Toward a New U.S. Policy in Syria

Ground Zero for Countering Iran and Deterring an Islamic State Revival

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July 11, 2018

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sanctions and a no-fly/no-drive zone in northeast Syria would prevent Assad regime and Iranian forces from charging in, which would infuriate local Sunnis and spur regeneration of the Islamic State. Such a zone, coupled with sanctions, would impose costs on the Assad regime by denying it the money and income needed to ensure control and maintain the patronage networks that underpin its power. This would in turn create financial burdens for Iran and Russia in their effort to keep Bashar al-Assad afloat, just as Tehran's ability to pay for such support will be diminished by the U.S. policy of maximum pressure. At the same time, the Israeli campaign to prevent Iran from building up its military infrastructure in Syria risks jeopardizing the regime's hard-won military gains. This poses a dilemma for Moscow: commit to an increasingly costly effort to keep Assad in power, which entails the risk of an Israel-Iran war in Syria, or work with the United States to get rid of Assad and preserve Russian gains there.

Specific Actions

To meet these broad goals, the United States should take the following military and economic steps:

- Prevent regeneration of the Islamic State and bar Iran from constructing a permanent military and intelligence architecture in Syria and the Fertile Crescent.
- Block Iranian and Assad forces from northeast Syria after the defeat of IS and enforce a no-fly/no-drive zone north and east of the Euphrates River using airpower and a small residual presence on the ground.
- Maintain the no-fly/no-drive zone until full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which seeks a stable Syrian government without Assad and the Iranian-backed forces that support his rule.
- Support Israeli efforts to drive wedges between Iran, Russia, and Assad, including Israeli strikes on Iranian military sites.
- Step up sanctions against banks issuing credit to the Assad regime, resource providers to Iran's Syrian proxies, and Assad cronies who facilitate Iranian investments in Syria.

- Help its allies in northeast Syria find alternative markets for the oil and agricultural exports that they currently have to sell to Assad.
- Work with Turkey in Manbij and elsewhere to create leverage with the Russians.

Syria Matters

After more than seven years of conflict, Syria is now the sole battlefield in the world on which American, Russian, Turkish, Israeli, and Iranian military forces all operate, along with forces of the Syrian Arab Army, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran-backed Shia militias, Kurdish nationalist movements, and a broad array of Sunni opposition groups, ranging from U.S.-backed moderates to extremists aligned with al-Qaeda and IS—all complemented by the periodic display of Israeli airpower. This kaleidoscope of military presence underscores the significance of Syria as the preeminent arena of strategic competition in the Middle East today, for both great and regional powers.

For the United States, Syria matters:

- as home to the now-liberated capital of the Islamic State, remaining a potential breeding ground of recruits for possible future phases of violent Sunni jihadism;
- as a critical link in Iran's efforts to control a territorial corridor from the Mediterranean Sea to Southwest Asia, and to open a new front against Israel;
- as host to a central government that, even in its diminished status, retains a dangerous chemical weapons capability and a willingness to use it;
- as a frontline state in several of the region's most volatile disputes, from the Arab-Turkish-Kurdish conflict in the north to the Israel-Iran/Hezbollah conflict in the south;
- as a potential source of enormous flows of refugees whose human tide could threaten the stability of neighboring states (such as Jordan and Lebanon) and faraway Europe;
- as a platform for Russian naval and intelligence access in the Eastern Mediterranean;
- and, given the important U.S. priority of North Korean denuclearization, as the site of Pyongyang's most brazen attempt at nuclear proliferation, the construction of a plutonium production reactor at al-Kibar.

In this complex environment, the United States needs a clear strategy that defines its overall objectives and the appropriate ways and means to achieve them. In broad terms, the two core goals of U.S. policy vis-a-vis Syria should be to prevent the reconstitution of IS as a territorial-based terrorist entity and to counter the expansion of Iranian influence, including (but not limited to) military presence and infrastructure. Achieving these goals requires commitment over time and multiple points of leverage.

