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WAR IN SYRIA: NEXT STEPS TO MITIGATE THE CRISIS

UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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HEARING CONTENTS:

WITNESS STATEMENTS

The Honorable Robert S. Ford [\[view pdf\]](#)

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The Honorable Nancy Lindborg [\[view pdf\]](#)

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Senator Cardin, other distinguished members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to speak before the committee today about what new steps can be taken to mitigate the crisis in Syria. It is an honor to appear before you again.

There is not much we the United States can do now to mitigate the crisis in Syria quickly. The fighting is too entrenched and bitterly sectarian; both the Syrian government and the armed opposition seek military victory instead of preparing their own ranks for tough, mutual compromises. Foreign nations are deeply involved – far more deeply than the United States – and they are committed to winning the conflict militarily. There is no magic American bullet.

This is not to say there are not useful things the United States can and should do, but we are well past the point of a clearly identifiable path out of the conflict.

Today in Vienna there was another meeting of the International Syria Support Group and renewed calls for a cessation of hostilities. Last January and February I was highly skeptical that efforts to broker a cessation of fighting would achieve much. In fact, the February 27 brought a significant reduction in violence for some weeks – longer than many observers, myself included, thought possible.

But it did break down, badly. Aleppo, the Damascus suburbs, Latakia province, Idlib province, Homs province, Hama province all are witness to that. The structural problem undermining an enduring cessation is the lack of agreed mechanisms to (1) monitor violations and (2) impose penalties on those determined responsible for violations. Indeed, it is not clear that American officials have a very clear understanding of which groups are operating in specific locations as they shift regularly in the course of the fighting.

I will add here that without greater military pressure on the Syrian government it will not negotiate a compromise political settlement. The difference in tone between President Assad's public remarks of late last July, when he was sober about defeats, and his upbeat tone in public remarks this spring after the Russian intervention are striking. The Russian intervention thus hindered prospects of a negotiated deal. The United States, meanwhile, lacks leverage with the armed opposition because it – and its regional backers – view us as inconsistent at best. I don't know if our policy on the armed opposition in the remaining time of the Obama administration will change. I only know the result the policy has had on the ground.

There are steps the administration might be convinced to take now to mitigate some parts of the Syrian tragedy. They would help us from the national security standpoint – especially in terms of undermining extremist recruiting in Syria – and they would address the horrible humanitarian situation.

These steps include

- Taking more Syrian refugees. The screening process is thorough but labor intensive. It needs greater resources. So far, the U.S. has admitted only about 1,800 this fiscal year when the administration's goal is 10,000 by the end of September. As fantastic as it sounds, we should be aiming to take 100,000 but without far more resources this will not be possible.
- pressing regional states such as Turkey and Jordan to keep borders open to refugees, as international humanitarian law requires.

Both countries of course do much to help Syrian refugees, but there are reportedly 50,000 people trapped on the Syrian-Jordanian border now in the harsh conditions of early summer. Turkish border guards have shot at refugees attempting to cross into Turkey on occasion. We should urge such actions to stop.

Likewise there are modest steps we could do to better press for access by humanitarian aid providers to civilians in communities under siege by both government and opposition in Syria.

These steps include

- Raising specific instances of aid access denial – whether by the Syrian government or opposition fighters – in the Security Council with a view to discussing the possibility of Chapter VII action.

The Russians have voted for UN resolutions such as 2254 that call for humanitarian access, and when the Syrian government blocks aid convoys, as it did in Daraya last week, the Russians should not be given a pass.

- Pressing Russia and Iran, and through them the Syrian government, to allow air drops to besieged communities in suburban Damascus just as there have been UN air drops to Deir Zour, an eastern Syrian city controlled by the Syrian Government and besieged by Islamic State forces.
- Press the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross to be explicit, publicly, about which groups are responsible for blocking aid convoys.

Only when combatants sense they will suffer retaliation of some sort will they change their behaviors. The absence of agreed monitors that I mentioned before makes the role of the UN and ICRC all the more important. In the past, they have preferred discretion, but clearly that discretion is paying marginal returns at best. The more forthright comments from Jan Egeland of the UN last week after the convoy to Daraya was stopped was a good step in this direction.

Looking longer term, Syria's unity may be impossible to restore. Especially if there is a durable cessation of hostilities but no progress on a compromise political deal, Syria could end up de facto partitioned even if no Syrian of any political stripe is now demanding this.

