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U.S. GRAND STRATEGY:
DESTROYING ISIS AND AL QAEDA, REPORT TWO

COMPETING VISIONS FOR SYRIA AND IRAQ: THE MYTH OF AN ANTI-ISIS GRAND COALITION

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Cover: Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (center right), U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (center) and foreign ministers attend a meeting in Vienna, Austria, November 14, 2015. World and regional powers, including officials from Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Europe are meeting in Vienna on Saturday in a bid to step up diplomatic efforts to end the four-year-old conflict in Syria. REUTERS/Leonhard Foeger.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute equips policymakers, opinion leaders, and the military and intelligence communities with detailed and objective open-source analysis of America's current and emerging national security challenges. Through daily monitoring, in-depth studies, graphic presentations, private briefings, and public events, the project is a unique resource for those who need to fully understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security to effectively develop and execute policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute conducted an intensive multi-week planning exercise to frame, design, and evaluate potential courses of action that the United States could pursue to defeat the threat from the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. ISW and CTP will publish the findings of this exercise in multiple reports. The first report examined America's global grand strategic objectives as they relate to the threat from ISIS and al Qaeda.[1] This second report will define American strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria, identify the minimum necessary conditions for ending the conflicts there, and compare U.S. objectives with those of Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia in order to understand actual convergences and divergences. The differences mean that the U.S. cannot rely heavily on international partners to achieve its objectives. Subsequent reports will provide a detailed assessment of the situation on the ground in Syria and present the planning group's evaluation of several courses of action.

The key findings of this second report are:

- The U.S. must accomplish four strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria to achieve vital national interests and secure its people: 1) destroy enemy groups; 2) end the communal, sectarian civil wars; 3) set conditions to prevent the reconstitution of enemy groups; and 4) extricate Iraq and Syria from regional and global conflicts.

- Any American strategy must take urgent measures to strengthen Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi and prepare contingency efforts for his fall. The collapse of the Abadi government and return of his predecessor Nuri al Maliki would be disastrous for the fight against ISIS.

- Ongoing international negotiations within the Vienna Framework are bypassing essential requirements for long-term success in Syria. Re-establishing a stable, unitary Syrian state that secures American interests requires the U.S. and its partners to 1) destroy ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and foreign Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria; 2) identify and strengthen interlocutors representing the Syrian opposition; 3) facilitate a negotiated settlement between the Syrian regime and opposition; 4) obtain regional acceptance of that settlement; 5) establish peace-enforcement mechanisms; and 6) reconstruct state institutions.

- The Salafi-jihadi militant base in Syria poses a threat to the U.S., but the U.S. must not simply attack it because that would put the U.S. at war with many Sunnis who must be incorporated into a future, post-Assad inclusive government. The U.S. must separate reconcilable from irreconcilable elements. These other Salafi-jihadi groups must meet the following conditions essential for core U.S. security objectives in order to participate: 1) break with Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS; 2) accept the principle of a future pluralistic and unitary Syrian state; 3) reject violent jihad; 4) commit to disarming to a policing and defensive level; 5) and commit to the elimination of the current shari'a court system and the establishment of political institution-based governance.

- The superficial convergence of Iranian, Russian, Turkish, and Saudi strategic objectives with those of the U.S. on ISIS as a threat masks significant divergences that will undermine U.S. security requirements. Iran and Russia both seek to reduce and eliminate U.S. influence in the Middle East and are not pursuing strategies that will ultimately defeat al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria or Iraq. Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, some linked to al Qaeda, stem from the ruling party's intent to reestablish itself as an independent, Muslim, regional power. Finally, Saudi Arabia's objectives remain shaped by perceived existential threats from Iran and a growing succession crisis, causing key divergences, especially over support to Salafi-jihadi groups. The U.S. must lead efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria and cannot outsource them to partners.

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By Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Gambhir, and Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding, Katherine Zimmerman,

AMERICAN STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

The United States is at risk of an escalating wave of terrorist attacks at home and against American targets abroad. Europe faces an even greater risk of such attacks. The tide of refugees from Middle Eastern wars combined with the terrorist threat is undermining central pillars of the European idea, particularly the free movement of peoples throughout the European Union. Fear of Salafi-jihadi attacks is fueling anti-Muslim sentiment in both the U.S. and Europe, threatening the ideals of tolerance and diversity that are core tenets of both societies. Growing anti-Muslim sentiments will cause more Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic to feel marginalized and alienated, which will drive even more terror attacks. This cycle is precisely what the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) is counting on to allow it to bring its fight into the heart of the West.[1] Al Qaeda will benefit as well. The West must act thoughtfully and decisively to avert the danger now confronting us.

Eliminating the threat to American security from Iraq and Syria requires that Jabhat al Nusra, al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, and ISIS be destroyed and conditions set to prevent them from being reconstituted either in their present forms or as new groups with the same objectives.

America cannot ensure the security of its territory and people from the threat of Salafi-jihadist military organizations while these organizations control extensive terrain, population, and resources in the Middle East. Such organizations organically possess the capabilities needed to conduct numerous and serious attacks within the West, as we have seen. The Salafi-jihadi ideology, moreover, generally inclines them to support such attacks.[2]

Defensive measures will not see us through this crisis, as we have seen in our examination of the nature of the enemy and of our own grand strategic objectives in the first report of this series, *Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe*.[3] We cannot close our borders so thoroughly that the skilled operatives of al Qaeda and ISIS cannot penetrate them. We must not adopt the police-state measures that would be needed to monitor all the communications and activities of all of our people all of the time, for that action would destroy our free society faster than any number of bombs. Sensible border policy and a rational, deliberate, and accountable expansion of the ability of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies to collect and analyze information are needed, but they will not suffice. As long as our enemies have military organizations and control significant territory and populations they will be able to throw attacks at us faster than we can hope to catch them.

The United States and Europe can assure the physical security of their peoples and preserve their values and way of life while controlling the continued threat from Salafi-jihadi military organizations through the normal law-enforcement means appropriate for democratic societies at peace.

Considering the current threat of al Qaeda and ISIS in this context enabled the planning group to define a clear endstate with regard to that threat. American efforts against al Qaeda and ISIS will have succeeded when:

The United States and Europe can assure the physical security of their peoples and preserve their values and way of life while controlling the continued threat from Salafi-jihadi military organizations through the normal law-enforcement means appropriate for democratic societies at peace.

Translating these objectives and this endstate into specific strategic requirements demanded a detailed examination of the nature of the enemy groups, which we presented in Part I. That examination made it clear that meeting America's vital security requirements and achieving our grand strategic goals requires eliminating the regional support bases that al Qaeda and ISIS currently enjoy in Iraq and Syria as the top priority. Efforts to disrupt or stop attacks against the West through network targeting, law enforcement, and immigration controls will fail as long as the enemy has regional bases in which to reconstitute attack groups, conduct research and development, gather intelligence, plan, and amass resources on a large scale. The planning group assesses that local governments or regional forces will be unable to eliminate these support bases in a timeframe or a manner acceptable for American security.

America's experiences with these enemies over the past 25 years demonstrate the critical importance of follow-through, moreover. Clearing Salafi-jihadi groups out of safe havens temporarily is not an acceptable goal, for they have repeatedly shown the ability to reconstitute and emerge stronger after American forces and attention are withdrawn. Thus al Qaeda and the Taliban grew into the void left by the withdrawal of U.S. interest and non-military support from Afghanistan after 1989.[4] The Islamic State of Iraq (formerly known as al Qaeda in Iraq) recovered from a crippling defeat in 2007 through 2010 after the departure of American troops and political attention in 2011.[5] The Taliban and al Qaeda are both regaining strength in Afghanistan as U.S. troops have been drawn down to minimal garrison levels and U.S. political and diplomatic effort has been focused elsewhere.[6] The pattern of history is clear: the U.S. must not only destroy the enemy groups, but must also commit to the effort needed to create conditions that will prevent their return or reconstitution.

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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

To achieve its vital national interests and secure its people, the United States and its partners must accomplish the following objectives in Iraq and Syria:

Destroy enemy groups. The military doctrinal definition of "destroy" is to "render an enemy force combat-ineffective until it is reconstituted" or to "damage a combat system so badly that it cannot perform any function or be restored to a usable condition without being entirely rebuilt." This concept differs from defeat, which means to deprive the enemy of the will or ability to continue to fight, in that defeat is a temporary condition.[7] An enemy that has lost its will or ability to fight can regain either with time, in principle. An enemy that has been destroyed, however, must be reconstructed before it can fight again. The requirement to achieve an enduring resolution to the threats from ISIS and al Qaeda translates into the objective of destroying those groups in this technical sense.