The U.S. military presence in east Syria has been essential to victory over IS, and its withdrawal should not be considered unless and until alternatives are in place that ensure a robust capability against an IS revival. In terms of Iran, the Trump administration's preferred approach of imposing severe economic sanctions will not itself be sufficient to compel Tehran to change course on Syria or the region. If the administration is seriously committed to the twelve objectives outlined in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's May 21 address, countering Iran in Syria is essential.

Economic pressure on Tehran may increase popular discontent and threaten the regime, but if the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has been triumphant on the battlefield in the meantime, Iran's leaders will be well positioned to argue that more resistance, not economic reform at home and compromise abroad, is the route to success. The United States must ensure that the IRGC's "resistance" approach is seen as a losing proposition—endangering Iran rather than enhancing its power, not achieving its objectives, and requiring permanent high military costs. Syria is the theater in which the United States can demonstrate that, despite all its efforts, the IRGC has been unable to secure its vaunted "land bridge," that Iran cannot use Syria as a power projection platform against Israel, the Arab states, and Turkey, and that a political deal is necessary and will not be on Tehran's terms.

Russia's role in this effort is important but uncertain. Despite decades of Moscow-Tehran partnership,

born both of antipathy toward the United States and fear of Sunni jihadism, Russia does not necessarily support Iran's ambition to dominate territory from Lebanon through Southwest Asia or its desire to open new fronts against Israel. Nor does Moscow necessarily share the goal of installing a permanent militia presence in Syria through which Tehran, rather than Assad, effectively controls the country. Through sustained engagement and close cooperation with its allies, the United States could exert real pressure on Russia by appearing to put at risk Moscow's own project to protect Assad's regime. The actor best positioned to drive a wedge between Iran on the one hand, and Russia and the Syrian regime on the other, is Israel, because Israel can present Russia with a dilemma: either rein in Iran's aggressive stance or face the possibility of a war between Israel, Iran, and Hezbollah fought on Syrian territory—an eventuality that has the potential to endanger Russian equities in the country.

In this context, U.S. sanctions on Iran should be coupled with a mix of muscular diplomacy among regional allies (Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates) and constraints on Iran's movements. The latter could be achieved by retaining small numbers of U.S. troops and introducing a no-fly/no-drive zone across the northern territory currently controlled by the United States and Turkey. This is a relatively low-cost, moderate-risk, high-payoff policy—appropriate for when the United States assesses that it is safe to revert to a mixed air/land approach to preventing an IS revival.

In holding northeast Syria (30 percent of the country, and the most resource-rich tier) with the current small U.S. force, Washington retains significant leverage against Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus. With a nascent agreement on the disposition of Manbij, the United States and Turkey must rapidly agree on U.S. terms for oversight of the northeast. Turkish and U.S.-aligned forces would then control roughly 40 percent of Syrian territory. An explicit agreement with Ankara would have the added magnetic draw of moving the Turks away from the Astana process that Vladimir Putin set in motion to help Russia and Iran define the terms for Syria's future. This would also be the moment to make clear to America's two principal Persian Gulf partners that they must "put skin in the game"—with deployment of at least some Saudi and Emirati troops, significant financial support, and political effort with Putin, whom they have assiduously courted over the past five years.

Meanwhile, it is imperative to begin signaling U.S. intentions to contest the drift toward a Moscow/Tehran-established status quo in Syria. With Russian air cover, the Assad regime's move into southwest Syria is now bringing the seven-year civil war largely to a close—at least for now. The U.S. campaign against the Islamic State is transitioning to a new phase in the northeast; regional partners and competitors are awaiting President Trump's decision on the future of the U.S. troop presence there and in Manbij.

A perception of U.S. retreat is already growing in the region, in part because of America's public discussion about withdrawing troops from Syria. Such a move suggests U.S. weakness and lack of staying power to both friends and enemies—an unwillingness to contest Tehran, abandonment of allies (e.g., the Syrian Kurds, Israel) in the face of severe threats to them, and a breach of faith with those in the region ready to join Washington in rolling back Iran (e.g., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel). And a move out of Syria will eventually undermine the logic of a U.S. military presence in Iraq, where such a long-term commitment is essential to building the Iraqi security forces' capabilities to confront and defeat any return by IS. The alternative approach advanced here offers a way to achieve U.S. core objectives in Syria while shrinking the U.S. military footprint.