Partition is not a particularly good outcome for the United States. In such a scenario

- it is doubtful that large numbers of fighters from either the government or the Syrian opposition would reach across lines and cooperate against the Islamic State. It will thus make our efforts against ISIS harder;
- reconstruction of Syria will certainly be far harder and that in turn means that while refugee flows might subside, relatively few of the 4.8 million outside the country will be able to go home.
- polling of young people in the region suggests that unemployment is a big driver in extremist recruitment which again suggests that moribund reconstruction will pose a national security problem for us and our allies.

There are Syrian efforts to reach across bitter ethnic and religious divides and they merit our support; they are modest in size and won't fix Syria's crisis quickly but they may lay groundwork that formal negotiations might utilize later. It is a small investment and includes

- encouraging more off-line, informal meetings between Syrians in track two formats and direct discussions under the auspices of international NGOs or senior world statesmen;

It would be especially useful to encourage conversations between Syrian women from opposing camps, although it may be hard to find empowered women from among the ranks of government supporters.

- encouraging greater participation from ethnic and religious minorities in off-line discussions with opposition and pro-government persons.
- Supporting efforts to build stronger civil society organizations in Syria so that they are stronger if the day after fighting ends ever comes.

The White Helmets, for example, have done great work even if some members of that group are far from perfect. There are legal groups struggling to maintain elements of fair rule of law in areas outside government control that need support and health and organizations operating under horrendous circumstances struggling to keep the health care sector afloat. They need recognition and support.



United States Institute of Peace

War in Syria: Next Steps to Mitigate the Crisis

**Testimony before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

Nancy Lindborg

President

United States Institute of Peace

May 17, 2016

Introduction

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current situation in Syria and steps that can be taken to help mitigate the crisis.

I testify before you today as the president of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress over 30 years ago as an independent, national institute dedicated to the proposition that peace is possible, practical and essential to our national and global security. It engages directly in conflict zones and provides tools, analysis, training, education and resources to those working for peace.

Unabated Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

The numbers associated with the Syrian crisis have become a grim litany of steadily increasing statistics throughout the past five years. Currently, the UN estimates 11.3 million Syrians are displaced, which is roughly equivalent to all the residents of Ohio being forced from their homes. Of those, 6.5 million are displaced within Syria and another 4.8 million have fled the country as refugees. Overall, 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance and of those, 4.6 million live in areas that are hard to reach. Grimmiest of all is the climbing death figure, now believed by some to be between 400,000 and 470,000 deaths.¹

For more than five years the Syrian conflict has crossed the threshold of mass atrocities, featuring widespread crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by the state security forces, affiliated groups, and opposition movements, including the use of chemical weapons and the intentional targeting of religious groups. The Syrian-American Medical Society has documented 161 chemical weapon attacks leading to the deaths of 1,491 people and more than 14,000 injuries. Additionally, an estimated 488,000 people live in besieged areas where they are unable to receive food or basic medical care, leading the UN Secretary-General to accuse all parties of using starvation as a weapon of war.

The Global Response

Since the beginning of this crisis, the global community has mobilized to provide critical humanitarian assistance. With your important support, Senators, the U.S. government has led the way by providing \$5.1 billion over the course of this crisis. However, inside Syria, provision of critical assistance has been persistently hampered by the complexities and extreme danger of responding to needs in this crisis. The regime has conducted a ruthless bombing campaign,

¹ The Syrian Center for Policy Research published a report that estimated deaths at 470,000 through 2015. UN Special Envoy de Mistura made a personal estimate of 400,000 killed on April 28, 2016

including the deliberate targeting of civilians and specifically medical personnel and facilities. The rise of ISIS has led to its capture of large swaths of territory where humanitarian access is extremely limited, and the many different armed actors have made the crossing of multiple lines of control an arduous, dangerous and uncertain undertaking by heroic aid workers.

The Syrian crisis has helped drive a steep increase in global humanitarian need that has overwhelmed the international system and led to significant funding shortfalls globally, despite historic levels of funds raised. For 2016, the UN reports only 23% coverage of the \$4.55 billion requested for humanitarian and regional response needs.²

In February, 2014, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2139, which demanded that “all parties allow delivery of humanitarian assistance, cease depriving civilians of food and medicine indispensable to their survival, and enable the rapid, safe and unhindered evacuation of all civilians who wish to leave.” It demanded that “all parties respect the principle of medical neutrality and facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment and transport.” However, despite repeatedly reaffirming these convictions in subsequent unanimously passed UN resolutions, access to hard-to-reach and besieged populations remained difficult or impossible, with terrible reports of malnourishment and outright starvation.

