



February 14, 2017

# Defeating Terrorism in Syria: A New Way Forward

Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session

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**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

**02/14/2017 Defeating Terrorism in Syria: A New Way Forward**

Stability in Syria is an important national security interest for the United States. Much of Syria is a geographic space controlled or dominated by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The country borders key regional partners. The persistent refugee crisis threatens the stability of Europe. The two-pronged threat of international terrorism, emanating from both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, is fuelled by the continuing conflict.

Despite the grim situation in the country, the US government has an opportunity to stem the challenges presented by the two international terrorist organisations and their enablers.

In fact, Washington has options it did not necessarily have two years ago, including a way to prevent not only the Islamic State but also Al Qaeda and other radical groups from operating in at least 50% to 60% of Syria. These include the territories that the Islamic State controls or once controlled since 2014. Once the Islamic State controls an area, it typically eradicates any Islamist and jihadist cells or support system and disarm the population to prevent local rivalry, which leaves groups like Al Qaeda having to revive dormant cells or rebuilding influence almost from scratch.

So the expulsion of the Islamic State offers a rare opportunity to implement a strategy to build an alternative to jihadist organizations, more so than in 2014 when dozens of different armed groups operated in those areas. The liberation of these areas by the US-led coalition also creates a de facto American sphere of influence, which both Russia and the regime have accepted – at least for the time being.

This counterterrorism strategy involves a more farsighted policy of establishing de facto safe zones in parts of Syria where inhabitants can be protected from the jihadists and the regime, and where the international community can ensure that Al Qaeda does not roll back into the areas from

which the Islamic State is expelled. Those safe zones can be established in the areas where the US and its allies fought, or will fight ISIS.

The strategy I am proposing is a baseline. It requires minimal American commitment, building on what the US is already doing in Syria against the Islamic State, without which any fight against jihadism is doomed to fail. Pre-existing resources and hard power should be supplemented with a policy that deliberately immunizes the liberated areas from falling back to extremist forces. This strategy is not an invitation for American occupation or long-term “nation-building” that President Donald Trump has explicitly criticized. Instead, it is both realistic and essential, expanding on battlefield victories already scored over the last two-and-a-half years of Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State in northern, eastern and southern Syria.

The strategy should begin by recognition of the fractured nature of the Syrian conflict today. To get a sense of the situation on the ground, it is important to view it through four quadrants.

The first quadrant is the caliphate terrain. This expanse stretches, albeit not coherently, from As Sukhnah near Palmyra to Albukamal near Iraq, and from there to the Kurdish-controlled Qamashli in the northeastern corner near the Turkish border to Azaz in northwestern Syria. Although the regime still holds pockets in the city of Deir Ezzor, the international coalition has the leverage to dictate how this region should be tackled to prevent the return of ISIS. In this quadrant, three political or military blocs currently focus on fighting ISIS: the Assad regime in Deir Ezzor; the American-led coalition and the Kurds in Raqqa; and Turkey and its rebel allies in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. If these different forces turn against each other, the consequences could reverse the gains against the Islamic State.

The second quadrant is rebel-held areas in the south, adjacent to the Israeli and Jordanian borders and near Damascus. In stark contrast to northern Syria, relatively quiet fronts exist between the regime and the rebels. Syria’s neighbors there, namely Israel and Jordan, have interest in a sustained calm in that region. Regional backers of the opposition that work

closely with Jordan, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, share a similar interest and are committed to preventing extremists from holding sway in that particular region. Both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have considerable presence in southern Syria, but they are largely contained. The primacy of the rebels and the regime against the jihadists needs to be sustained with a more robust approach to southern Syrian, including by enabling local forces to govern their areas more effectively, building on the existing calm.

The third quadrant is the more fragmented northwest: Idlib, and pockets in rural Aleppo, Hama and Homs. The international community has fewer options in this region because of Al Qaeda's dominance here; unlike the Islamic State, it has integrated into and taken the lead in the mainstream insurgency. Throughout the conflict, Al Qaeda has focused on fighting the Assad regime and rarely sought to impose its own ideology on the local communities in which it operates. As in Yemen and elsewhere, the approach means the fight against Al Qaeda will have to be more sensitive to the local dynamics. This quadrant makes up approximately 2% of Syrian territory, and is the only area where Al Qaeda has relatively dominant presence.

The fourth quadrant is the regime-held areas, roughly 40% of Syria stretching from Deraa in the south to Aleppo in the north.

The US government should approach the Syrian conflict from this compartmentalized outlook. Different areas require different solutions. What works for eastern Syria does not necessarily work for the northwestern corner of Aleppo and Idlib. Similarly, what works for southern Syria does not work for the north. The country is currently fragmented along different conflict dynamics, and therein might exist some solutions.

An approach that recognizes the fragmented nature of the conflict is not the same as division of Syria. Quite the contrary, salvaging different areas in Syria as much as possible helps provide realistic solutions to particular challenges. The US administration can achieve minimally defined

objectives of defeating the Islamic State and ensure that the jihadist insurgency cannot physically reconstitute itself again.

In much of Syria, the US has more leverage and presence on the ground than it is publicly recognized. What is lacking is a policy to utilize this leverage to ensure the removal of jihadists, protect local communities from indiscriminate bombardments, and minimize conflict between various allies in northern Syria, namely the Kurds on one hand and the rebels and Turkey on the other.