Northeast Syria and UNSCR 2254

In considering whether and how to withdraw U.S. troops, the Trump administration has three options. First, the president could countermand or simply not implement his guidance and maintain a ground force in the northeast. Second, the administration could simply withdraw without a "day after" plan. Third, it could pull out ground troops but maintain a political-military "overwatch" in the northeast through coordination with local forces—namely, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—and Turkey sufficient to maintain the region's autonomy and stability and deny the area to the Syrian regime and IS.

The first option could raise legal authorization problems once the IS fight—the justification for such a presence in a hostile country—is over, and would overcommit the United States to the PYD/SDF. The second option would allow IS to regenerate among the Sunni Arab population while signaling U.S. weakness to the entire region, analogous to the 2011 Iraq withdrawal. At the same time, support would drop for a U.S. troop presence next door in Iraq, which can help stabilize that critically important country (which boasts the region's second-largest oil production and third-largest reserves) and counter Iranian efforts there.

With the third option—maintaining a role in the northeast post-pullout sufficient to deny it to Assad and his Iranian allies—the United States could generate, with low cost and risk, significant military leverage on the war's outcome (especially if coordinated with the Turkish presence in the northwest and Israeli military operations over Syria), and on Iran's postwar role. If tied to sanctions and information operations surrounding the pullout, this would increase the costs for the regime and Iran, creating considerable leverage at the negotiating table. Such pressure can powerfully complement the diplomatic leverage inherent in UNSCR 2254, which calls for a political transition to secure the country and the region, and the U.S. "embargo" on foreign postwar reconstruction absent an acceptable political outcome in accordance with 2254.

Various options are available for such a political-military overwatch, including a U.S. no-fly/no-drive zone modeled on Operation Northern Watch over Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991–2003. In that campaign, American air patrols and stated policy were able to deter Saddam Hussein's threats to Kurdistan throughout that period (at least until 1996), while a limited U.S. and Turkish military ground presence worked with the Kurdish Peshmerga and stabilized the situation. An air-centric overwatch in Syria obviously cannot be permanent, but until a stable national government that meets the expectations of UNSCR 2254 emerges, such a policy could pressure Assad and his sponsors to accept a compromise political solution by denying him access to important terrain, population, and resources (especially oil and agriculture). This approach could be even more effective if synergized with a strong sanctions regime. It would also meet the president's troop withdrawal mandate. And even if the campaign does not compel Assad and his allies to compromise, it would at least position the United States to prevent an IS revival and limit the expansion of Iranian influence in the region.

Such "maintenance" activity by U.S. airpower augmented by small ground advisory and liaison teams has been repeatedly executed (including in Northern Watch itself) without explicit congressional or international authorization, since it avoids the risks, costs, and symbolic engagement of a significant ground presence. This type of operation would require significant U.S. air assets, but most of them are already in the region, and the option, while costly, should be less expensive than an ongoing deployment of a 2,000-strong ground force combined with the counter-IS air campaign.

Any such operation would also require careful diplomacy with the PYD/SDF (who provide the ground defense force), along with Arab communities, Turkey, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and Baghdad (since the main supply routes into northeast Syria run through Iraq, specifically the KRG). Some reconciliation would be necessary between Turkey and the PYD, which is considered an offshoot of Ankara's nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

In addition, the United States and international partners would need to provide limited humanitarian assistance for the northeast and support alternative oil and agricultural markets (mostly likely the KRG or Iraq), both to maintain its viability and support local governance. These efforts could be conducted on a far more modest level than the nation-building pursued in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Various observers question the efficacy of and risks attendant to such zones. Yet risks are inherent in any Syria scenario, and the United States currently is operating an informal no-fly/no-drive zone in the northeast. It is not so much dependent on the 2,000 U.S. troops there, even if most were pulled out, but rather on other elements already present—U.S. airpower, local ground allies, and mutual political understandings with other players not to challenge each other's key security interests.