Salafi-jihadi groups such as Ahrar al Sham that are not formally part of Jabhat al Nusra but are deeply intertwined with it pose a dilemma. Such groups have significant popular support and provide governance in parts of Syria. Attacking to destroy them risks mobilizing a substantial part of the Sunni Arab population against the West while pushing them into an even tighter embrace with. The Salafi-jihadi ideology of these groups will create conditions propitious to the reconstitution of Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS, however.

Simply adding groups such as Ahrar al-Sham to the list of Salafi-jihadi organizations that must be destroyed would entail unwisely going to war with a sizable part of the Sunni Arab population of western Syria. Doing so would make finding a political settlement acceptable to Syria's Sunnis nearly impossible. Fragmenting these Salafi-jihadi groups in order to separate the hard-core leadership committed to the Salafi-jihadi ideology from the mass of members who support the groups for other reasons, therefore, is by far the preferable alternative if it is feasible. The planning group assesses that it is. Ahrar al Sham in particular is large and complex enough that it may be possible to splinter the group into factions willing to give up jihad and specific forms of governance in return for internationally-accepted participation in a post-Assad government.

The strategic objective toward these groups, therefore, is to persuade and coerce as many of their members as possible to renounce jihad; abandon governance through sharia courts; reject ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other foreign Salafi-jihadi groups; expel the members of those organizations from Syria; expel their own al Qaeda-linked leadership; and prevent their return. Some members of Ahrar al Sham will refuse to accept these conditions.[8] These members will then fall into the category of groups that must be destroyed alongside al Qaeda and ISIS. The rest of the group may be reconcilable and the U.S. should pursue its integration into other opposition structures once the conditions listed above are met.

End the communal, sectarian civil wars in Iraq and Syria. The continuation of sectarian warfare in Iraq and Syria will prevent the U.S. from destroying ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra and preclude their return or reconstitution. The wars will continue to generate ungoverned spaces and security vacuums in which ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra or their successors will concentrate even if they are severely defeated in their current safe havens. Ongoing large-scale military conflict will also make it impossible to establish reliable non-sectarian military and police forces that could sustain a defeat of the Salafi-jihadi groups and translate it into the permanent destruction of those groups. The brutal sectarian nature of the conflict, which has become an existential communal struggle in many areas, will remain an extremely powerful force driving passive and active support for al Qaeda and ISIS. These groups intentionally exploit such conditions by portraying themselves as the only reliable defenders of the Sunni Arabs in both countries. The atrocities the Assad regime is committing against Syria's Sunni majority are in fact mobilizing the global Salafi movement to support Salafi-jihadi groups such as Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham, as we discussed in the first report.[9] The continuation of sectarian war in Iraq and Syria will create headwinds strong enough to drive any strategy aimed only at destroying our enemies completely off-course over time.

Set conditions to prevent the reconstitution of enemy groups. The destruction of Salafi-jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria must be lasting. Neither the U.S. nor the region can afford the price of a continual cycle of American engagement and disengagement that is accompanied by the defeat and resurrection of Salafi-jihadi groups. Each engagement will be more difficult and fraught than the last; each disengagement will increase the mistrust and resentment of Americans who will come to be seen as completely unreliable. Allowing al Qaeda and/or ISIS to create a phoenix-like mythos—which they are already trying to cultivate—will make ultimately destroying either group an order of magnitude more difficult. People will come to expect the groups to rise from their own ashes each time the cycle is repeated, likely creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of resurrection.

The destruction of Salafi-jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria must be lasting.

These considerations impose four requirements on American strategy in Syria and Iraq:

- Ensure that security forces are established and expanded that are sufficient to prevent the return of Salafi-jihadi groups;
- Ensure the composition, organization, and behavior of the security forces will strengthen negotiated political settlements and will not generate grievances among the population that would tend to unravel them;
- Directly support and facilitate the reconstruction of local economies; and
- Facilitate the return of refugees, the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the efforts of local governments and international organizations to assist in that process.

The risk that local security forces could be organized or behave in ways that undermine a negotiated settlement is obvious. The risks that mismanaged or ill-conceived efforts at rebuilding local economies and helping refugees return could do so is less obvious to many. Yet the experiences of the international community in Afghanistan in particular have shown how much damage can be done to a political settlement by well-intentioned but poorly thought-out economic and refugee-resettlement assistance.

People traumatized by brutal communal warfare are even quicker than most to perceive and resent apparent injustices in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Aid organizations nonetheless generally seek to provide help wherever they can without recognizing that rivals on the ground often attempt to create conditions that will drive them to give aid disproportionately to one side at the expense of another. Syrian President Bashar al Assad, for example, is attempting to shape the provision of aid in this manner at this very moment, allowing food and other forms of relief into some areas and preventing it from going into others.[10] Local security forces can often manipulate the provision of aid simply by deliberately allowing violence to continue in areas they wish to deprive of help. Armed groups meanwhile leverage humanitarian aid deliveries to achieve local legitimacy, using this legitimacy in some cases to undermine attempts to reach a negotiated settlement as Jabhat al Nusra is doing.[11] Humanitarian assistance efforts must therefore be developed and executed in direct support of the political settlement and in close coordination with all local actors and with international actors—such as the U.S. and its allies—seeking to strengthen that settlement.

Large-scale economic reconstruction is even more difficult to keep neutral. Rebuilding power grids, road systems, water and sewage systems, agricultural areas, and other large infrastructure projects require some considerable degree of central and local government involvement. Americans learned the hard way in Iraq, however, that providing aid to ministries controlled by sectarian actors is one of the fastest ways to unravel a settlement and fuel sectarian violence.[12] That problem has re-emerged in Baghdad as Iranian-proxy Shi'a militia groups now control important ministries. The emergence of a cross-sectarian post-Assad government in Damascus will surely pose similar challenges. The cooptation of local governance by Salafi-jihadi military organizations in significant portions of Syria poses the same problem at a lower level. Flowing aid through Alawite-controlled ministries will fuel Sunni resentment. Sending help through Salafi-jihadi-controlled local governance will empower precisely those who must be defeated. Humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts will require the development and execution of a detailed and coherent strategy that will be at least as complex and difficult as any military plans. The same comments apply to refugee-resettlement efforts.

Extricate Iraq and Syria from regional and global conflicts. The deployment of Iranian military forces into Syria and Iraq and the establishment of a major Russian military base in Syria has transformed those countries into theaters of competition and potential conflict among external actors. This phenomenon is not accidental, as we shall see when we examine the objectives of Moscow and Tehran in the following sections. Both Putin and the Iranian regime intend to marginalize and ultimately expel the U.S. from the Middle East and are using their forces to further this aim, as well as to accomplish local objectives in Iraq and Syria. They are also both wholeheartedly backing Assad and the more radical Iraqi Shi'a groups that are fueling sectarian conflict in both states

and preventing the emergence of viable political settlements.

The Iranians are doing so because radical sectarian Shi'a (and Alawites, whom they regard as Shi'a for this purpose) are their most reliable allies and tools. The Iranian regime is also unable to escape from a very strong pro-Shi'a pull despite its pan-Islamist rhetoric.

Putin does not have any particular sectarian or ethnic preference, but he is supporting Assad and the Alawites unequivocally because only they can provide the strategic objective he is seeking through his intervention—an air and naval base on the Mediterranean coast. He is readily falling in with Iranian support for sectarian Shi'a actors in Iraq because his interests there are secondary, and Iran is his essential partner.

Constructing a settlement in Iraq and Syria that will be stable and will support America's vital national security interests, however, requires that the external guarantors of that settlement be seen as neutral among the parties. The very fact that the Iranians and Russians are so completely committed to one side of the conflict makes their participation in the conflict's resolution damaging if not fatal to international attempts to negotiate a settlement of the war.