The US must view southern and eastern Syria, for example, as part of its strategy of fighting extremism in Iraq as well as protecting Jordan and Israel. The focus in these two regions should involve locally accepted governance. The alternative is to hand over these areas to the Assad regime that currently does not have the resources and legitimacy to conquer or hold new areas – such policy will only ensure that the Islamic State will come back, as it did in Palmyra in December despite Russian and Iranian support. Eastern Syria has the added value of its relevance to the stability of Iraq. Even if the US government does not see Syria as important, eastern Syria is inescapably vital for Iraq's border security.

Stabilizing Syria should be a priority for the United States. Reliance on Russia to do the job is a fantasy, and will only perpetuate the conflict and enable jihadists to entrench themselves on the doorsteps of Europe. The areas where the US already has leverage -- from eastern Aleppo along the Turkish border to eastern Syria near the Iraqi border and from there to the Jordanian and Israeli borders – present Washington with a historic opportunity to stabilize the country and ensure an enduring defeat of jihadists.

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House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade  
February 14, 2017  
“Defeating Terror in Syria: A New Way Forward”

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the subcommittee: I am honored by your invitation to speak about defeating terror in Syria and pleased to submit this statement for your consideration.

As a one-time military professional I was trained to define a mission and design an accompanying strategy in ways consistent with the desired end-state. In Syria we want terror defeated. We want to kill it and keep it dead. We do not want to neutralize terrorists now only to see them reappear in a few years, as was the case in Iraq. It is the ‘keep it dead’ part of the desired end-state that makes the battle far more than military in nature. Without an end-state reflecting political legitimacy in Syria – a political system seen by virtually all citizens as satisfactory and with no superior alternative – extremists will seek again to fill a governance vacuum produced by one family’s corruption, incompetence, and brutality.

Syria today is a problem from hell. Its internal conflict approaches its sixth year. It is the humanitarian abomination of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has killed hundreds of thousands of people, mainly civilians. Starting with a population of 23 million it has hemorrhaged nearly 5 million refugees and displaced internally over 6 million. More than 13 million require urgent humanitarian aid. Tens of thousands of Syrians have disappeared in government prisons, suffering unspeakable acts of torture, starvation, sexual abuse, and execution. Upwards of one million Syrians have been besieged by their own government, denied the basics of nutrition and medicine. Adding to the misery of Syrian civilians already on the receiving end of state terror is the presence in Syria of two competing terrorist groups: ISIS (ISIL, Islamic State, Daesh) and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), rival descendants of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Syria is also a political catastrophe. What happens in Syria does not stay in Syria. Refugees have placed great burdens on three countries close to the United States: Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. In 2015 one million migrants – most from Syria – made their way in a modern day mass odyssey to western Europe and Scandinavia, roiling the politics of our closest allies. And an emboldened Russia allied itself with Iran’s special brand of Islamist extremism to preserve in Syria a client regime subservient to Iran, one totally in the service of Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Reacting to the military success of Moscow and Tehran, NATO ally Turkey has joined with Iran and Russia in what it hopes will be a new Syrian peace process that safeguards Turkish interests.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations have defined defeating terror in Syria largely in terms of neutralizing the two rival AQI descendants: ISIS and JFS (the former Nusra Front). Indeed, terminating their military capabilities is critically important. Yet it will not suffice. Not if the desired end-state in Syria involves keeping both groups dead and rendering potentially more lethal successors stillborn.

This is why the Russian-Iranian preservation of the Assad regime presents such a challenge to defeating terror in Syria. Assad has been a poster child for ISIS and JFS recruitment: particularly of foreign fighters. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Syrian Arab Republic, reporting to the UN Human Rights Council, has detailed the horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime, ISIS, JFS, and others: the overwhelming majority by the regime. The reports of the Commission have been substantiated and expanded upon by numerous non-governmental organizations. The United States has facilitated the removal from Syria and safe-keeping of literally tons of evidence of egregious criminal behavior by Assad and his agents.

The point here is neither to catalogue the crimes nor try the perpetrators. Rather, it is simply this: there can be no political legitimacy in Syria and therefore no permanent defeat of terror as long as the Assad extended family and entourage wield political power in any part of the country. Leave aside persuasive evidence of Assad regime complicity in promoting ISIS and other extremists as convenient enemies of choice. Too much blood has been spilled, too many lives ruined, and too few acts of mercy and human decency performed: all because a single family elected to use collective punishment to survive politically. Russia and Iran know this. Assad's apologists know it. Perhaps Assad himself knows it. But some or all of them are content for the regime to continue to rule through state terror. This is not a pathway to legitimacy. This is not a prescription for defeating terror in Syria.

A prerequisite for killing terror in Syria and keeping it dead is for the Assad regime – family, enablers, and entourage – to be replaced by what the June 30, 2012 Geneva Final Communique referred to as a “transitional governing body,” one exercising full executive power and reflecting broad national consensus. But Russia and Iran – for separate, though compatible reasons - have purchased for their joint client something that looks like military victory. This leaves the United States stuck with a situation crying out for the rapid military defeat of ISIS and JFS, but no clear way forward to sealing that victory, because a polarizing war criminal remains politically ensconced in Damascus. The best we can do near-term under the circumstances is to defeat militarily these AQI descendants – particularly ISIS – in a way that does not strengthen a regime whose behavior pumps oxygen into the lungs of ISIS and JFS.

There are significant differences between these rival AQI descendants beyond the fact that they despise each other. ISIS has defied Al Qaeda leadership and has declared a ‘caliphate’ in the territory it seized in Syria and Iraq: territory initially equivalent in size to the United Kingdom. In Syria ISIS has, for the most part, observed a live-and-let live relationship with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Much of ISIS’ military effort in Syria has been focused on nationalist rebels opposing Assad, on JFS, and on Kurds.