Any such temporary intervention must be linked to a strategy of encouraging Russia to cooperate on

several matters in return for a "victory"—namely, on stabilizing Syria, rolling back Iran's ambitions there, and blocking IS regeneration (including as a reaction to Iranian vassals ruling Sunni Arab populations, as seen in Syria and Iraq in 2013-14). This would require coordination among U.S. Syrian allies, the PYD, Israel, and Turkey, focused on a postwar outcome (formally under 2254) for which the United States would be willing to trade its presence in the northeast. At minimum, such an outcome would have to meet the security needs of these allies and dramatically reduce Iran's role in the country. In return, the United States could accept Russia's military presence and political arrangements short of an immediate end to the Assad regime, as long as those arrangements would not betray U.S. partners, especially the PYD/SDF, or encourage a new IS or al-Qaeda threat.

In sum, any total military withdrawal from the northeast risks being seen as U.S. abandonment of Syria leading to a total victory by Assad and Tehran, pushing the United States out of Iraq, and reinforcing Tehran's ambitions for Syria as a power projection platform against Israel, thus heightening the risk of a war between the two that could suck in the United States.

Reinforced Economic Sanctions

Economic sanctions are the focus of the administration's "counter Iran" strategy, but they are unlikely to be enough to drive Iran from Syria. Still, there is much more the administration can do to develop a country-level "Syria plan" for implementation of broader Iran sanctions aimed at rolling back the Islamic Republic's influence in the region. And if these sanctions are synergized with a plan to deny the most resource-rich area of Syria to the regime and Tehran, then the United States and its partners can gain significant leverage over the political process.

There is no shortage of "hooks" for such sanctions—numerous Syrian entities have been subject to sanctions under programs targeting everything from weapons of mass destruction to corruption. Economic sanctions on the Assad regime, including those adopted by the "Friends of Syria" group in 2012 and U.S. sanctions levied years earlier, have been largely ineffective in generating pressure on the regime, principally because of the massive influx of resources from Assad's sponsors. Nevertheless, they have driven up the cost of Tehran's bailout. Beyond military support for Assad's forces and Shia militias, Iran has kept the Syrian economy afloat, extending credit for the purchase of Iranian oil and other goods and providing a financial lifeline to banks. Many Iranian actors in Syria are also already subject to U.S. sanctions, or will be when nuclear-related sanctions are reimposed. The latter offers an opportunity to again draw attention to the treasure Iran has spent in Syria and the flouting of international norms and commercial standards.

Three areas in particular can help put the spotlight on Tehran and encourage U.S. partners to demonstrate resolve. First, the administration should sanction banks involved in the provision of credit to the Assad regime. Since 2013, Iran has extended billions of dollars in credit to Damascus under the condition that the funds be used to buy Iranian oil, machinery, and other goods. The loans have proven to be a significant source of revenue for Assad and his cronies since Iran foots the bill and revenues line their pockets. Syrian and Iranian press have cited the banks involved, such as the Export Development Bank of Iran and Trade Bank of Syria, among others. The United States should encourage the European Union to act against EDBI based on its work with Syrian banks on EU sanctions lists.

Second, looking beyond financial networks, sanctions should target Iranian provision of resources to proxies in Syria, which is primarily achieved through the air bridge from Iran to Damascus. Shia militias fighting in Syria are trained and armed by Iran before being moved to the conflict zone, often on commercial aircraft. Prior to their removal from U.S. sanctions lists under the terms of the nuclear deal, dozens of aircraft belonging to Iran Air were identified by the U.S. Treasury Department based on their use in ferrying military and crowd-control equipment to the Assad regime. The reapplication of sanctions to Iran's national carrier in the coming months offers an opportunity to highlight that such activity did not cease despite the nuclear deal. Sanctions will not disrupt the air bridge or bankrupt the IRGC, but they can

highlight the role of other Iranian carriers in maintaining the bridge, such as Mahan Air, which was not removed from sanctions lists under the nuclear deal but still succeeded in expanding its routes in Europe and Asia during that period.