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Russian aggression in Europe and against Turkey, moreover, is regrettably shifting Russo-American relations back toward a Cold War model of hostility. Iran's repeated violations of the UN Security Council Resolution endorsing the nuclear deal, particularly the sections calling on Iran not to develop, test, or field nuclear-capable missiles, are increasing tensions between Tehran and Washington despite the nuclear agreement.[13] The recent storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad by angry crowds after the Saudis executed Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al Nimr has led a number of Arab states to follow Riyadh's lead in breaking off or downgrading diplomatic relations with Iran.[14]

Iraq and Syria are unlikely to be able to establish stable and durable political settlements while they remain in the middle of all of these tensions and conflicts with the military forces of all of the players operating on their territory. Withdrawing all American forces would be one option for resolving this dilemma, of course, but it would do so at the expense of all other American national security requirements. The alternative is that the U.S. insist on the withdrawal of Russian military forces from Syria and Iranian military and law enforcement forces from both Syria and Iraq. That is the alternative the U.S. must pursue.

The very argument with Russia and Iran about such a withdrawal, if there is one, will be informative about the true motivations of the various actors for their military involvement in these conflicts. Putin should, according to his own rhetoric, be satisfied with a political settlement acceptable to the Alawites as well as to the Sunnis and Kurds, and should happily remove his ships, planes, and troops from Syria when it has been completed. The Iranians should be equally willing to pull back the elements of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Law Enforcement Forces now deployed in Syria, and to curtail the activities of the Qods Force in both countries, if their current rhetoric is honest.

Neither Tehran nor Moscow is likely to be amenable to such withdrawals, however, particularly if a military force of American troops and allies is to remain. The Russians and the Iranians are likely to make arguments based on fairness, equity, parity, and, in the case of Iran, the principle that extra-regional powers should have no presence in the Middle East. The U.S. and its partners must reject and defeat these arguments, which are actually without merit. Russian and Iranian policies in Iraq and Syria are themselves unequal, unfair, and favor one group at the expense of others in a way that will cause peace to fail. The U.S., however, can and should maintain neutrality, but Americans cannot accept the premise that Iran has a unique right to deploy its forces into the Arab world in pursuit of its aim of expelling the U.S. from the region entirely.

The Iranians are likely to make one reasonable counter-demand, however, which the U.S. should accept and support—namely that the Gulf States cease supporting Salafi-jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria and focus their assistance instead on inclusive governance structures set up to strengthen and perpetuate a peace settlement. The U.S. should make that demand on its own initiative, even if Tehran somehow does not.

Extricating Iraq and Syria from the regional and global conflicts is not simply a matter of expelling Iranian and Russian forces, but also requires destroying foreign Salafi-jihadi organizations that are operating in Syria. There are distinctive Chechen, Uzbek, Uighur, Moroccan, and other military units inside of Syria.[15] Such groups are sometimes aligned with ISIS or Jabhat al Nusra, but they nevertheless represent a distinct threat. They seek to bring their fighters back to their home countries enhanced by the training they received in Syria and enriched by resources earned from their support of a global movement. They pose a distinct danger, and

their destruction, rather than their expulsion, must be sought.

The insistence on the departure of Russian and Iranian troops from Iraq and Syria will seem to some an extraneous and even unreasonable demand. It is, on the contrary, an essential prerequisite for the long-term settlement of conflicts in those states. Iraq and Syria will not survive a Cold War-style partition by the great powers. The requirements for stabilizing the disintegrated, partitioned components are high and tend to exacerbate the likelihood of safe havens for ISIS and al Qaeda, because Sunni political and social structures are weak and under threat from both Sunni and Shi'a extremists. Germany, in contrast, boasted no skilled and violent insurgency after World War II to take advantage of the seams and tensions partition created. Americans must equally resist the doctrines of moral equivalence that will be advanced against any insistence on maintaining a U.S. and NATO presence while excluding that of Russia and Iran. There is no moral equivalence here, for the aims of Western strategy are very different from those of Moscow's or Tehran's. Our aim is to destroy Salafi-jihadi groups and mediate and then support a stable peace acceptable to all sides. We have no other interest in Iraq and Syria. That is why we must insist on a predominant role in that mediation and support while marginalizing those with particularistic objectives.

Iraq and Syria will not survive a Cold War–style partition by the great powers.

CONCLUSION

American strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria are easy enough to write down. They were not easy to define precisely, however. The immense complexity of these conflicts, particularly the war in Syria, make determining exactly what the U.S. must accomplish in order to fulfill the requirements for its own security against al Qaeda and ISIS very difficult. Even choosing the right verb for the objective of destroying (rather than defeating) ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra required careful consideration and explication.

Deciding how to approach the heavily-radicalized Syrian opposition is even more complicated and open to debate. The planning group hypothesizes that fragmenting Ahrar al Sham and reconciling many of its members to an acceptable post-Assad state is possible, but there can be no certainty until conditions are set and the attempt is made.

Arguing for a possible American and European military presence but insisting on the withdrawal of Russian and most Iranian forces will surely be controversial in Tehran and Moscow, and probably in Washington and Brussels as well. Some readers may question whether this demand is truly necessary and whether it does not needlessly force confrontation over secondary matters with Russia and Iran. The planning group has considered this matter in considerable detail and finds that the continued presence of Russian and Iranian troops in Syria, and of powerful Iranian-controlled militias in Iraq, is incompatible with a stable settlement of either conflict. It also assesses that driving the U.S. out of the region is one of the main purposes for those deployments, and so finds them also incompatible with core American interests beyond resolving these wars.

The frustration of many Americans attempting to find a policy to advocate in Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iraq, is palpable and understandable. The challenge is difficult enough that this planning group has chosen to articulate its path to such a policy clearly and deliberately rather than cutting to the chase as the best practices of Washington report-writing would have suggested. Agreement on the strategic objectives the U.S. must achieve in Iraq and Syria is a vital prerequisite for any sensible discussion of what the U.S. should do. The group thus invites reasoned argument regarding the objectives advanced above as it continues its work.

FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING COURSES OF ACTION

Charting a clear roadmap from the present to success is impossible, but we must be able to recognize success when we see it. We must, even more importantly, be able to discern and avoid the many traps along that road—the "solutions" that seem good enough but that will actually lead to failure. Understanding American objectives, the nature of the enemy, and the goals of other important actors does not provide a sufficient basis for developing and assessing possible courses of action. The complex structure of the environment in which those courses of action must function requires consideration in its own right. We must incorporate relevant lessons from previous conflicts including especially those of the last 15 years. Defining the characteristics of settlements of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria that could satisfy American vital national security interests is, finally, essential.

Underestimating the requirements for resolving the conflict in Syria in a way that sustains American vital national interests over the long term is the most immediate and serious trap into which U.S. policy is already falling. Stitching together some collection of local ceasefires with a haphazard international negotiation will produce no durable peace if it produces anything at all. The current negotiations process prioritizes getting the various non-Syrian actors to the table, sidelining a great many important Syrian players in aid of that goal. The gaps between the regional actors are so great that a meaningful agreement among them is extremely unlikely. Such an

agreement would have limited relevance in Syria even if it could be obtained, moreover, because none of the external actors actually control the actions of the fighting groups themselves.

Pursuing a negotiated settlement at the present time is, in fact, contrary to American interests. Conditions on the ground strongly favor the factions most inimical to those interests—the Assad regime on the one hand and Salafi-jihadi fighting forces on the other. A settlement that empowers those groups, as any settlement concluded at this moment surely must, would be disastrous.

Arriving at a settlement that does not empower the Assad regime or Salafi-jihadi organizations, however, requires fundamentally altering the situation in Syria. This prospect is so daunting that few have been willing even to articulate its requirements, let alone identify a course of action to fulfill them. There may be no solution in Syria achievable at a price the U.S. and its allies are willing to pay. There is no way to know, however, if we do not even decide what such a solution would look like. The planning group has turned to that task in this section.

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR RESOLVING THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA

The international community has seen many examples of successful negotiated settlements to conflicts relevant to the one raging in Syria.[16] The most informative include the Balkan settlements—both the 1995 Dayton Accords and the resolution of the 1999 Kosovo war—and the replacement of the Afrikaner regime in South Africa by a representative government. A number of failed attempts to establish stable political orders following changes of regime or protracted civil wars also offer valuable lessons, particularly the experience of Iraq after 2003 and Afghanistan from the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 through the present. These historical examples highlight a number of features common to almost any attempt to find a stable resolution to a bitter and protracted communal conflict. Attempts to bypass or short-circuit the requirements that emerge from this history are almost guaranteed to fail.

Attempts to bypass or short-circuit the requirements for a stable settlement that emerge from historical examples are almost guaranteed to fail.