JFS, on the other hand, has fought Assad even as it tries to marginalize nationalist rebels and bring the armed anti-Assad uprising under its control. Although it claims to have broken with Al Qaeda, its leaders have demonstrated fealty to Ayman Al-Zawahiri over the years. Whereas ISIS has conducted and inspired acts of terrorism abroad, JFS seems to have restricted its terror activities to Syria, although it stands accused of having hosted Al Qaeda foreigners with transnational terror ambitions.

Notwithstanding important differences between them, both AQI descendants merit early neutralization. And both may require new approaches in order to be beaten thoroughly.

Since September 2014 the United States, with several coalition partners, has been pursuing ISIS in central and eastern Syria with aircraft. After the battle for Kobani later that year, the Kurdish People's Protection Units – the YPG – became the main ground combat component for the anti-ISIS coalition in

Syria. Two-and-one-half years later ISIS remains headquartered in its Syrian 'capital,' Raqqa, after having mounted major terror operations in Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, and Ankara.

The YPG's objective is establish a Syrian Kurdish autonomous zone along the border with Turkey. Given the close relationship between the YPG and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) – an organization designated as terrorist by the United States – Ankara has objected strenuously to the YPG serving as the ground force for the American-led coalition. American special operators advising the YPG in its counter-ISIS operations have attempted to mitigate this objection by training eastern Syrian non-Kurdish forces to work with the YPG under the umbrella of an organization called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Although the YPG has fought well, neither its interests nor its capabilities make it the ideal force for a block-to-block fight in Arab cities like Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. As I understand it, Arab elements of the SDF would take the lead in entering Raqqa while mainly Kurdish elements would surround the city. One wonders about the level of urban combat expertise resident in the SDF.

The American-led bombing campaign and the work of the SDF on the ground deserve some credit for the gradual shrinkage of ISIS-controlled territory in Syria. Many ISIS leaders and fighters have been killed. Towns and villages important to the logistical link between ISIS in Syria and ISIS in Iraq have been liberated. The nature of ISIS itself – the fact that in Syria it is an imposed entity with significant Iraqi presence in the leadership ranks, the fact that it spends more time fighting opponents of a hated regime than the regime itself, and the fact that its sectarian brutality has inspired widespread resentment – has also contributed to its decline. But this despicable organization has had the time not only to enslave Syrians and perhaps influence young Syrian minds, but to plan in Raqqa significant terrorist operations inflicted on Turkey and western Europe. How much longer will it be permitted to breathe in Syria?

As it reviews anti-ISIS strategy in Syria, the new administration should take a hard look at how and when ISIS will be finished off militarily. Since the ISIS atrocity in Paris in November 2015 I have been advocating that a professional, American-led ground force coalition-of-the-willing replace Kurdish and Arab militiamen to close with and kill ISIS rapidly and with minimal collateral damage. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain have long since volunteered to put forces in Syria to fight ISIS: an offer that drew a strong objection not from the ISIS so-called 'caliph,' but from Assad's foreign minister. Other candidates for the coalition would include Turkey (which already has combat forces in Syria), Jordan, and France.

As an Army veteran who served in Vietnam and Lebanon I am not searching for new opportunities to employ in combat American uniformed personnel already over-committed and over-deployed. On the other hand, two successive Presidents have defined ISIS as a serious threat to American security. We may get lucky and watch the Syrian segment of this organization either preemptively vanish from Raqqa and other populated places or collapse militarily in the face of militiamen barely schooled in the complexities and techniques of fighting in built-up areas. But we cannot count on luck.

Ideally the Pentagon is examining several issues beyond ground force composition. How can ISIS be neutralized in populated areas without adding to the humanitarian catastrophe? What kinds of local administrations will be established in the wake of liberation? How can United Nations relief convoys be expedited? How can civilians in liberated central and eastern Syria be protected from an Assad regime – ISIS' principal enabler in Syria – that has pledged to restore its rule over all of Syria? Perhaps an opportunity will arise in liberating central and eastern Syria from ISIS for the United States and its partners to facilitate the creation of a decent, inclusive government it can recognize and support as an alternative to a regime whose existence is catnip for terrorists.

The near-term military neutralization of Al Qaeda's JFS has challenges distinct from those associated with ISIS. Much of the JFS combat power is centered in the Idlib area of northwestern Syria. Unlike ISIS, JFS has made fighting the Assad regime a high priority. In places like eastern Aleppo it fought alongside nationalist, anti-Assad rebels against the regime and pro-regime Shiite militiamen assembled by Iran: foreign fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. JFS also worked hard – as it has for years – to dominate the armed Syrian opposition and to draw recruits from the ranks of other organizations. Many of those groups have concluded that JFS – like ISIS – must be neutralized.

For nationalist rebel forces to confront JFS militarily and resist any temptation to collaborate with it against a common foe, attacks on them by the Assad regime and its Shiite militia supporters must cease. Russia, according to some opposition sources, has shown interest in promoting and monitoring a ceasefire that would facilitate the anti-JFS operations of nationalist rebel forces.