Third, the Treasury should work with Gulf partners to sanction Assad cronies who facilitate long-term Iranian investments in Syria. The country's war economy has spurred a new business elite to replace targeted individuals such as Rami Makhlouf, who was sanctioned in 2008. This group is useful to the regime because they are outside of sanctions; many likely hold assets in the Gulf while benefitting from Iranian investment. Joint action by the U.S. Treasury and other members of the Riyadh-based Terrorist Financing Targeting Center would send a message to Syrian elites that their relationship with Assad and Iran will cost them. The United States should encourage the UAE in particular to identify and block the assets of those involved in such projects. The new generation of Assad cronies will have to choose between the wealth they have maintained abroad and lucrative Iranian contacts.

Separately, Washington should provide assistance to the northeast and support its agricultural and oil trade. The Assad regime has remained the primary buyer of oil from this area whether it was under the control of IS or the SDF. Although extraction takes place in the northeast, transformation of oil into electricity—including that provided back to the northeast—is done in territory that has remained under regime control throughout the conflict. Gulf states could be asked to bear the costs of new power-generation facilities in the no-fly/no-drive zone. The question of cutting the regime off from these purchases, and the SDF off from such revenue, is a difficult one that has ramifications on the humanitarian situation and broader questions of stability. It may be possible to route this oil to the Kirkuk-Ceyhan Pipeline, but it would require Iraq and Turkey to acquiesce (or to blend Syrian and Iraqi crude). Additional imports from Iran may be an alternative for the regime; at times, Iran has exported an estimated 52,000 barrels of oil per day to Syria. A similar dynamic exists with agricultural commodities—roughly two-thirds of the country's wheat comes from the northeast. Any strategy aimed at cutting the regime off from such resources will need to consider how and when such trade should be allowed. Efforts should also be taken to promote local productive capabilities and generate jobs in the area as a bulwark against the reemergence of IS.

Coordinating U.S. Strategies on Iran and Syria

Perceived success on the Syrian battlefield has added to the prestige of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. With some justification, the IRGC claims it saved Assad. More important, the force is widely seen in the region as being a powerhouse and a reliable ally to its friends—nimble at intervening quickly, able to mobilize many fighters, and potent on the battlefield. Many accept the IRGC's claim to have defeated the United States in Syria: Washington insisted Assad had to go, and Iran insisted he had to stay.

The resultant state of affairs is dangerous—at a time when Iran is torn by debates about how to resolve the many crises it faces, the IRGC can argue that its path works best. The IRGC can, and does, correctly point out that Iran's self-styled reformers/technocrats have proven unable to end the country's isolation. Their strategy of a "nukes only" deal (and a weak, time-limited deal at that) did not work. By contrast, the IRGC can argue that its strategy of resistance has worked at achieving its objectives, especially in Syria. To be sure, Iranians resent the cost, but in the end, success sells—at least to the Supreme Leader and the key decisionmakers, whose prime concern is defending the revolution. More generally, success in war gives legitimacy and rallies people around the government.

While the IRGC's "success" has been modest and costly, that is still a better track record than any other policy the Islamic Republic has adopted, abroad or at home. The regime's long list of failures—especially at resolving economic problems—makes the IRGC's regional strategy look good by comparison. President Hassan Rouhani's government has not delivered on its promises to reduce repression, provide prosperity, or tackle the corruption and cronyism that feed public anger.

The severe economic problems magnify the impact of U.S.-orchestrated economic pressure. The tightening of U.S. sanctions could increase popular discontent against the regime. That creates an opportunity for change, as witnessed by the June letter signed by

more than 100 prominent Iranians calling for direct, unconditional dialogue with the Trump administration. But it also creates a risk that the change will be in the wrong direction.

The IRGC tries to present itself as the alternative to an incompetent Rouhani crowd. Iranian newspaper articles calling for a military president—and the Supreme Leader's long-time military advisor saying Iran would be better off without this government—created the atmosphere for Rouhani's June 27 statement that he would not resign. His statement brings to mind Shakespeare's adage "The lady doth protest too much"—why would he bring up the subject of resignation unless he is being pressed to do exactly that?

If the IRGC can argue that it has been triumphant on the battlefield, it will be well positioned to argue that it can save the day whenever Iran's interests are threatened. The leadership may claim that what is at risk is the nation, not just the regime. This card could play well given the growing spirit of Iranian nationalism, which has largely replaced Islamic revolutionary ideology. Certainly Khamenei would be comfortable arguing that the route to success is via resistance rather than economic reforms and opening.