Re-establishing a stable, unitary Syrian state that secures the American people from Salafi-jihadi military organizations based there requires that the U.S. and its partners:

- Destroy ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and foreign Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria;
- Identify and strengthen effective interlocutors that represent the (predominantly Sunni) Syrian opposition;
- Facilitate the negotiation of a settlement between the Syrian regime and its opponents that includes:[17]
    - Fundamental reform of the Syrian security services;
    - Full regime-change acceptable to all major population sub-groups;
    - Mutually-agreed upon measures for accountability and amnesty;
    - Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) mechanisms;
    - The withdrawal, replacement, and/or regularization of foreign military forces; and
    - Resettlement of refugees.
- Obtain regional acceptance of the negotiated settlement and its outcome;
- Establish peace enforcement mechanisms; and
- Reconstruct state institutions, including effective security services.

Regime change agreeable to all parties. A negotiated settlement requires that the principal military forces agree to stop fighting permanently before one has completely defeated the others either by breaking their wills or by depriving them of the means to continue fighting. It also usually requires that all sides decide to accept an outcome that is less than they might hope to achieve through outright military victory.

When the conflict results from the rejection of the ruling government by a substantial portion of the population willing to take up arms against it, a negotiated settlement must generally result in fundamental changes to the nature of that government. The settlement would otherwise be merely a mechanism by which the government accomplishes its objective—remaining in power unchanged—through non-military means.

The international discourse about Syria has obscured the real political stakes and requirements for the various actors. The U.S. and its Western allies focus heavily on whether Bashar al Assad will personally remain in power or depart, suggesting implicitly or explicitly that his departure from power would (or should) satisfy the key political demands of the opposition fighting him. But if the political transition is from Assad to someone in his inner circle, then it is merely a form of succession within the same regime rather

than a true transition. The opposition is not demanding succession within the Assad regime, however, but rather the departure of that regime and the creation of a new one.[18]

If the political transition is from Assad to someone in his inner circle, then it is merely a form of succession within the same regime, but the opposition is demanding the departure of that regime and the creation of a new one.

That demand, in turn, concerns Syria's Alawites, who fear that any new regime would be dominated by Sunni oppositionists eager to repay them for decades of oppression. Shi'a vengeance-taking after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq is a model that could easily be repeated in Syria by Sunni. Many Syrian armed opposition groups publicly declare their intent to protect minority populations and to preserve state employees, but the penetration of the armed opposition by Salafi-jihadi elements means that most of Syria's opposition cannot actually provide such guarantees.[19] The real challenge for international mediators is therefore to help the Syrian opposition and the Alawite community come to an agreement on the shape of a post-Assad regime that all can accept, and then provide sufficient mechanisms to guarantee adherence.[20] That challenge is daunting to say the least, and it is difficult to imagine meeting it without the deployment of international peacekeeping forces in some numbers and for a considerable time.

Accountability and amnesty. Syrians on all sides of the current conflict have committed atrocities and war crimes against one another in addition to crimes they accuse each other of having committed before the outbreak of the current civil war. The Assad regime is responsible for the most numerous and the worst of these—using chemical weapons, mass-starvation, and the widespread deliberate bombing of civilians, for example. The opposition has also committed atrocities and war crimes, particularly ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra.[21] The West may find it easy to separate ISIS and Nusra atrocities from the larger Sunni Arab community and hold the latter blameless for them, but traumatized Alawites may find it much harder to do so.

The atrocities committed by the Assad regime against the Syrian majority population render accountability and amnesty a particularly vital issue for most anti-regime elements in Syria. Many armed opposition groups call for the regime to be held accountable for its crimes as a necessary component of a negotiated settlement.[22] A settlement that simply absolves everyone either explicitly or by ignoring the issue is doomed to fail. Individuals on all sides of the conflict will seek vengeance against those they hold responsible for crimes against their families. Communities will avenge past injuries, creating a new cycle of violence that is likely to unravel any ceasefire.

South Africa has long been held up as an example of how to manage such problems through its Accountability and Justice Commission, although even that undertaking has not been without challenges. Settlements of the Balkans conflicts depended in part on commitments by the international community to search for, arrest, and try individuals accused of war crimes. The American decision in 2003 to exclude from any future role in the state or military an excessive number of Ba'ath Party members, including many thousands who held positions of little importance and who had no part in Saddam Hussein's atrocities, was an attempt at a simplistic solution to this problem that failed utterly.

Syria will certainly require some more intelligent form of de-Ba'athification, and the opposition groups that signed the Geneva Communiqué committed to allowing government employees not complicit in regime crimes to retain their jobs.[23] The process for determining which employees were or were not complicit, however, is likely to be complex and fraught. Syria will likely also require an international commitment to hold accountable at least those responsible for conducting chemical weapons attacks and attacks deliberately targeting civilians—the latter group including both regime fighters and members of some opposition groups, particularly ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra and their closest associates.[24] This undertaking is also likely to prove difficult given the refusal of Iran and, more importantly, UN-veto-wielding-Russia, to admit that Assad has carried out the chemical attacks or committed other atrocities.

Security force reform and reconstitution. A real change in the Syrian regime and serious accountability and amnesty measures will automatically require fundamental reform of the Syrian security forces, since they were designed to keep this particular regime in power and they include those most responsible for the atrocities committed at Assad's behest. This requirement includes both the intelligence services and the pro-regime fighting forces. Attempts to patch together some amalgamation of the current Syrian armed forces, minus a few leaders, with the current opposition forces, suitably altered, will almost certainly fail. These forces have been shaped to fight each other to the death, not to cooperate with one another. Merging them into one nominally unified force will simply ensure that all sides retain organized fighting forces to use when the agreement breaks down—and the simple fact that such forces remain will accelerate that breakdown.[25]

Demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR). Hundreds of thousands of soldiers are now fighting in

Syria, many in informal groups loosely connected with one another. The return of peace to Syria will require that most of those soldiers go home in an orderly fashion and without their weapons. This is a moment to learn the lesson of one of the disastrous post-2003 U.S. decisions in Iraq, namely instructing Saddam's army simply to disband and its members to return home with their weapons and skills. DDR on this scale is a massive task, however, that requires extensive planning and careful execution, almost certainly supervised by international experts backed by international forces. It is also a process that will take years to complete, but that must be agreed-upon in all of its details up front as part of a peace settlement.

Attempts to patch together some amalgamation of the current Syrian armed forces with the current opposition forces will almost certainly fail.

America's extensive experience with these problems in Iraq demonstrates the risks in one of the most obvious short-cuts around this problem, namely trying to bring the fighting units into the new security services. Integrating Shi'a militia groups into the Iraqi Security Forces early on simply turned the ISF into a sectarian killing machine that drove accelerated sectarian conflict and caused Sunni Arab Iraqis to accept and even support al Qaeda in Iraq as their defenders. Efforts to integrate Sunni irregulars (the "Awakening" fighters) into the Iraqi Security Forces faced enormous resistance from Shi'a sectarian actors and ultimately failed as American troops withdrew when the highly sectarian Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki stalled and then reneged on his commitments to these fighters.[26] DDR and the creation of new security forces must proceed along separate parallel tracks without the one feeding directly into the other.

Resettlement of refugees. The conflict in Syria has created millions of refugees within the country and driven millions more beyond its borders. The homes of many of these refugees have been destroyed or occupied. Syria cannot be a viable country again until some significant portion of its refugees return either to their homes or to dwellings elsewhere in which they are willing to remain. The thorny problems of refugee resettlement are inter-connected with the issues of accountability, amnesty, regime-change, and DDR outlined above. As international experience in Afghanistan has demonstrated, the task of resettling refugees can take decades. It can also create renewed conflict if it is not carefully managed. A peace settlement need not necessarily include all of the details of a refugee resettlement policy, but it must include the outline of a process for determining those details. History also shows that a mass refugee exodus in response to one crisis can create an enduring cycle of refugee flight in response to perceptions that a settlement that had prompted some refugees to return is breaking down. Afghan refugees did flow back to their home country in large numbers in the first decade of the 2000s, but began flowing out again as the security situation deteriorated after 2010. Iraqi refugees also returned following the reductions of violence in 2007 and 2008, but began to leave again as sectarian tensions and violence rose once more in 2011. The departure or significant reduction in the American military presence played an important role in driving refugee flight in both cases.

Refugee recidivism is a problem in two ways. First, it adds a layer of instability to any settlement inside the state. Large movements of a population are always destabilizing even if managed well, and fractured states recovering from war can hardly manage them at all. The very fact that significant numbers of people begin to flee a state after a settlement can itself undermine general faith in the settlement, even if the fears of the refugees are unfounded. Second, the flow of refugees into Europe is one of the principal reasons why a settlement of the Syrian conflict is required. If returnees to Syria begin to flee once again in response to real or imagined threats to their safety then the benefit of the settlement in this regard is lost.