JFS would not be a party to a ceasefire. Indeed, JFS targets have been recently engaged by American combat aviation. But for the nationalist Syrian opposition to confront JFS militarily, Moscow will have to keep a tight leash on Assad and Iran. Even if Moscow truly wants to do so, it will not be easy. In any event, American support for armed, nationalist Syrian opposition units with which Washington has developed relationships over the years should be maintained and enhanced. These units – not undisciplined, looting Iranian-led militias or a depleted Syrian army – will be the ground combat component of any serious effort to neutralize JFS.

In the end, however, defeating terror in Syria will require legitimate governance for Syria. Russia has supported a regime it knows to be illegitimate for two reasons: military operations in Syria have enabled President Putin to tell his domestic audience that Russia has defeated an alleged regime change campaign by the United States and is therefore back as a great power; and he has been able to tell Arab leaders that he stands by his friends, no matter how regrettable their habits. Iran has supported Assad because it knows that he will do whatever Tehran asks of him to support Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah is Iran's long arm of penetration into the Arab World; it threatens Israel as it holds Lebanon captive. Iran realizes that no other President of Syria would accept a relationship of subordination to it and to Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

Thanks to Russian and Iranian military intervention Assad seems secure in at least part of Syria for as far as the eye can see. Assad's political well-being means the indefinite continuation of state terror in Syria. As the United States and its partners move – ideally with dispatch – against ISIS and JFS, any temptation to make common cause with or improve the political prospects of Syria's premier practitioner of terror – Bashar al-Assad – must be resisted. Rumors of Russian disaffection with Assad and Iranian-led militias should be explored, though without any expectation of a positive result.

ISIS and JFS can and should be defeated militarily. Terror, however, will be killed in Syria only when legitimate governance, reflecting inclusivity and rule of law, replaces family rule based on collective punishment and mass homicide. So long as the latter prevails responses to it will inevitably include appeals to sectarianism, extremism, and terror. Moscow and Tehran know this quite well. Regrettably they are in charge and they seem not to care. Defeating the descendants of Al Qaeda may produce, in liberated areas, a decent alternative to Assad rule. Still, it is likely that transitioning all of Syria from that rule to terrorist-killing legitimacy will be a long-term national security endeavor for the United States and its partners.



**Statement before the**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade**

***“Defeating Terrorism in Syria:  
A New Way Forward”***

A Testimony by:

**Melissa G. Dalton**

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**February 14, 2017**

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today with my excellent colleagues Ambassador Frederic Hof and Hassan Hassan on options for countering terrorist groups in Syria.

This testimony is informed in part by a scenario-based workshop on Syria conducted in November 2016 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

### *Why Syria Matters*

Syria today stands at the epicenter of a regional conflict with global consequences for U.S. interests and objectives. Countering terrorism is one aspect of a deeper problem set. This is a multifaceted conflict destabilizing the Middle East and Europe and raising the possibility of a broader war.

Syria's civil war has raged for six years, beginning as peaceful protests against the brutality of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and descending into a deadly spiral, with over 500,000 thousand killed, millions becoming refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), and thousands besieged by regime, Russian, Iranian attacks, and non-state actor attacks. It has spawned the greatest human catastrophe since World War II. The United States and members of the international community have struggled to effectively address the crisis in Syria. There truly are no good policy options at this point, as all choices entail significant risks. The U.S. public wants a strong America but does not want to become embroiled in another conflict on the scale of the post-9/11 interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the current limited approach in Syria – focused primarily on counterterrorism – has been quite financially costly to U.S., allied, and partner interests and arguably has diminished U.S. leadership credibility across the globe. The Trump administration and the Congress have the opportunity to change the course of U.S. policy towards Syria, addressing the terrorist threats emanating from the area by nesting short-term operations into a strategy.

Americans have no interest in perennial military interventions in the Middle East. The United States has demands for resources at home and competing geostrategic objectives in Europe and Asia. However, the United States has compelling reasons to not only counter terrorist groups but also to address the broader factors that have enabled the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS). The growth of Iranian proxy groups and a battle-hardened Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria also pose counter terrorism challenges. Additionally, the United States has to contend with intertwined realities in the Middle East that could challenge its ability to negotiate and influence outcomes to its advantage. Among these reasons are: countering terrorists and the roots of terrorism, which threaten the U.S. homeland and our allies and partners; preventing military confrontation with Russia and Iran while limiting the long-term, subversive influence they could have in the region; and stemming conflict emanating from Syria from further destabilizing neighboring states and Europe.

Achieving U.S. objectives in Syria will require inherent tradeoffs in the policy choices the Trump administration could pursue. It is likely that only some of these goals will be achieved, and possibly at the expense of others. Inherent in resolving the tensions among these interests will be determining the priority afforded to Syria as an issue to tackle within the Trump administration, and how they see its importance relative to other global interests.

### *Current Operational Dynamics*

The grinding Syrian civil war has grown increasingly intense and sectarian, particularly over the past three years. It has pit Syrian government forces and their foreign allies, including Russia and Iran, against a range of antigovernment insurgents. These opposition fighters include ISIS and JFS, as well as a constellation of Syrian Kurdish and Arab rebels, who are supported by the United States, other Arab countries, and Turkey. U.S. and coalition strikes have reduced ISIS and JFS numbers, with ISIS now numbering between 19,000 and 25,000 foot soldiers and JFS between 5,000 and 10,000.<sup>1</sup> The United States reportedly has 500 special operations forces in Syria and has conducted over 2,700 air strikes since May 2016 with anti-ISIS coalition members.<sup>2</sup>