If the IRGC is riding high, the U.S. government cannot achieve the twelve objectives Secretary Pompeo outlined on May 21. So Washington must make sure that the IRGC's resistance approach is seen inside Iran as a losing strategy—one that endangers the country, requires permanent high military costs, and prevents it from enhancing its power or achieving its objectives. Syria is the key theater here because the IRGC holds it up as the marquee example of its success.

There is an excellent opportunity at modest cost to show that the IRGC has not met its key objectives. The IRGC has placed great emphasis on the importance of a land bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean going through east Syria. That can exist only if Iran's allies control the Middle Euphrates River Valley or the desert to its west, which they do not completely hold at present. The United States has a strong interest in ensuring a stable, moderate local authority in the MERV—that is, keeping Iran out of there—because if the area comes under the control of sectarian Shia, they would enflame the Sunni population, likely fueling another revival of radical Sunni jihadism. Washington does not want a MERV-based repeat of the 2015 debacle in Mosul, Iraq, where sectarian anti-Sunni authorities sparked the return of Sunni jihadism. So long as the MERV is controlled by the kind of stable, local, moderate government that keeps jihadism at bay, Iran will not have a land bridge through the area.

Controlling the desert to the west of the MERV may not at first be possible by the authorities there. Yet a continued very modest U.S. Special Forces presence at al-Tanf backed up by airpower can help accomplish that objective while also reassuring the Jordanians, who worry about Iranian encroachment reaching their borders.

U.S. officials have often insisted that the importance of the land bridge is exaggerated by Iranians and Israelis. That may well be the case, but saying so does not serve U.S. interests. The United States is in a good position to deny the Iranians what they proclaim they need and what Israel fears they will get. If the IRGC defines success as controlling the land bridge, and the United States can deny that to them as a byproduct of initiatives carried out largely for other reasons, then Washington should loudly point out that Iran has not achieved the objective it set.

Russia is a wildcard. As mentioned previously, Moscow has maintained a partnership with Tehran for years built on common antipathy to the United States and fear of Sunni extremism, but it does not necessarily share all of Iran's goals regarding Syria and Israel. The United States has had little success exploiting that divergence because Russia and Iran share the important common objective of shrinking U.S. influence in the area. Russia wants the United States to accept it as a great power, so Moscow has been eager for talks with Washington about Syria's future. But this does not mean Russia has the will or ability to do anything that actually restrains Iran. The Kremlin has every incentive to agree to U.S. initiatives distancing it from Tehran but then avoid implementing them on a sustained basis.

The actor best positioned to drive a wedge between Iran and Russia is Israel, because it can confront the Russians with a choice they do not want to make: either rein in Iran's aggressive stance or face the imposition of costs on Assad for his deference to Iran—or, in extremis, an Israel-Hezbollah/Iran war. Russia

wants to remain on good terms with both sides of that potential conflict, and it does not want such a conflict to endanger its ally Assad. As part of the wedge-driving effort, Israel must show it is willing to use force against Iran while accepting Assad but retaining the option of imposing costs on him, too—especially when his air defenses challenge Israeli aircraft. The United States should make clear to Israel, and Russia, that it has no objections to an active Israeli policy of preventing Iran from establishing a permanent military presence in Syria. Jerusalem appears to have decided that military force needs to be a key element in such a policy. Washington should continue its response to date, namely, raising no objections. U.S. interests are well served if Tehran thinks that the United States has provided a green light to the Israelis to do what they think is necessary to prevent Iran's presence in Syria from becoming a threat to them.

Unfortunately, Israel may not succeed at dividing Russia and Iran. And Tehran may sink its claws into Syria so deep that its proxies and agents are inseparable from Syrian forces and the Syrian government—with the Iranians being the dominant partner in that relationship. It is only prudent for the United States to hedge against this possible outcome by keeping up pressure on Assad until he shows full independence from Iran—as unlikely as that may be given his regime's depleted manpower and dependence on Iranian boots on the ground. So long as Iran and its agents—especially foreign fighters—are active in Syria, U.S. policy should be to contain the Assad regime and oppose steps that would strengthen it.

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