Finally, in February of this year, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), co-chaired by the U.S. and Russia, managed to negotiate a Cessation of Hostilities (COS) that miraculously managed to hold for nearly seven weeks. From late February through early March, the humanitarian community was able to make important progress in reaching ten of the 18 communities under siege, both through 63 convoys bringing life-saving food, medical supplies and treatment and 22 airdrops by the World Food Program. Humanitarian assistance reached just 3% (10,500 of 393,700) besieged between October and December 2015, but with the Cessation of Hostilities in place, humanitarian aid reached 52% (255,250 of 486,700) of those in besieged communities between January and April 2016.³ Some estimates indicate that violence decreased by 90 percent during the cessation, bringing a much needed respite to war-torn communities.

However, by mid-April, the tenuous Cessation of Hostilities began to fall apart. Humanitarian access has once again been severely reduced, with negotiations for access again difficult and uncertain. The regime bombing campaign never fully ceased, and in April, Syrian regime forces rapidly escalated attacks in and around Aleppo and Homs, including the destruction of two of the

² UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service: <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emergencyDetails&appealID=1133>

³ISSG Humanitarian Task Force briefing April 28, 2016

few remaining hospitals in Aleppo. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that in March and April, Syrian government forces killed 1100 civilians, ISIS killed 165 and opposition forces killed 170.

As the ISSG ministerial reconvenes today in Vienna, most urgent is the recommitment of all parties to pressure each of the warring parties to respect the Cessation of Hostilities in an effort to stop the killing and enable critical assistance to reach those most in need.

Regional Spillover

Syrians fleeing the war have helped push global displacement to the historic high of 60 million people worldwide who have been forced from their homes by violence. An estimated 4.8 million Syrian refugees have fled their country, overwhelmed neighboring countries and now spilling onto Europeans shores, triggering a secondary crisis within Europe.

The impact of this outflow on the region is enormous. Basic infrastructure -- water, electricity, schools, hospitals -- have been stressed to the breaking point. Economic and social pressures are mounting as countries cope with the influx of Syrians.

In Lebanon, which is hosting an estimated 1.07 million Syrian refugees, nearly one in four people is now Syrian. *(If one in four Americans were a refugee, the United States would face the unimaginable equivalent of hosting the populations of California, Texas and Illinois combined.)* This influx has increased tensions among Lebanon's own communal groups. Since 2011, it has reduced the country's economic growth to the 1-2% range. Syrian refugees have increased the labor supply but also have pushed more Lebanese into the ranks of the unemployed. This crisis, along with Lebanon's chronic debt crisis, political paralysis, and declining revenue, has drastically limited the government's ability to invest in infrastructure improvements, such as water, electricity, and transportation—the very resources needed by an increasing population of both Lebanese and Syrian refugees.

Similarly, Jordan struggles to cope with more than 628,000 Syrian refugees. Jordan already suffers from an insufficient supply of natural resources, especially water and energy. Coupled with chronic high rates of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, this influx of refugees places immense stress on one of the region's poorest countries. The World Bank estimates that Jordan has lost more than \$2.5 billion a year since the beginning of the Syria conflict. This amounts to 6% of its GDP, and one-fourth of the government's annual revenues.

Even amid its own war, Iraq also is receiving Syrian refugees. The United Nations estimates that more than 246,000 Syrian refugees have entered Iraq to escape the Syrian civil war. These

refugees join nearly four million internally displaced Iraqis, adding to the enormous stress on the social infrastructure of a state already suffering from its own war.

Five years ago, there were hopes that changes in the region would lead to more equitable, inclusive growth, with an emphasis on creating more jobs for MENA's legions of young unemployed. Instead, the reverse has happened, with the first four years of the Syrian war costing the region as much as \$35 billion (measured in 2007 prices) in lost output or foregone growth.

The conflict in Syria has had a profound impact on the lives of average citizens throughout the region. In many cases, towns have doubled or tripled in size; housing prices have increased, schools are operating at double shift, and communities--already poor themselves--are stretched to accommodate a refugee population that continues to expand. Estimates are that per capita incomes for many Turks, Egyptians, and Jordanians are 1.5% lower now than they would have been without the Syrian conflict, and by 1.1% for many Lebanese.