Based upon data released by Russia's Central Election Commission there are approximately 4,000 to 5,000 Russian troops thought to be in Syria. However, this does not include Russian special forces and other similar personnel, which would increase this estimate.<sup>3</sup> Russia's intervention in 2015 has since enabled the Syrian government to reinforce its positions, retake territory from Syrian rebels, and regain Aleppo, using brutal tactics against Syrian civilians and civilian targets including hospitals and schools. Assad's Syrian Army currently fields between 80,000 and 100,000 troops.<sup>4</sup> Further buttressing Assad's forces, Iran has mobilized between 115,000 and 128,000 fighters in Syria, comprised of Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani recruits.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, there is a significant fighting force with active supply lines from external allies backing Assad.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by the U.S.-led coalition and comprising mostly of Syrian Kurdish and some Sunni Arab groups, number approximately 35,000 to 50,000 soldiers.<sup>6</sup> They successfully pushed ISIS out of areas in northern Syria in 2016. Substantial governance and security challenges, however, remain in the recovered areas. For one, Turkey's intervention in northern Syria, *Operation Euphrates Shield*,<sup>7</sup> has complicated U.S. and partnered security efforts,

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitt, Eric. "Al Qaeda Turns to Syria, with a Plan to Challenge ISIS." *The New York Times*. May 15, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/16/world/middleeast/al-qaeda-turns-to-syria-with-a-plan-to-challenge-isis.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Munoz, Carlo. "Pentagon sends hundreds more U.S. special operations forces into Syria." *The Washington Times*. December 10, 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/10/pentagon-sends-hundreds-more-us-special-operations/>; U.S. Department of Defense. "Operation Inherent Resolve." February 8, 2017. [https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve).

<sup>3</sup> "Commission Inadvertently Reveals Russian Troop Numbers in Syria." *The Moscow Times*. September 22, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/duma-voting-figures-reveal-over-4000-russian-troops-in-syria-55439>.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ma Sri, Abdulrahman. "Analysis: The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army." *Atlantic Council*. January 13, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/analysis-the-fifth-corps-and-the-state-of-the-syrian-army>

<sup>5</sup> Raided, Majid. "Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria." *Gatestone Institute*. November 24, 2016, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/9406/iran-soldiers-syria>.

<sup>6</sup> CSIS Syria Stabilization Workshop, November 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In August 2016, Turkey launched "Euphrates Shield" seeking to both secure its territory from ISIS and halt the advance of the YPG militia. In approaching the city of al-Bab, the advance slowed as ISIS increasingly relied on subterranean and tunnel warfare, suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, and man-portable anti-tank guided missiles. Notably, in the face of these emerging challenges, the Turkish military altered its force composition in the Operation Euphrates Shield and started deploying more commando units to support local Syrian forces. "ISIL fighters 'besieged' in Syria's al-Bab in Aleppo." *Al Jazeera*. February 6, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/isil-fighters-besieged-syria-al-bab-aleppo-170206172706993.html>.

Kasapoglu, Can. "Operation Euphrates Shield: Progress and scope." *Al Jazeera*. February 3, 2017,

as U.S. and Turkish objectives clash regarding the role and reach of Syrian Kurdish forces. Turkey bitterly opposes the role and territorial control of the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) that have linkages to the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey deems a terrorist organization. Additionally, Arab-Kurd tensions in northern Syria, increasing as the SDF YPG units press into Arab communities, present a specter of a civil war to come.

The northern Syrian city of al-Bab presents a stark picture of how competing forces in Syria will either have to cooperate or risk confrontation in the combined fight against ISIS. ISIS controls al-Bab, its last stronghold west of Raqqa. Syrian government forces, backed by Russia, are advancing on the city in parallel with Turkish-supported Syrian opposition groups to root out ISIS. The fight in al-Bab will be a test of the newly-brokered Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria, and whether Syrian forces on both sides will abide by that agreement to address a common enemy or turn on each other.<sup>8</sup>

### Fragmented Territorial Control

Syria no longer exists as a unitary whole, as the civil war has cleaved it into at least four parts. Assad's forces, backed by Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah, control the western segment, a strategic corridor from Damascus to Aleppo providing access to the Mediterranean and the Assad family's Alawite community in Latakia, and enabling Iranian resupply and command and control to Lebanese Hezbollah. In the second segment, Sunni Arab tribes occupy the desert connecting eastern Syria and western Iraq, disenfranchised by Assad's crackdown and the post-Saddam era of repression in Iraq, wherein ISIS easily implanted its so-called caliphate. In the third segment, Syria's northwest is comprised of a marbled blend of opposition groups supported by Turkey, the United States, and the Gulf states, and into which JFS has secured safe haven. By negotiating and cooperating with other opposition groups in northern Syria, and with perceptions of U.S. withdrawal pervasive among Syrian opposition members, JFS has demonstrated an ability to adapt to changing conditions and its influence has grown among opposition groups.<sup>9</sup> U.S.-backed groups have grown weaker. Aside from being one of the most powerful groups in Syria, JFS' ability to adapt could contribute to its longevity.<sup>10</sup> The Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham receives substantial support from Turkey and has also recently attracted a number of opposition groups to its ranks.<sup>11</sup> Syria's fourth segment, in the south surrounding Deraa, is closely watched by Israel and Jordan, along with Syria opposition groups supported by Gulf partners. Relative to the four other segments, clashes between regime and opposition forces occur less frequently there.