Status of foreign military forces. Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah, Russian, and a small number of American forces are in Syria today. Which, if any, will remain after a negotiated settlement has been concluded? This issue concerns the Syrian parties to the conflict but also the regional parties. The Iranians are very unlikely to accept a resolution of the conflict that requires them to withdraw all of their forces from Syria, which has been Tehran's principal base of operations in the Levant for decades.[27] Both they and Lebanese Hezbollah will likely resist any agreement that completely expels Hezbollah forces as well. Nonetheless, this withdrawal is a core demand of many of Syria's most powerful armed opposition groups.

Russia may or may not be willing to withdraw its forces from Syria, depending on what Vladimir Putin's objective was in putting them there in the first place. If his aim was to establish a permanent Russian military base on the Mediterranean, then he will likely resist being forced to abandon it. But will Syria's Sunni opposition accept the continued presence of the military forces that have been backing Assad and attacking them? Will they demand the complete withdrawal of those forces, or will they instead demand that the U.S., other Western states, or regional powers deploy forces into Sunni or contested areas to offset any continued Russo-Iranian-Hezbollah presence? Negotiations will have to resolve these questions as well.

These considerations must inform our expectations of any attempt to arrive at a negotiated settlement of the Syrian conflict. They must also shape our approach to

courses of action that are not aimed at an immediate settlement but that ultimately seek a unitary, stable Syria. Any permanent resolution of the conflict will have to address these challenges. Steps we take in the interim can greatly ease or enormously complicate efforts to do so.

NEGOTIATIONS AND FIGHTING

It is impossible to separate the negotiations from the situation on the ground. Current conditions strongly favor the groups most dangerous to American interests, as we have noted. The negotiations themselves drive fighting and shape military campaigns as all sides maneuver to ensure that they occupy the territory that is important to them if and when a ceasefire enters into force.[28] The talks also drive efforts to secure important ground through localized ceasefires and territorial trades, which in Syria are generally a product of acute regime pressure on civilian populations to coerce armed opposition forces to agree to such local deals.[29]

The international mediation process can come to be seen as unfair and can become completely dysfunctional if "getting people to the table" is seen as an end in itself.

The various actors calculate whether and when to agree to certain political terms based on their military positions and prospects. These calculations can easily create perverse incentives. Actors who are relatively satisfied with their military positions are more likely to be willing to agree to ceasefires and enter into a political process. International mediators whose aim is to establish ceasefires and start a process tend to reward those who appear most amenable and to push harder against those who appear resistant. The mediators can easily find themselves unwittingly backing aggressors against their victims, however, if they do not pay careful attention to how the situation on the ground has been changing. The entire mediation process can come to be seen as unfair and can ultimately become completely dysfunctional, particularly if "getting people to the table" is seen as an end in itself.

Mediation undertaken without regard to the military situation will also miss important opportunities to change the calculations of the various sides by helping one or another improve its position on the ground with an eye to gaining concessions from it at the negotiating table. Outside forces can also, of course, oppose attempts by some actors to strengthen their positions as a way of persuading them that they will not be able to achieve their goals by force and therefore must accept sub-optimal negotiated outcomes. Russia and Iran are helping Assad shape conditions on the ground so as to guarantee him (or his successor) a favorable negotiated settlement. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the Gulf States are working with the opposition forces in a similar fashion, although they are preferentially supporting Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups and so their net effect is actually detrimental to U.S. interests even if it helps balance the military state of play. But the U.S. and its allies are taking no action to assist the opposition against Assad or to weaken Assad directly in a way that might make the Alawites more amenable to the kind of settlement that American national security requires. This is one of the most important factors that led the planning group to conclude that the current negotiations will not achieve core American security requirements.

ASSESSING THE CURRENT U.S. DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY IN SYRIA

Current U.S. policy seeks a negotiated settlement to the Syrian Civil War that produces a new Syrian government including both regime and opposition elements. Twenty regional and international powers including Saudi Arabia and Iran met twice in Vienna in late 2015 as part of a Russian-led initiative to create an agreed-upon framework for negotiations between the Syrian regime and its opponents. The framework called for negotiations between the Syrian regime and elements of the Syrian armed opposition, now scheduled to begin on January 25, 2016, and aimed to establish a transitional governing body by May 2016, after which new presidential elections would be held.[30]

The current framework adopted at the Vienna Talks will likely permit Assad to retain his power throughout the transition period preceding new elections if he and his patrons and entourage so choose. It will also likely allow him to run in those elections. He will probably win them if he does run, in fact, if the past offers any sort of precedent—he was re-elected in 2014, after all, in a vote dominated by the pro-regime populations, partly because war continued to rage unchecked in Sunni areas.[31] This framework thus offers little hope even that Assad himself will depart, let alone that the nature of the regime in Damascus will change fundamentally. It gives the Alawites enormous leverage if they—or Russia and Iran—decide to trade his personal departure for an internationally-sanctioned intra-regime succession. It thus gives the armed Syrian opposition little incentive to favor a political settlement over continued war. Parts of the opposition appear to have come to the same conclusion: opposition powerbroker Ahrar al Sham withdrew from talks in Riyadh on December 10.[32]

Russia's intervention in Syria gravely compromises the prospects for a negotiated resolution to the war even were the Vienna framework compelling. Russia does not accept the division of rebel groups into blocks of different kinds,

but rather lumps all of the opposition forces in central and northern Syria together with Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS (and does not distinguish between those two groups in any meaningful way either, despite the open military conflict between them).[33] The continued Russian air campaign will thus likely make the opposition more intransigent and less willing to accept the persistence of the Assad regime under Bashar or a successor. A small number of formerly independent Salafi-jihadi groups and opposition groups have in fact already declared loyalty to Jabhat al Nusra or to Ahrar al Sham, respectively.[34] The continuation of the Russian military approach is likely to continue to drive opposition groups together with the Salafi-jihadi military organizations that field the most combat power in much of Syria.

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Russian support to Assad is also likely to reduce the willingness of the Alawites to make major concessions, since it greatly improves their military situation on the ground, and thus their bargaining position, while simultaneously raising the threat posed by jihadist groups to Alawite survival. Moscow would have to be willing and able credibly to threaten to withdraw its support from the Alawites to drive them to accept fundamental regime change in the current circumstances, but there is nothing in Russian statements or actions to suggest that Putin is willing to contemplate such a course. These roadblocks are likely to preclude a negotiated end to the Syrian Civil War and perpetuate the conditions that allow ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other Salafi-jihadi military organizations to maintain – possibly grow – their safe havens in Syria.

Pursuing the current negotiating framework therefore entails significant risks from violent spoilers, even as it fails to eliminate Salafi-jihadi safe havens. ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other irreconcilable Salafi-jihadi military organizations will almost certainly attempt to spoil the negotiations and derail any negotiated settlement, leading to increased violence over the near term. These groups are implacably opposed to any settlement that leaves a secular government in power, whether Assad's or some compromise transitional state including the moderate opposition. They oppose any settlement at all that does not give them control of Syria, in fact. The current international process rightly excludes ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra from the negotiations and from any ultimate settlement, and, in fact, specifically authorizes continued attacks against those groups even during the ceasefire.[35] ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, therefore, have every incentive to continue fighting and to escalate their attacks in order to disrupt the entire negotiating process.

If the process yields a transitional government, Salafi-jihadi groups would almost certainly conduct targeted assassinations, kidnappings, spectacular attacks against symbolic targets, and use other forms of coercion to undermine its authority. Jabhat al Nusra would likely launch attacks against pro-regime territory.[36] ISIS is also likely to spoil confidence-building measures such as ceasefires, as its actions have shown.[37] ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other Salafi-jihadi military organizations could also seek to expand their operational footprint into the neighboring states of Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan in response to an imposed political settlement.

Syrian Alawites, Syrian Kurds, or other minority factions could also spoil a settlement by electing to prolong the conflict rather than concede to a Sunni Arab-led government. Syrian Alawites could fight to preserve a rump state along the Syrian coast if a political settlement fails to provide a clear role for minorities in a post-regime Syrian state. This rump state could receive military support from Russia and Iran. Syrian Kurds could also undermine peace efforts by seizing additional territory along the Turkish border, prompting a military response from Turkey. Arguments within the Syrian opposition over ideology or general struggles for influence would open seams that could be exploited by ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other Salafi-jihadi military organizations operating in Syria.

