping border between Syria and Iraq. The best way to do that is by working with tribes in the area and with selective drone strikes. Sunni tribal confederations such as the Baggara, Dulaim, Jabbour, N'eim, Qugaidat, Shammar, and Tai'e extend into Syria and Iraq -- and some even reach into Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. These tribes could be made into a bulwark against ISIS and other jihadists in Syria and Iraq. According to some reports, ISIS has worked to win over their rank and file by offering basic services. For those that don't accept such carrots, the group has used harsh sticks, such as beheadings and crucifixions. Its pull among the tribal population worries local tribal leaders, who see their influence slipping.

Arab intelligence agencies can play on these fears by supplying tribal leaders with lethal and nonlethal assistance. The United States is not in a good position to lead this effort, since it has no boots on the ground and lacks the qualitative intelligence. However, Washington should coordinate closely with Arab Gulf countries in supporting tribes against militant groups, using air power to aid their fight against ISIS.

Another natural bulwark against ISIS and other such groups is Syria's Kurdish population in northeast Syria. To stave off the militant threat, the Kurds united two years ago under the banner of the Kurdish Supreme Committee. The group includes the radical Democratic Union Party of Syria, which is the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and the more moderate Kurdistan National Council, an alliance of 15 Kurdish political parties. Despite tensions among its members, the alliance has battled jihadists for the better part of two years. And like their Arab counterparts, the Kurds are organized into broad tribal confederations that reach across the border into Iraq and Turkey.

Sealing off Syria's external borders -- and its internal one with the Kurdish region -- would help contain jihadist

groups and interdict ISIS suicide operators coming to Iraq while the United States works with the Iraqi government to win over moderate Sunnis and, possibly, launches drone strikes against ISIS positions. This could be bolstered through the creation of a U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force to coordinate cross-border operations. Meanwhile, allying with the Arab tribes on both sides of the border will undermine ISIS support in its key Sunni Arab demographic. This could result in a foreign policy twofer, helping address both the current situation in Iraq and Syria and the broader jihadist threat over the long term.

SYRIAN SOLUTION

With ISIS hemmed in, the crisis in Iraq would be far easier to manage through airstrikes and diplomacy.

The world could then turn to the war in Syria. The top-down diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis are going nowhere. According to Samantha Power, U.S. representative to the United Nations, more Syrian civilians died from Assad's barrel bombs during this year's failed peace talks in Geneva than during any other period in the Syrian war. And that onslaught continues to this day. The best way to keep the regime from dropping barrel bombs, as well as chlorine gas and other indiscriminate weapons, would be to shoot down its aircraft.

Providing vetted armed groups with antiaircraft weapons would help the opposition secure its territory. It would also empower moderates by making them key to defending against Assad's onslaught. Although antiaircraft guns would not take care of the regime's weapon of choice -- artillery -- civilians would at least have less reason to flee to Turkey and Jordan, which are already overwhelmed with refugees and fear spillover violence. The United States could provide the opposition active intelligence to facilitate such operations.

Now the question is how to channel antiaircraft and other heavy weapons so that they don't fall into radicals' hands. Much has been made of the bickering and petty rivalries within the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and the thousand or so armed groups fighting against the Assad regime. The divisions are partly a reflection of Syria's extremely diverse Sunni population -- from the urbane Sunnis representing the traditional elites, who long collaborated with the regime, to the tribal Sunnis of eastern Syria and Dera, who cooperated with the regime at arm's length, to the conservative Sunnis of northwestern Syria, who have long fought Alawites and the Assad regime. ISIS and other militant groups, such as the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, are primarily entrenched within the tribal and conservative Sunni populations.

The Supreme Military Council (SMC), an umbrella organization that Arab and Western intelligence helped set up in late 2012 as the armed wing of the SNC, was meant to unify rebels' supply chains, encourage moderates to unite, and empower the SNC on the ground. Unfortunately, it hasn't worked, which coalition leaders blame on a lack of outside support. The problem with the SMC is that, like the SNC, it is beset with petty rivalries and has at times been infiltrated by radical Salafis. For that reason, it would be unwise to use the SMC, at least as it exists now, to channel antiaircraft weapons to moderate rebels.

The other major conduit supporting the rebels has been individual groups vetted by Western and Arab intelligence agencies, including the Syrian Revolutionary Front and Harakat Hazm, which have been given American-made antitank missiles. Such vetted groups stand wholly apart from their more radical counterparts, but their lack of resources or political agenda has hobbled them. The SMC leadership, moreover, has criticized Western efforts to supply some groups with weapons as creating warlordism among the moderate Syrian opposition.

But given the threat that jihadist groups pose in Syria, selective arming seems like the least bad option. And antiaircraft weapons would come with strings attached. In the short term, the regional intelligence agencies that are advising moderate groups inside Syria would be best placed to carry out joint antiaircraft operations until the moderate Syrian opposition can stand on its own. Over the longer term, the SMC should be reconstituted as a clear anti-radical force with more tribal leaders and leaders from vetted groups. As was the clear during the SMC's initial

formation, Arab and Western intelligence agencies are best placed carry out the task. A new SMC could be the channel for other heavy weapons as well and the conduit for setting up governments in opposition areas coordinated with the SNC and other groups in exile.

Eventually, as the SMC's capabilities increase, the group could fill vacuums in areas where ISIS and other jihadi groups give way. Eventually, the SMC would fully train its sights on the Assad regime. Assad, in turn, would come to appreciate that his military solution to the Syria conflict is doomed to fail and that he needs to return to the negotiating table.

PAYING UP

For the second time in less than a year, U.S. President Barack Obama is considering military strikes in the Middle East. Targeted air, missile, and drone attacks could degrade ISIS's capabilities and should be used carefully. But they will not fix the region's problems -- especially the ongoing war between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The United States must start to address those problems by increasing covert support for border security operations and for the Syrian opposition. To do so, it can tap the \$5 billion Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund that Obama recently outlined in a speech at West Point. This fund aims to expand the training and equipping of foreign militaries, bolster allied counterterrorism capabilities, and support efforts to counter violence extremism and terrorist ideology.

Yet Syrians cannot unite around groups armed in the shadows. A much more comprehensive and overt training and equipping program, as recently introduced in the National Defense Authorization Act, would help the United States build up moderate forces in Syria that could effectively combat Assad and deescalate the crisis. Although it is still unclear which moderate Sunni oppositionists will be part of any final negotiated settlement, it is clear is that ISIS and other radicals can't be included. ❖

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