According to the Pentagon, ISIS has lost 43 percent of its total caliphate, including 57 percent of its territory in Iraq and 27 percent of its territory in Syria.<sup>12</sup> While it could retain some territory,

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/02/operation-euphrates-shield-progress-scope-170201133525121.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Barnard, "Battle to Retake Syrian City Turns into a Geopolitical Test of the War," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/middleeast/battle-al-bab-syria-geopolitical-test.html>

<sup>9</sup> "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond." *United States Institute of Peace*, p. 12. December 2016, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Lund, "The Jihadi Spiral," Diwan, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), February 8, 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/67911>

<sup>12</sup> "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond," 24.

its capabilities have been markedly degraded.<sup>13</sup> Even still, ISIS remains a resilient force. Without the ability to counter the airpower of the U.S.-led coalition, ISIS fighters continually demonstrate discipline and a willingness to fight.<sup>14</sup> ISIS is also expanding its global reach to affiliates and individuals through remote plotting and virtual links. As a result, ISIS commanders in Syria and Iraq are able to not only inspire but also direct operations globally.<sup>15</sup> ISIS has also taken advantage of the migrant exodus and political climate in Europe to spread its influence and operatives and sow fear. With the idea of ISIS still alive and well, it is possible for it to easily regrow in Sunni areas of Syria and Iraq, if local community actors do not consolidate security and governance gains in those areas.

### *Current Diplomatic Efforts*

After pledging to strengthen a fragile ceasefire in Syria,<sup>16</sup> representatives from Russia, Turkey and Iran recently discussed details of implementing the Syrian ceasefire agreement in Astana, Kazakhstan.<sup>17</sup> Russia and Iran are split over the possible future participation of the United States: while Russia seems open to the idea of U.S. involvement, Iran opposes any such notion.<sup>18</sup> Blaming Iranian-backed Shia militias for violating the fragile ceasefire agreement by launching assaults against rebel-held areas, the Syrian opposition has objected to Iran's role in Astana.<sup>19</sup> United Nations leadership is hopeful that the meetings in Astana will bolster the UN-sponsored intra-Syria talks, which are guided by UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015).<sup>20</sup> According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Astana is not meant to replace the UN format.<sup>21</sup>

### *Policy Choices*

The Trump administration will choose a Syria policy from a range of known options, most of which are not mutually exclusive and several of which have been attempted at least in part by the Obama administration. All options in Syria entail risks and tradeoffs—including choices of inaction or tacit acceptance of the status quo. This requires the Trump administration to determine what is most important to U.S. short- and long-term interests, including on countering terrorism.

Woven throughout these Syria-specific options are geopolitical choices with which the Trump administration and Congress will have to grapple, including:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bridget Moreng, "ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers," *Foreign Affairs*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-21/isis-virtual-puppeteers>; Rukmini Callimachi, "Not 'Lone Wolves' After All: How ISIS Guides World's Terror Plots From Afar," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html?_r=0)

<sup>16</sup> Tahhan, Zena and Dylan Collins. "Astana summit: Opposition sets demands for new talks." *Al Jazeera*. January 24, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-summit-opposition-sets-demands-talks-170124163538146.html>.

<sup>17</sup> "Russia, Turkey, Iran discuss Syria ceasefire in Astana." *Al Jazeera*. February 6, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/russia-turkey-iran-syria-ceasefire-astana-170206080423207.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Syria: UN, Security Council welcome Astana talks and look forward to intra-Syrian negotiations." *UN News Centre*. February 1, 2017, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56086#.WJzAA1UrLcs>.

<sup>21</sup> "Russia, Turkey, Iran discuss Syria ceasefire in Astana."

- How to manage tensions with Russia in a way that secures U.S. interests and contests Russian aggression globally while cooperating where it is advantageous and feasible<sup>22</sup>;
- How to calibrate pressure on Iran's destabilizing activities without provoking blowback to U.S. forces operating in Syria and Iraq, and while attaining an enduring political outcome in Syria<sup>23</sup>; and
- How to manage deeply fraught relations with NATO ally Turkey while leveraging the operationally-capable YPG to fight ISIS in northern Syria.

The major policy options are:

*1) Allow Russia and Iran to back Assad in consolidating control of western Syria.* This could be an intentional policy choice or simply the outcome of events on the ground continuing on their current course. If the Trump administration drags its heels on deciding on Syria, this may well be the result regardless of intent. Having secured Aleppo, Assad's forces, backed by Russia and Iran, are pounding Idlib, where JFS and other opposition groups have embedded among civilians, and are seeking to remove ISIS from al-Bab with Turkey's cooperation. Under this option, the United States could abandon its insistence that Assad must go and make a deal with the Russians to ensure continued counterterrorism efforts against ISIS and JFS. Washington could also reduce support to local Syrian rebels in order to deescalate tensions with Russia, Assad, and Turkey. The United States could still maintain support for international humanitarian operations in Syria, the neighboring region, and in Europe, but Washington would cease to try to curb Assad's or Russian targeting of civilian populations.

The risks to this approach begin inside Syria. A deep-seated Sunni insurgency would likely continue to challenge Assad throughout much of the country, providing fertile ground for terrorist recruitment and providing safe haven for terrorist groups. Even if the United States stands down on its efforts to train and equip resistance groups, regional partners may still support local Syrian groups to combat Assad and Iranian influence. Refugee and IDP flows will worsen with Assad's consolidation, putting additional pressure on Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Europe. A Russian- and Iranian-protected Assad enclave in the Middle East, ringed by Iranian-backed militias, could serve as a beachhead for attacks against Israel, Turkey, and other allies, or even U.S. interests at points in the not-so-distant future. It is also unclear whether Russia would be satisfied with this foothold in the Middle East or if it would harbor grander ambitions to reclaim all of Syria or even to look beyond its borders. Beyond Syria, U.S. strategic and moral credibility and resolve would be questioned if we were to walk away from a long-standing policy to contest Assad, even if it were to come with a change of administration. Certainly, America's moral suasion would suffer.