Current diplomatic efforts attempt to bypass and short-circuit almost all of the issues identified in the previous section as central to any stable resolution of a conflict such as the one that has been raging in Syria since 2011. There is virtually no chance that these efforts could produce a durable outcome

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in the long run even if they were successful in pacifying Syria over the next couple of years (which is itself unlikely). Advocates of the current negotiations argue that they are the necessary first phase in a process that will ultimately lead to a final resolution of the conflict. This argument reflects a broader sense among many that beginning a political process is inherently good and carries no risks in itself, and that even small agreements in such a process can snowball into a final resolution of the problem. The search for a ceasefire in Syria, in particular, reflects the growing sense of urgency

in the international community that something must be done to stop the violence in Syria. But the U.S. and the West are taking no action to mitigate the many risks posed by violent spoilers, while Russian operations are radicalizing more moderate forces that might in principle be open to talks. The likelihood that the international community will succeed in reaching a long-term solution to the Syrian Civil War through the current approach is thus miniscule.

ASSAD'S INABILITY TO REGAIN CONTROL OF SYRIA AND DEFEAT ISIS AND JABHAT AL NUSRA

The complexities of a negotiated settlement and the risks of its collapse—or, alternatively, the danger that it will actually empower the Salafi-jihadi groups that the U.S. must destroy—has created another trap for American policy: the myth of Assad as a lesser evil against ISIS.[38] Members of the planning group have argued elsewhere about the problems with embracing Assad as a partner resulting from his prominent role in driving the sectarian war.[39] But the notion of working with him or, perhaps, a less-sectarian successor, deserves careful evaluation given the lack of palatable alternatives. That evaluation must include an assessment of the feasibility of Assad actually regaining control of Syria and destroying ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra— and preventing their return or reconstitution. It must also consider the regional consequences of aligning the U.S. with the Alawite regime. Both considerations militate powerfully against seeing Assad as a potential partner.

The Alawite regime does not have sufficient combat power to defeat ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, let alone to hold the areas they now control. Assad has tried to conduct multiple simultaneous or successive major military campaigns against rebel forces in the past and has continually encountered the same fatal dilemma—he can either hold the ground he wins in one area with the forces he sent there, precluding operations elsewhere, or he can move his clearing forces to another front and lose the gains he has made.[40] He can only hope to resolve this dilemma by finding additional forces and in considerable numbers. Russian military intervention has not dramatically transformed the military landscape in northern and western Syria, and therefore has not sufficiently helped Assad to enable him to reconquer Syria. Regime forces taking advantage of Russian air support have made some gains, notably relieving the siege of Kuweires air base northeast of Aleppo, but they have not been able yet either to surround or to take Aleppo, nor to drive ISIS from Palmyra, another objective they are pursuing. Campaigns in both areas may yet succeed, but the time they are taking and the difficulties they are encountering suggest that they will mainly have the effect of moving the lines on what will remain a dynamic but stalemated battlefield.

There is no apparent source of significant additional manpower for Assad at this point. Iranian forces are stretched to sustain current deployment levels, as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is not configured to maintain combat units in protracted conflicts beyond Iran's borders.[41] Lebanese Hezbollah is already keeping several thousand fighters in Syria even as Lebanon continues to slide further into instability. It is extremely unlikely that Hezbollah will mobilize large numbers of additional troops to fight for Sunni territory in Syria on behalf of Assad.

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It is improbable in the extreme that Putin will deploy major combat forces to help Assad either. Such a deployment would, indeed, risk turning Syria into another Afghanistan. It would also divert forces from operations in Ukraine that are far more important to Putin than fighting ISIS. The movement of Russian combat forces to the Syrian coast and then to bases in eastern Syria would be an unprecedented projection of Russian force, moreover, for which there is no reason to believe the Russian military is actually prepared or preparing. It goes without saying that Sunni Arab countries like Saudi Arabia might be willing to send combat forces into Syria in such a situation—but only to fight alongside the opposition against Assad. They will never commit military power to an alliance with him. Assad could optimistically hope, therefore, to reconquer most of western Syria while accepting the persistence of an insurgency within that area as well as of ISIS sanctuaries in the east. That outcome is entirely inconsistent with American interest and national security requirements in Syria.

The U.S. is thus the only potential source for the many thousands of additional troops that would be required to support Assad in a way that achieves our core national security objectives of eliminating the main ISIS sanctuaries. It is almost impossible to imagine a scenario in which an American president would order U.S. troops into Syria in support of an Assad-Iran-Russia-Hezbollah coalition. It is almost equally difficult to imagine a coalition permitting the deployment of such forces. Keeping American troops out of the region is a major objective for both Russia and Iran.[42]

Backing Assad is also strategically problematic. Any course of action that preserves the regime would allow Iran to maintain key supply routes for transferring weapons to Lebanese

Hezbollah via Damascus. U.S. intervention could also open opportunities for the IRGC and other Iranian-backed foreign terrorist organizations to secure a foothold along the Golan Heights on Israel's border. Russia would receive international validation and a bolstered claim to leadership in global counter-terrorism operations if the U.S. concedes to its demands for a partnership with Assad. Russia would likely move to secure the long-term presence of its military forces on the Syrian coast in order to challenge the U.S. and NATO.

The U.S. could also irreversibly damage its relations with critical regional allies. Turkey and the Gulf States have provided direct support to anti-regime forces since the start of the Syrian Revolution. Any decision to intervene on behalf of the Syrian regime would place the U.S. in direct opposition to its regional partners. It would solidify the half-conscious reorientation of the American alliance system in the Middle East away from the Sunni Arab states and Israel and toward their regional adversaries. Whatever the wisdom of such a reorientation, it must not be undertaken simply in the hope of finding an easier solution to the challenge of ISIS in Syria—particularly considering the very high probability that it will fail to deliver any such solution.

MINIMUM CONDITIONS FOR COOPERATING WITH SYRIAN SALAFI-JIHADI GROUPS

The requirement to find a settlement of the Syrian conflict that does not empower Salafi-jihadi groups immediately runs into the problem posed by organizations such as Ahrar al Sham, which is one of the largest and most powerful fighting forces among the opposition. It benefits from popular support and participates actively in local governance in many areas. It is also thoroughly entwined with Jabhat al Nusra and committed to a vision of Salafi-jihadism and Salafist governance, yet it is not actively planning or directly supporting attacks against the West and claims that it is uninterested in doing so.[43] Allowing Ahrar al Sham to retain its military and political power virtually ensures that Jabhat al Nusra will retain a foothold in Syria and, furthermore, that conditions will be set for its reconstitution into a major force even if it is once destroyed. But treating Ahrar al Sham as identical to Jabhat al Nusra, as the Russians do, puts the U.S. at war with many Sunnis who can and must be incorporated into a future, post-Assad inclusive government. It is vital, therefore, to identify precisely what the U.S. and its allies must demand of Ahrar al Sham and other Salafi-jihadi groups that are not yet part of al Qaeda or ISIS in return for allowing the bulk of their members to participate in a political settlement and the government that it will ultimately produce.

Treating Ahrar al Sham as identical with Jabhat al Nusra, as the Russians do, puts the U.S. at war with many Sunnis who can and must be incorporated into a future, post-Assad inclusive government.

The minimum conditions that the Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups–excluding Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS—must meet in order to participate in a post-war Syria compatible with core American security requirements are to:

- Break with Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS and either expel the leaders of those groups or turn them over to the Western coalition;
- Accept the principle that the future Syrian state will be pluralistic and unitary;
- Reject violent jihad, including against ISIS, and abjure future offensive military operations outside of the local areas they protect;[44]
- Commit to disarming to the minimum level required for them to police and defend areas in which they will continue to dominate or govern (a condition that all parties to the settlement will have to meet); and
- Commit to the elimination of the current Shari'a court system by which they govern, to the formation of new local governance structures that exclude current and recent officials of Shari'a courts, and to the holding of local elections in which Shari'a court officials will not participate either as candidates or as vetters. The governance of Syria must rest on political institutions rather than on Shari'a courts from localities upward.[45]

Groups that commit to and fulfill these requirements can expect to retain control of local governance as long as they can win local elections under these conditions. They can also expect to retain some police and military forces at levels and with weaponry to be negotiated depending on the security conditions in the country. These demands are likely to fracture the groups and help separate the reconcilable from irreconcilable elements, although a violent struggle will likely ensue between the factions. A sound counterinsurgency approach must separate them, however, and destroy irreconcilable elements.