Rethinking Refugee Assistance

Importantly, the refugee crisis has accelerated a rethinking of how assistance is provided, with increased focus and action on responding to the protracted reality of this crisis instead of treating it as a short term conflict. Given the utter enormity of the social, physical and economic destruction inside Syria, it will be decades before people are fully able to return home even once a peace agreement is reached. While there is still much to do better and differently, there are useful if still nascent changes in how the international community provides assistance. For example, the UN has worked with Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt to develop a regional refugee and resilience plan as well as individual country strategies with the goal of forging a much closer link between relief and development efforts. Additionally, efforts have included an increased focus on:

- Building resilience, with greater attention to education, jobs, psychosocial and social cohesion within both refugee and host communities;
- Addressing potential conflict between refugee and host communities through dialogue, mediation and targeted initiatives, including a recognition of the importance of including host communities, often poor themselves, in any assistance programs;
- Enabling local initiatives and local government and civil society actors to have a greater role and voice in assistance programs;

- Financing to support host countries, including a new World Bank-led MENA financing initiative that provide new concessional loans to Lebanon and Jordan at rates not previously available to them as Middle Income Countries. New funding just announced provides \$100 million for Jordan to create 100,000 jobs for Jordanians and Syrians, while another \$100 million for Lebanon focuses on education for both Lebanese and Syrians.
- Providing education and livelihoods: Jordan has announced temporary work permits for Syrians; many schools in Jordan have gone to double shifts, and there is progress in enabling Syrians to attend school in Jordan.

Focus on Youth

Addressing the youth of Syria may be the most important challenge as an entire generation is now growing up torn from families, homes and dreams. UNICEF reports that the conflict is affecting 8.4 million children—more than 80 percent of all Syrian children—either within the country or as refugees. Approximately 3.7 million Syrian children have been born since the conflict began in 2011, including over 300,000 children who have been born as refugees. Without a birth certificate, one of the main means of determining citizenship, these children risk becoming stateless in the future, adding to their risk. Children are left without protection, especially the more than 15,000 unaccompanied or separated children who have left Syria. Most of all, there is tremendous urgency to ensure education is available, with reports noting more than 2.8 million Syrian children are not attending school. Young people who languish in refugee camps or live on the margins in the slums of host countries risk growing up untrained, unskilled, and uneducated. These children and youth, many of them unmoored from family, culture and community, are vulnerable to predatory employers, the allure of violent extremists groups, transnational criminal organizations, or potential victims of human trafficking.

Despite significant efforts to mobilize action to ensure “No Lost Generation” of Syrians, persistent funding shortfalls and tremendous challenges remain. In the absence of concerted action, we risk a new generation of youth without hope and potentially poised to continue cycles of conflict. Instead it is imperative to focus on programs that enable youth to have opportunities, be heard and have a chance to contribute to a more hopeful future. This includes:

- Engaging youth from refugee communities in efforts that enable them to resist the lure of radical ideology, including consistent but discreet support to moderate religious leaders in the region who may engage youth as part of interfaith dialogues and counter radicalization efforts.
- Establish mechanisms to issue children born while displaced or as refugees some form of birth certification and documentation.

- Despite some progress on enabling refugee children to attend school, a full scale concerted effort is needed to ensure that Syrian children can attend school, and importantly, that high-school and college students can complete studies that have been interrupted by war.
- Increase the focus on enabling youth to find livelihoods and jobs, with complementary help for youth of host countries.

World Humanitarian Summit

Next week, the first World Humanitarian Summit will convene in Istanbul, with governments and civil society working to map out a new approach for humanitarian action at a time of unprecedented need. Global humanitarian assistance has shifted over the last decade from primarily serving those affected by natural disaster. Now 80% of assistance is going to those affected by violent conflict. Conflict has been identified by the UN as the “greatest global threat to development.” The Syrian humanitarian crisis has dramatically sharpened the urgency to reconsider some of the fundamental approaches to humanitarian assistance.

The World Humanitarian Summit will aim to expand the number of donors helping to meet the global burden of humanitarian need. It will seek to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian delivery; will focus on building resilience and closing the gap with development; and most importantly, will deliver an urgent call to action on shrinking the need.

As the Syrian crisis illustrates, all too often, humanitarian action becomes the focus in the absence of real solutions moving forward. At the Summit, there will be a call to rally the missing political will to end these protracted conflicts that wreak generational havoc.

Conclusion

Today the ISSG reconvenes in Vienna, with the hopes of reinvigorating the cessation of hostilities. In the absence of a longer term solution, an agreement to staunch the violence is paramount. In the meantime, critical policies for the U.S. government include:

Continued life-saving support: The U.S. government leadership and support has been critical; it is imperative that humanitarian support continues to ensure life-saving assistance is available for those most in need.