*2) Strengthen the counterterrorism approach to "defeat" ISIS and al-Qaida.* President Trump has made it clear that he wants to more robustly counter ISIS. A strengthened counterterrorism

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<sup>22</sup> CSIS will be publishing a report in spring 2017 on a new U.S. Strategy for Russia, a study effort led by Lisa Samp and Dr. Kathleen Hicks.

<sup>23</sup> CSIS will be publishing a report in March 2017, *Deterring Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, a study effort led by Melissa Dalton and Dr. Kathleen Hicks.

approach would likely include targeting JFS, enhancing intelligence collection, reinforcing U.S. and regional strategic forces presence and force enablers in Syria, and increasing air strikes on ISIS and JFS targets. A counterterrorism policy “on steroids” could also tie together the campaigns against ISIS in Raqqa, Syria, and in Mosul, Iraq, to more effectively squeeze ISIS with greater operational synchronization. The United States might choose to cooperate with Russia and Assad (and thus also Iran) to degrade ISIS and JFS, as these countries might provide ground forces and intelligence. It is critical that both overt and covert operational lines of effort be synchronized to avoid inadvertent conflict or duplication among local partners.

This approach may reduce immediate terrorist threats and accomplish a major policy goal of the administration. The downside, however, is that it does not address underlying challenges or grievances that are rooted in the political, economic, identity, and social dynamics that produce terrorists. In other words, for every terrorist the United States captures or kills, three could take their place, particularly if there is no attempt to hold territory or invest in a political solution or improved governance. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that the United States and its partners will truly “defeat” ISIS, given that it is embedded in a Sunni insurgency in Syria and Iraq. Rather, the United States can degrade ISIS’ capabilities and reach to threaten the U.S. homeland and its allies and partners. Still, such a policy would undoubtedly worsen humanitarian conditions, as it would give Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, license to indiscriminately target civilians with impunity under the guise of countering terrorism. The United States would be seen as complicit in these activities and as a partner to Assad, Russia, and Iran, further inflaming longer-term Sunni terrorist movements against the West. As such, it would risk significant blowback from regional Arab partners on other priorities such as Israeli and Gulf security and efforts to pressure Iran. This approach also fails to contain spillover effects, including the possibility that the conflict moves across borders, extremist group exfiltration, and refugee flows into neighboring countries and Europe.

*3) Conduct a larger-scale military intervention to pressure Assad.* This choice involves the greatest departure from the status quo and would require heavy resourcing and commitment and should require a vote of affirmation from Congress. A U.S. intervention could take the form of implementing no-fly zones, safe zones, enhanced support for Syrian rebels, and/or coercive measures and direct strikes on Assad regime targets. Almost all of these types of interventions require a larger ground force commitment to enforce a change in the military balance, pressure Assad, and create a safe area for humanitarian response efforts. On the high end of ground force requirements under these options, up to 30,000 ground forces could be required to secure a safe zone. This number would include local Syrian, regional, and U.S. and Coalition troops.

The major downside to pursuing this option is that it heightens the potential for miscalculation or escalation with Russia and Iran. Turkey is also likely to resist an intervention if the United States relies upon Syrian Kurdish forces to secure areas, which we undoubtedly would. Syrian rebels with ISIS or JFS sympathies could infiltrate safe zones and conduct attacks or gather intelligence for ISIS and JFS. As Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, large concentrations of U.S. troops can never be perfectly secured. U.S. and coalition ground troops would be magnets for terrorist attacks and a beacon for terrorist recruitment. Such a policy would involve high upfront risks to U.S. and international security and resourcing costs but could accrue gains in local Syrian governance and security over time if part of a greater political strategy for Syria and the region. If

the military requirements of the intervention are such that the involvement of U.S. ground troops becomes necessary—a likely reality—then the near-term risk to American lives and treasure could be great.

4) *Pursue a negotiated political outcome.* President Trump has expressed openness to dealing with Russia but appears to want a hardline tack versus Iran. On Syria, it will be difficult to pursue both goals. Iran will need to be on board with any diplomatic deal involving Syria if such a deal is to endure. It is unlikely that the Russians hold enough leverage over Iran to compel cooperation or that Iran will necessarily see the removal of Assad as in its interests. Washington will likely need to adopt a range of approaches, including carrots and sticks, to persuade Russia and Iran to come to the table on U.S. terms – or to enter the existing Astana process. It is unclear exactly what the right mix of inducements and pressure will be, but it likely will require a more extensive coalition of allies and partners. For example, the United States and Europe could convince Russia to pressure Assad to accede to an agreement and even leave the country in exchange for sanctions relief for Russia – requiring Russia to take the first step before unwinding sanctions, as has been done with sanctions on Iran. A quid pro quo of Syria for Crimea is not only strategically damaging for the United States; it is not necessary. In fact, increasing pressure through secondary sanctions on Russia to persuade Vladimir Putin to make the case to Assad to depart could resonate more deeply – Russia responds more readily to strength.<sup>24</sup> If convinced, Russia could apply both overt and covert pressure on Assad himself and his inner circle, including enhancing financial pressure, information and cyber operations.