The commitment to and implementation of these commitments would need to be phased. The groups must commit up front to all five conditions. They must fulfill the first condition—expelling or handing over ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra leaders—before any agreement could come into effect. The U.S. may have to allow them to delay ending the jihad for

some limited time after the implementation of an agreement, recognizing that the security situation will not likely resolve itself instantly. ISIS in particular will seek to exploit a change in the status quo in western Syria, and the members of Ahrar al Sham and other anti-ISIS groups will have to be able to defend themselves until some other forces arrive to assist. There will also have to be a limited transition period from the current shari'a court system of local governance to a new structure as outlined above. Disarmament will likely require a longer agreed-upon timeframe. It is imperative that the U.S. and its partners prevent Salafi-jihadi groups from protracting agreed-upon transition periods or using force during those periods to change conditions on the ground to their advantage. International troops will almost certainly be required to uphold that imperative.

VULNERABILITY OF IRAQ

Syria's challenges are so enormous that they sometimes obscure the structural difficulties confronting American strategy in Iraq. The recent recapture of most of Ramadi by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was an important step forward in the struggle against ISIS, but it was only a step. The ISF still faces an uphill climb to clear the rest of the Euphrates River Valley east through ISIS-held Fallujah to Baghdad and west to the Syrian border. It must also fight its way through the rest of Salah-ad-Din Province into Ninewah Province to regain Mosul and the portions of Ninewah not under either ISIS or Kurdish control. These fights will not be easy. Their difficulty will be enormously compounded by the growing vulnerability and fragility of the Iraqi government and its leader, Prime Minister Haider al Abadi.

American strategy for destroying ISIS in Iraq must therefore reckon with the extreme fragility of one of its most important pillars.

Iraq is suffering from serious economic problems resulting from the collapse in the price of oil and the consequent major reductions in the state budget. Such reductions have an immediate effect on the legitimacy of the government when citizens are accustomed to receiving direct support from the state in various forms, including employment and other top-down wealth transfers. These reductions have also exacerbated conflicts about who will pay and support militia forces operating outside of state control that have been driving an influx of Iranian-backed militia leaders and fighters into the ISF. This influx, in turn, undermines Abadi's independence from Tehran and the ISF's independence of the militias. Prime Minister Abadi is also attempting to combat the rampant corruption and mis-governance in Iraq that has risen to the level of a national crisis in the context of these severe budgetary constraints. These efforts have run him afoul of many entrenched interests and even weakened the public support of his most important backer, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.[46] Abadi's increased vulnerability is encouraging his predecessor and principal rival, Nuri Kemal al Maliki, to maneuver more aggressively in preparation for unseating Abadi and re-establishing himself in power. Maliki's maneuvers rely heavily on the support of Iranian-controlled militias, which would also benefit greatly from Abadi's departure.

These internal Iraqi matters are important to America because they can undermine or even collapse Iraqi efforts against ISIS while simultaneously preventing the U.S. from trying to assist in that fight.

These internal Iraqi matters are important to America because they can undermine or even collapse Iraqi efforts against ISIS while simultaneously preventing the U.S. from trying to assist in that fight. A serious attempt to remove Abadi from the premiership would likely paralyze the Iraqi government and derail ongoing campaigns against ISIS. A rapid resumption of power by Maliki is unlikely to lead to an equally-rapid resumption of those campaigns, however.

Maliki has moved steadily into the Iranian orbit since losing power. His dependence on Iranian-controlled militias and their political wings would reinforce this drift once he regained control.[47] Iranian interests and objectives do not align with America's in fundamental ways. Tehran desires to drive the U.S. out of Iraq entirely, for one thing, and is content to protect the metropolitan Shi'a areas of Iraq without putting forth too much effort to drive ISIS out of the Sunni heartland. The Iranian regime holds a largely undifferentiated view of Iraq's Sunni population, moreover, as does Maliki—it views almost all Sunni as at least tacit supporters of ISIS.

A Maliki-driven anti-ISIS campaign will thus likely look very different from the one that Abadi is currently conducting with American assistance. It would not include any significant effort at outreach to the Sunni community—Maliki's tenure was known for his refusal to reach out with much other than force, except when Americans cajoled him. It would very likely not include significant U.S. assistance either. Maliki can be expected to order some or all U.S. combat forces out of Iraq and/or to seriously curtail their activities. It probably would include the incorporation of even more Iranian-controlled militias and other sectarian

fighting forces into the ISF, which, in turn, would likely take up its old sectarian ways, finishing the sectarian cleansing of Baghdad and its environs in part through sectarian killings. Maliki's campaign against ISIS, therefore, would very likely make the problem much worse, rather than better.

Facilitating Maliki's departure from power was an important achievement of the U.S. administration in 2014, enabling a transformation in the way the Iraqi government and the ISF prosecuted the struggle against ISIS. Maliki's return to power would be disastrous. Even the collapse of the Abadi government and the transition to someone other than Maliki would do serious damage to the current campaign. American strategy for destroying ISIS in Iraq must therefore reckon with the extreme fragility of one of its most important pillars. It must avoid actions that would further weaken Abadi while contemplating a series of urgent measures to strengthen him. It must also prepare for the unhappy contingency of his fall, since the collapse of Abadi's government would not make the destruction of ISIS in Iraq any less vital to American national security. We shall consider these matters in detail when presenting specific courses of action.

CONCLUSION

Crafting a viable solution to the Syrian Civil War while supporting and strengthening an Iraqi government with some independence from Tehran will be enormously difficult. It will require a superb understanding of the dynamic situation on the ground, a strategic perspective that takes the long view of America's interests, and the ability to articulate many separate but interwoven lines of effort in the military, economic, political, diplomatic, and governance arenas. Executing such an approach will also require patience and commitment over time. Wounds such as those inflicted on the Syrian and Iraqi peoples heal very slowly. Conflicts such as these tend to re-emerge after initial settlements appear to get them under control. Any quick-fix solution will fail, as will any solution built on a simplistic understanding of the problem.

The conflicts in Iraq and Syria generate direct and potent threats to the security of the American and European homelands, and they must therefore be ended on terms that protect our peoples regardless of the difficulty of that task.

The U.S. and its allies must embrace this challenge, however, because the problems will not go away by themselves. Continued civil war will generate continued refugee flows, global sectarian mobilization and radicalization, increased foreign-fighter movements, persistent safe havens for al Qaeda and ISIS, and growing resentment against the West that will support increased direct attacks on Western soil. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria are not contained and are not containable. They generate direct and potent threats to the security of the American and European homelands, and they must therefore be ended on terms that protect our peoples regardless of the difficulty of that task.

IRANIAN OBJECTIVES

Iranian objectives in Iraq and Syria overlap with those of Russia in complicated ways. They are almost entirely antithetical to the objectives of the United States and the West, Tehran's fear of and opposition to Salafi-jihad groups notwithstanding.

The grand strategic objectives of the Iranian regime are to maintain its power, preserve its revolutionary character

in keeping with the ideals of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, and export those ideals throughout the Muslim world. It also aims to establish Iran as the hegemon of the Middle East, thus regaining what it believes to be Iran's rightful legacy as heir to the Persian Empire.

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Former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology was explicitly anti-American and anti-Zionist. The current regime thus strives to expel the United States, Great Britain, and their allies from the Middle East entirely as well as to eliminate the state of Israel. Iran is a Shi'a theocracy, and its leaders view the defense of Shi'a populations around the world as its right and obligation. Moreover, these leaders seek to guide, represent, and ultimately lead the entire Muslim world, both Sunni and Shi'a.[48]

Iran's leaders pursue a number of strategic aims in support of these grand strategic objectives:

- Deter a U.S. or Israeli attack on the regime or the nuclear program;
- End the international sanctions regime;
- Increase Iran's domestic economic independence and resilience;
- Re-integrate into the global economy on Iran's terms;
- Challenge Saudi regional power and influence;
- Keep Israel fully occupied defending itself;
- Support and strengthen Iran's regional partners and proxies;
- Build a regional coalition under Iran's leadership to "resist" Israel and the U.S.[49]

These strategic aims require a series of concrete undertakings that the Iranian government and armed forces pursue in the region and globally.