Focus on Resilience: The U.S. government leadership and support is vital for a wide range of changes that could enable smarter, more effective and more efficient assistance. This effort includes more flexible funding that enables greater support for local actors, greater ability to tailor response to needs on the ground and an increased ability to address relief and development needs as part of one response. It also includes support for the new World Bank initiatives that support middle income countries struggling to support an overwhelming refugee burden.

Focus on building peace and reconciliation at the community level: Finally, we know that even if peace is negotiated in Vienna tomorrow, the wounds of Syrians will take generations to heal. We need to focus now on investing in ways to rebuild social cohesion both within refugee communities and where access is possible, inside Syria. My own institution, USIP, has piloted some of this work inside Syria by gathering religious and tribal leaders, ethnic Arabs and Kurds from a rural northeastern district last year for talks that halted a rise in local communal tensions, let displaced families return home and re-opened a local road critical to normal commerce. This work helps lay the foundation for moderate local leadership and cooperation that are essential for building Syria's future stability. It need not, indeed should not, wait for an end to hostilities.

Thank you, Senators, for your continued focus and attention to this critical issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.

War in Syria: Next Steps to Mitigate the Crisis

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Tamara Cofman Wittes

May 17, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Senator Cardin, for the invitation to appear before you today. I'd like to request that my full statement be entered into the record, and I'll give you the highlight reel. And let me begin by emphasizing, as always, that I represent only myself before you today – the Brookings Institution does not take institutional positions on policy issues.

Opportunities Lost

When I last testified before this committee regarding Syria, in April 2012, [I expressed my concern](#) that American reticence to act to shape the emergent civil war and the involvement of regional powers in it risked enabling an unbridled escalation of the conflict. I suggested then that uncontrolled escalation could entrench sectarian violence, empower radicals, destabilize the neighborhood, and generate wide human suffering. While the Obama Administration has taken incremental steps over the last four years to try and shape both the battlefield and the context for diplomacy, those steps have proved too little and too late to alter the conflict's fundamental dynamics.

President Obama's initial read of the Syrian conflict as holding only narrow implications for American interests was a signal failure to learn the lessons of the post-Cold War period, and the civil wars of the 1990s, by recognizing the risk that Syria's civil war could spill over in ways that directly implicated U.S. interests. The experience of the 1990s clearly suggested how a neglected civil war offered easy opportunities for a violent jihadist movement—just as the Afghanistan war did for the Taliban in the mid-1990s—and how large-scale refugee flows would destabilize Syria's neighbors, including key U.S. security partners like Jordan and Turkey. And as we now know, ISIS used the security and governance vacuums created by the Syrian civil war to consolidate a territorial and financial base that the United States has been seeking since late 2014, with limited success, to undermine.

Unfortunately, the realistic policy options available to the United States have narrowed considerably since 2012, the violence is entrenched, the spillover is creating serious challenges for the neighborhood and for Europe, and the number of actors engaged directly in the Syrian conflict has proliferated. All of this means that the continuation of the Syrian civil war has direct and dire consequences today, not just for regional order, but for international security. This reality, combined with the tremendous human suffering this war generates every day, drives two clear imperatives for U.S. policy: to intensify efforts to contain the spillover and misery, and to seek an end to the conflict as soon as possible.

Ending the War

We must be realistic, however, about what steps will, and will not, end the Syrian conflict. Recently, [some policy experts have suggested that](#), in the name of advancing great-power concord to end the war, the United States should relax its view that Bashar al-Assad's departure from power is a requisite for any political settlement. This view rests on the assumption that Russia will not bend in its insistence on Assad's remaining in place, and on the assumption that a U.S.-Russian agreement on leaving Assad in place would override the preferences of those fighting on the ground to remove him. Both of these premises, in my view, are incorrect.

We must therefore understand clearly the interests and imperatives driving the major players in this conflict, and we must understand, too, that the battlefield dynamics will heavily condition the prospects of any political settlement. Ending the bloody war in Bosnia in the 1990s involved getting the major external powers with stakes in the outcome – the United States, the Europeans, and Russia – to agree on basic outlines of a settlement and impose it on the parties. But imposing it on the parties required a shift in the balance of power on the battlefield, brought about by Croat military victories and ultimately a NATO bombing campaign. Bosnia also required a large-scale, long-term United Nations presence to separate the factions and to enforce and implement the agreement.