There is certainly no guarantee that the Russians would accept such a course or in accepting would abide by their commitments. Further steps might include permitting a sustained Russian military presence in Syria and in the Eastern Mediterranean. Iran will want a pliable replacement to Assad to preserve its influence and access, including Hezbollah's supply and operational reach in the Levant. It is no guarantee that Assad's replacement under such conditions would necessarily yield better results vis-à-vis U.S. interests. The phasing of the negotiations might include starting with creating “no bomb zones,” and instituting a true cessation of hostilities. Negotiations should include Syrian opposition leaders, so that Syrians own the solution and the negotiated outcome is more likely to endure.

This is by far the hardest outcome to achieve, as it must have both multilateral and local buy-in for it to endure, and parties to the conflict have competing agendas and interests. It is likely the only option that will deescalate the overall violence in Syria quickly, but very well could require escalation against Russia, Assad, and Iran to achieve it. This is perhaps a U.S. form of the Russian doctrine of “escalate to deescalate,” and will require a very nuanced approach to avoid miscalculation. Moreover, absent a shift in the local balance of power, the United States would enter such negotiations with limited leverage, as Secretary John Kerry's negotiations demonstrated. Perhaps the Trump administration can generate its own leverage. Even if it is successful, the United States would be complicit in the actions of Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime against the Syrian people, a high cost to pay to U.S. credibility, and especially if the deal leaves Assad in power.

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<sup>24</sup> See forthcoming Hicks and Samp CSIS Russia Report in Spring 2017.

### *Recommendations*

The Trump Administration and Congress should work together to forge a coordinated U.S. strategy for Syria with allies and partners, countering terrorism, its underpinnings, and its enablers. The goals of this strategy should be to degrade ISIS and JFS, achieve a nationwide cessation of hostilities and a negotiated transition of power in Damascus, and consolidate security gains by knitting together local security, governance, and development in the four segments of Syria. Such an approach will require leveraging multiple tools of U.S. statecraft, including:

#### Diplomatic Initiatives

- Registering strong concerns with Russia and Iran about their support for Assad's brutal tactics and their long-term ambitions in Syria (e.g., long-term presence of IRGC-backed groups in Syria) and being prepared to back up those concerns with economic sanctions and military coercion;
- Rebuilding communication and trust with Turkey through Departments of Defense and State and intelligence community contacts;
  - While pressing Turkey on human rights concerns, emphasize the criticality of working through differences as NATO allies.
- Bolstering support to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and his efforts to restore security and stability in Iraq. If Iraq falters, ISIS and other terrorist groups will regrow in western Iraq and push back into Syria;
- Working with the UN to leverage and integrate the Astana process into UN-mediated negotiations;
- Creating a U.S.-led multilateral forum in which tensions and conflicting objectives can be addressed with key allies and partners on the Syria problem set (including Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and Gulf partners);
- Continuing to work with the international community to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to besieged civilian areas in Syria, with clear and immediate repercussions in the case of outside interference;
  - Beyond the compelling moral imperative to do so, generations of Syrians will remember potential U.S. inaction, which could feed extremist anti-U.S. narratives and boost terrorist recruitment.

#### Economic Measures

- Calibrating sanctions pressure on Putin to convince Assad to accede to the negotiating table, requiring Russian action before alleviating sanctions and leveraging European secondary sanctions on Russia. Ukraine should not be a quid pro quo for Syria;

- Extracting positive lessons learned from the U.S. and European negotiating experience with Iran to create needed pressure on Russia and Assad for a negotiated political solution;
- Sustaining support to multilateral and USAID initiatives to address humanitarian and community resilience needs in order to consolidate governance gains as ISIS and JFS are pushed out of areas.

### Military Operations

- Strengthening coherence of operational planning and efforts across Syria and Iraq, synchronizing operations for Raqqa and Mosul to squeeze ISIS, and aligning covert and non-covert approaches versus ISIS and JFS;
- Letting operational conditions on the ground inform strategic adjustments and withdrawal timelines. ISIS and JFS will not be defeated in the next year; it will require a multi-year effort;
- Increasing both special operations forces and conventional ground forces in Syria and Iraq, based on commanders' assessed requirements, with U.S. conventional forces providing support to U.S. SOF conducting training and combat operations with local partners;
- Enhancing focus on consolidating gains from ground and air operations, setting the conditions now for what comes after ISIS and JFS. Amplify support to and knit connections among local security forces and governance structures in both Syria and Iraq, so that terrorist groups cannot grow back.
- Being strategic about deploying the local partner forces that will be the most credible in providing security to specific communities in the short and long term, accounting for ethno-sectarian differences, even if it requires a slower pace for operations;
  - The blowback effects of Arab-Kurd conflict in northern Syria could be severe if local security forces are mismatched with civilian communities and set the conditions for terrorist exploitation.
- If establishing a safe zone, construct one in southern Syria, where operational dynamics are clearer than in the north;
  - Ensure that the safe zone operation ties to political negotiations to end the civil war so as to avoid an open-ended commitment.

### Intelligence Operations

- Enhancing intelligence-sharing and combined operations within the region and with European and regional allies and partners to disrupt terrorist attacks, improving coordination among military, intelligence, and law enforcement entities;

- Combine intelligence sharing across allied and partner ISR platforms to reduce burden on U.S. assets.

#### Legal Measures

- Seeking a new Authorization for the Use of Force (AUMF) for the U.S. intervention in Syria (and Iraq), providing for operational flexibility to U.S. commanders.