So I believe that, absent a change on the ground, diplomacy alone is unlikely to end the Syrian war – but I certainly agree with diplomatic efforts to advance a country-wide cessation of hostilities and advance a vision for a political settlement. A full-scale cease-fire could create more space for political bargaining, and in the meantime reduce human suffering and mitigate the spillover effects of the ongoing violence. Right now, however, the Assad government and its patrons in Tehran and Moscow have no interest in a sustained cease-fire, because the battleground dynamics continue to shift in their favor. They used the partial cease-fires of the past weeks to consolidate territorial gains from opposition forces and to further weaken those forces through continued air attacks. Without agreement amongst the various governments around the table as to which fighting groups constitute terrorist organizations, a ceasefire will inevitably disadvantage opposition factions as the Assad regime targets them in the name of counterterrorism. That will likewise advantage the most extreme among the rebel factions as well as jihadi groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda's affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, who will all continue to use force to acquire and hold territory and to force their political opponents and inconvenient civilians off the field.

Likewise, some suggest that the sectarian nature of the conflict, and the deep investment of regional powers in backing their preferred sides, mean that it is not possible to hasten an end to the war at all, and that it must be allowed to "burn itself out." This policy option is infeasible for the United States, from moral, political, and security standpoints. The scale of death and destruction already, over nearly five years of war, should shame the conscience of the world. Those seeking to escape this misery deserve our succor, and

those seeking to end the carnage deserve our support. And it is beyond question that Bashar al-Assad and his allies are the ones responsible for the vast majority of this death, destruction, and displacement.

In political and security terms, the war's spillover into neighboring countries and now into Europe can still get worse. Key states like Lebanon and Jordan are at risk of destabilization and/or extremist terrorism the longer the conflict goes on and the more of its consequences they must absorb. Turkey, as we know, has already suffered attacks by extremist groups. And the war has continued to be a powerful source of recruitment for extremists, drawing fighters and fellow travelers from around the world. ISIS and Al Qaeda feed on the civil conflict and the chaos on the ground is what gives them room to operate. It is indeed imperative that the United States remain engaged, and intensify its engagement as needed, to secure an end to the conflict as soon as possible.

Understanding the Geopolitical Context

In the ongoing diplomacy over how the conflict ends and what political settlement results, there are two issues on which the parties involved in the Vienna talks demonstrate sharp disagreement, and about which the United States needs to advance clear views. The first is a disagreement over the primacy of preserving the central Syrian government, currently headed by Assad. Russia, along with some regional actors (even some opponents of Assad), believe that the most important determinant structuring a political settlement must be the preservation of the Syrian central government, even if that means preserving Bashar al Assad in office. If Assad is ousted without an agreed-upon successor in place, they argue, then Syria will become a failed state like Libya, in which ISIS will have even more space to consolidate and operate, with dire consequences for regional and international security. It is this concern over state collapse and the desire for strong central authority that keeps Russia united with Iran behind Assad.

It's understandable to desire the preservation of Syrian government institutions as a bulwark against anarchy, and to want a central government in Syria with which to work on counterterrorism and postwar reconstruction. The problem with elevating this concern to a primary objective in negotiations is its embedded assumption that any Syrian government based in Damascus will be able to exercise meaningful control over most or all of Syria's territory after rebels and government forces stop fighting one another. That's a faulty assumption, for several reasons.

First, it is extremely unlikely that we'll see swift or effective demobilization and disarmament of sub-state fighting factions in favor of a unified Syrian military force. If the central government remains largely in the form and structure of Assad's government, and even more so if Assad himself remains in power, it is hard to imagine rebel groups agreeing to put down their weapons and rely on security provided by the central government. Thus, local militias will remain important providers of local order and also important players in either defeating or enabling extremist groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Second, effective governance from Damascus is extremely difficult to imagine, much less implement. The degree of displacement, the extent of physical destruction, and the hardening of sectarian and ethnic divisions due to five years of brutal conflict (and decades of coercive rule before that) all present steep challenges to centralized rule. Those with resources and capacity within local communities will end up being the primary providers of order at the local level – and it is local order, more than a central government, that will enable communities to resist ISIS infiltration. Thus, countries concerned with having effective governance in Syria as a bulwark against extremists need to recognize the value and importance of local governance in any post-war scenario.

Finally, there is the unalterable fact that Bashar al-Assad and his allies have slaughtered perhaps as many as 400,000 of Syria's citizens; have used chemical weapons against civilians; have imprisoned and tortured thousands and displaced millions; and, through Assad's own horrific decisions, have broken Syria's government, the Syrian state, and the Syrian nation to bits. Those who demand his ouster as a prerequisite for ending the war are justified in their view that Assad does not have and will not have legitimacy to govern from a majority of Syrians, that his continued rule would be divisive and destructive of Syrian unity and security, and that he should instead face justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity. As a practical matter, and because of all this, many Syrian fighting factions on the ground and their supporters, are committed to Assad's ouster. US-Russian concurrence on setting that goal aside will not induce them to end their fight. The only way that might occur is if Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia – who are committed to Assad's ouster – relent on their demands and agree to curtail support to rebel factions who continue to fight. This is hard to imagine in the current circumstances.

In other words, while preserving the Syrian state is a laudable goal, it will not alone achieve the objectives set by those who hold it out as the primary imperative in the political negotiations over the future of Syria. I would suggest that, while the fate of Bashar al Assad is not perhaps of primary concern from the perspective of U.S. interests, the United States should be pressing Russia and others involved in the talks to relax their fixation on Syria's central government (and who runs it) as a counterterrorism goal, and to recognize that a significant degree of decentralization and international engagement with local actors inside Syria will be necessary to preserve the peace, to carry out reconstruction, and to defeat ISIS. Likewise, the Syrian opposition and those states demanding Assad's ouster as a precondition for peace must recognize that they have even more to gain from insisting on decentralization and local autonomy than they do from Assad's departure from power. They might even be able to trade their current demand for Assad's immediate departure against robust assurances for empowerment of local authority, release of detainees and internationally guaranteed transitional justice.

The second major issue under contention regarding a negotiated end to the Syrian war is the role that Iran will play in post-conflict Syria. Iran's efforts to expand its influence – in Syria and in the region as a whole – present a concern that unites all of the United States's partners in the region, and should be a major concern for Washington as well. The gains made by the Assad regime (with Russian and Iranian help) over the past eight months enhance the disturbing prospect of a Syrian government remaining in power in

Damascus that is dependent on Iranian funding, Iranian military support, and the importation of Iranian-backed militias. While the Russians are perhaps concerned more about the Syrian state as a bulwark against extremism, Iran is deeply committed to the survival of its Alawi client and the maintenance of Syria as a channel for Iranian support to Hizballah. And while some Sunni Arab states embrace the goal of preserving Syrian territorial integrity and the central government, all are troubled at the prospect that this government would be under the thumb of Tehran. Any political settlement that institutionalizes Iran's overwhelming role in Syria will likewise increase Iran's ability to impact to threaten Israel's northern border, to destabilize Lebanese and perhaps also Jordanian politics, and to interfere with ongoing efforts to assuage the anxieties of Iraqi Sunnis and bring them back into alignment with the government in Baghdad.

The rising likelihood of an Iranian-dominated Syria emerging from the war has induced a change in attitude toward the Syrian conflict by America's closest regional partner, Israel. Israeli officials took a fairly ambivalent stance toward the civil war for several years, although they were always wary of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. But today, they judge Assad's survival as possible only through effective Iranian suzerainty, putting their most powerful enemy right on their border. Iranian domination of post-conflict Syria would also likely spell an escalation in Iranian weapons transfers to Hizballah – and Israel cannot expect to have 100% success in preventing the provision of increasingly sophisticated rocket and missile technology to Hizballah. These and other types of support from Iran through Damascus could increase Hizballah's capacity to wage asymmetric war against Israel, at great cost to Israel's civilian population. Israeli observers are increasingly alarmed at this scenario, and Israeli officials now [state clearly](#) that, if faced with a choice, they'd prefer to confront ISIS than Iran across the Israeli-Syrian frontier.

American diplomacy in Vienna must take greater account of the destabilizing implications of an Iranian-dominated Syrian government, even a rump government that does not control all of Syrian territory. A U.S. focus on constructing a political settlement that limits Iran's influence in postwar Syria could induce greater coherence among American partners in Vienna currently divided over the fate of Assad; and it could prevent a situation in which the United States trades the threat of ISIS in Syria for the threat of Iranian-sponsored terrorism and subversion emanating from Syria.

Al Qaeda and the Syrian conflict

Al Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has particularly benefited from the war's continuation, from the weakness and partiality of the ceasefires negotiated earlier this year, and from the inability of the U.S.-Russian diplomatic process to generate any progress toward a political transition. Shrewdly, Nusra has focused on building its reputation as the most consistent, and most effective, military opponent of the Assad regime, and on its readiness to cooperate with anti-Assad factions with whom it has other, ideological and political, disagreements. The failures of diplomacy feed Nusra's strength and win it allies amongst more nationalist rebel factions. And while it's tempting for American efforts to focus on rallying forces to defeat ISIS, our diplomats and decision

makers must beware that leaning too far back on the issue of political transition for the sake of building an anti-ISIS coalition might just end up pushing more hardline opposition elements into the arms of a different extremist movement, one with demonstrated intent and capability to attack the United States.

To summarize, it's imperative that American diplomacy to produce a political settlement of the Syrian war be firmly focused achieving two goals crucial to the interests of the United States and its regional partners: first, enabling and institutionalizing local governance as a bulwark against ISIS (more than central government institutions), and second, establishing hard limits on Iran's role in a post-conflict Syria and on its ability to use Syria as a conduit for support to Hizballah.

Managing Spillover and Restoring Stability

A second major priority for US policy, in addition to this refocused diplomacy, must be stepped-up efforts to mitigate the destabilizing consequences of the Syrian war, no matter how long it goes on. And, while the United States continues to work through diplomacy and pressure to produce an end to the war, work must also begin now to prepare for the long-term and wide-scale effort needed for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction.

The scope of death, displacement and destruction threatens to rob Syria of the basic ingredients for social stability, regardless of what lines might be drawn at a negotiating table in Vienna. Without concerted effort to ameliorate the effects of this conflict for people on the ground, to rebuild social trust, and to nurture resilience within these battered communities against conflict and division, any peace settlement could quickly unravel the face of local security dilemmas and intercommunal tensions, as well as in light of the unaddressed scars and grievances of Assad's brutality against the Syrian people.

Meeting this challenge requires at least four lines of effort:

- doing more to engage Syrians in building local governance and community resilience, especially skills and platforms for conflict resolution;
- doing more to stabilize and secure frontline states, including support for integrating refugees into the economy and society;
- helping more refugees create new lives far from the conflict zone, including much more resettlement in the United States; and
- working diligently with regional partners to tamp down the sectarianism that both drives and is driven by the war, and that feeds extremist recruitment and violence.

As we have seen, ISIS markets itself partly on the order it provides to local communities – a brutal order to be sure, but still a contrast with the chaos and insecurity of civil war. To counter ISIS effectively, we must help local communities with governance and service delivery. More can be done even now to put into place the ingredients for

successful and sustainable conflict resolution for Syrians. These steps include enabling and encouraging Syrians displaced by the fighting, whether in neighboring countries or in areas of Syria not under ISIS or regime control, to engage in dialogue over, and planning for, their own communal future. Neighboring states accepting refugees have understandably sought to tamp down political discussion and debate within refugee camps, for example. But these refugee populations need to engage in dialogue to build the basis, in social trust, that will enable them to manage daily governance and resolve differences peacefully if and when they are no longer living under refugee agencies and host-government security services. These processes can also connect, over time, to negotiating efforts on a political transition in which the Syrian opposition is represented, yielding greater legitimacy and efficacy to that more formal political process.

Too often, in discussing Syria, we posit a choice between working with the central government and working with unsavory non-state actors. There is an obvious additional option, already in play, that deserves greater emphasis: empowering and engaging local municipalities, local business sectors, local civil society, and other actors who exist in territory not under extremist or regime control and who have an obvious stake in the success of their own communities and their defense against coercion either from ISIS or from the Assad government. It is these local actors who will make or break the implementation of any political settlement, because they are the ones who will give it life and legitimacy. They are the ones who will help manage differences within their own communities and with their neighbors to avoid outbreaks of violence, and they are the ones who will lead the establishment of a new social compact to enable long-term stability in Syria. USAID and its implementing partners have been creative in developing programs to engage local communities and local governing institutions, and this work deserves robust, sustained support from Congress.

The United States continues to lead in international support for refugee relief – but it lags woefully in refugee resettlement. Only about [1300 of the 10,000 Syrian refugees](#) the Obama Administration promised to admit into the United States have been resettled here so far; and the United States can and should accept more.

In addition, American policy efforts to address the refugee crisis must go beyond humanitarian relief and expanded resettlement. Working with European partners, the United States government can work to save lives along the transit routes for refugees fleeing the region, can support successful integration of refugees into European cities (again, working at the municipal level), and can do more to support social stabilization, livelihoods, and development for the large refugee communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey and for the societies hosting them.

On June 14 and 15th, the Brookings Institution will convene a high-level gathering of regional, European, and American leaders to develop new responses and more robust forms of cooperation to meet this global humanitarian crisis. I look forward to reporting back to you on our results.