IRANIAN MEANS

Axis of Resistance

Iran has created a regional coalition on which it relies to pursue its strategic and grand strategic objectives. This "axis of resistance" includes the Assad regime in Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Shi'a militias in Iraq, some parts of the Iraqi government itself, HAMAS, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iranian officials periodically include the Yemen-based al Houthi movement in this list as well.[50]

The "axis of resistance" concept long predates the rise of ISIS. It is primarily meant to be the alliance under Iran's control of military and para-military forces confronting Israel, the U.S., and their regional allies and partners, including Saudi Arabia. Lebanese Hezbollah and the Assad regime have historically been the two most important members of the axis.

Lebanese Hezbollah

Hezbollah poses the greatest and most immediate threat to Israel by virtue of the advanced, long-range rockets which Iran has provided. It also gives Iran access to a group of highly-trained an loyal Arab partners through whom Farsi-speaking Iranians can interact with other groups in the Arab world. Hezbollahi leaders thus played important roles in helping Iranian forces train and support Iraqi Shi'a militias after 2003 and in helping them integrate with Syrian forces after 2011.[51] The preservation of Hezbollah's political and military power is a core national security interest of Iran that Tehran will fight to defend.

Iranian Methods

- *Maintain Assad-type regime in Syria*
- *Maintain pro-Iranian and anti-U.S. government in Iraq*
- *Expand interoperable military coalition with Hezbollah, Syrian forces, and Iraqi militias*
- *Support Hezbollah, HAMAS, and PIJ*
- *Maintain and expand conventional military threat to U.S. and Israel in the region*
- *Stabilize economy*
- *Expand energy trade but also diversify economy*
- *Develop "industrial-scale" nuclear enrichment and energy-production program*
- *Transform government of Bahrain*

Iranian foreign and military policy is controlled by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and executed primarily by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). President Hassan Rouhani and his cabinet, including Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Defense Minister General Hossein Dehghan, have opinions about what Iran should or should not be doing militarily in Syria, but they have little ability actually to influence the policy. Iranian regional strategy is thus in the hands of Khamenei, IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, and Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani. The most significant advisers in this policy-making are former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi (Khamenei's senior military advisor) and former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati (Khamenei's senior foreign policy advisor). Retired Admiral Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), helps coordinate Iran's all-of-government approach to the fight. All of these individuals are committed hard-line revolutionaries who should not be seen as "reformists."

Assad Regime

The Assad regime was a critical ally before 2011 because it provided Iran a state base for its support to both Hezbollah and HAMAS, whose headquarters were in Damascus until Assad's sectarian brutality against his Sunni majority population forced HAMAS to decamp. Syria provided the physical infrastructure Iran used to supply Hezbollah with weapons and move personnel. It also provided a safe haven that Israel would not attack even when it was hitting Hezbollahi targets in Lebanon.

Assad continues to be an important ally for Tehran, but the relationship is now reversed—Iran has been forced to deploy its own forces, Hezbollahi troops, and Iraqi Shi'a militias to fight in Syria simply to keep Assad in power.

Tehran seeks to be known as a state that remains loyal to its partners, hoping to benefit, among other things, from the perception that the U.S. is not a reliable ally.

Iran continues to support Assad because it still needs the base that the Alawite coastline and Damascus environs provide to support Hezbollah in Lebanon. Tehran's long-term goal is likely to stabilize Alawite control of that area sufficiently to allow Hezbollahi fighters to return to Lebanon and still rely on Iranian logistical support flowing through Damascus International Airport and the Syrian ports.[52]

If those lines of communication are permanently disrupted, Iran will face much greater risks in having to supply Hezbollah entirely through Lebanese territory. Lebanese infrastructure is much more vulnerable to Israeli attack, for one thing, as Israel demonstrated during the 2006 war.[53] The use of Lebanese lines of communications, moreover, depends on Hezbollah's ability to maintain its predominance in the unstable equilibrium that is Lebanese internal politics.

Iranian support for Assad has also become a matter of national policy and honor, as well as a personal honor of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Tehran seeks to be known as a state that remains loyal to its partners, hoping to benefit, among other things, from the perception that the U.S. is not a reliable ally. That principle was tested in 2014 as Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki sought to retain his seat despite intense opposition among Iraq's Shi'a. Supreme Leader Khamenei appears to have maintained his personal support for Maliki to the end, but allowed himself to be talked into letting the regime abandon him by more pragmatic subordinates.[54] Maliki left power and was replaced by Haider al Abadi, who has generally been much less enthusiastic about pursuing Iran's interests and keeping his distance from the U.S. That experience has likely re-cemented Khamenei's already strong commitment to back Assad, or at least a successor of Bashar's choosing.[55] Iranian officials, in any event, have been vociferous in their insistence that Assad will not be forced out against his will.[56]

Iraqi Militias

Iran has recruited, trained, supported, and directed para-military forces drawn from Iraq's Shi'a population since the Iran-Iraq War. Tehran expanded its network and support dramatically after the U.S. overthrew Saddam in 2003.[57] The Badr Corps, later renamed the Badr Organization, was the original Iranian proxy formed to fight against Saddam in the 1980s. Iran re-injected that force into Iraq in 2003, where it aggressively infiltrated Iraqi Security Forces, particularly the Iraqi National Police. Tehran also helped Moqtada al Sadr, son of a major Shi'a cleric murdered by Saddam in 1999, form another proxy after the U.S. invasion, known initially as the Jaish al Mahdi (JAM, or Mahdi Army). Qais al Khazali, one of Sadr's lieutenants, broke from Moqtada in 2004, and formed a separate organization known as Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (the League of the Righteous) in 2006. The Iranian Qods Force also maintained a small, elite, and highly-lethal arm known as Kata'ib Hezbollah.

These forces all continue to operate in Iraq with considerable Iranian support and direction, and they came to the fore as the Iraqi Security Forces collapsed in Mosul and ISIS captured the city in June 2014. The Badr Organization works closely with Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asai'b Ahl al Haq, and other proxy militias to wrest command and control of operations against ISIS from Prime Minister Abadi and Iraqi institutions that are seen as too pro-American. The Iraqi Security Forces in many areas respond to the guidance of Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani via the Badr Organization's own leader, Hadi al Amiri.[58]

The Jaish al Mahdi has gone through a number of transformations and was ultimately stood down by Moqtada al Sadr in 2008. It has been replaced by the Peace Brigades, which he still controls. Sadr is not a reliable partner for Iran (or anyone), and competes with the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asai'b Ahl al Haq, and other Iranian proxies for influence in Iraq. The Peace Brigades are focused on the fight against ISIS in Iraq.

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Kata'ib Hezbollah has sent support to Syria, however, along with Asai'b Ahl al Haq and a number of relatively newer Iraqi militias including the Nujaba Movement (NM, also known as Saraya al Difa al Shabi), Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada (KSAS), Kata'ib Imam Ali (KAIA), and Talia Saraya al Khorasani.

The appearance of elements of these militias on Syrian battlefields demonstrates that Iran has created the capability to mobilize external groups, move them from Iraq to a foreign theater, and integrate them into a coherent fighting force there, along with the military and para-military forces of Assad and Lebanese Hezbollah. Many returned to the Iraq battlefield after the fall of Mosul, proving that Iran could also redeploy these forces back en masse. Iran subsequently redeployed some Iraqi proxy contingents back to Syria in the summer of 2015. The axis of resistance has thus become a military coalition that can be formed and reorganized in a modular fashion and deployed across the region to theaters in which Iran has established command and support infrastructure. The creation of such a military coalition has likely been an Iranian objective for some time, judging from its operations in Iraq since 2003. Expanding and protecting that coalition is probably a core national security objective for Tehran today.

Syrian Irregular Forces

The IRGC and Qods Force see their activities in Iraq as a model to be replicated, and they have done so in Syria. IRGC Major General Hossein Hamedani, killed in Syria in October 2015, helped form Alawite militias modeled on Hezbollah and Iraqi militias as auxiliary forces to the conventional Syrian Arab Army (SAA) that was in danger of collapse.[59] These National Defense Forces (NDF) were formed outside of the SAA and interact with it in a manner similar to that of Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. The creation of the NDF and this manner of integration into the larger axis of resistance rather than into the Syrian armed forces show Tehran's commitment to the principle of retaining and expanding an inter-operable Arab-Persian military coalition that it controls and directs.

Relationship with Russia

Maintaining and deepening Iran's relationship with Russia is another core strategic requirement for the Iranian regime. That relationship has long been troubled, and Iranian leaders have learned not to trust Russia completely even to keep commitments it has made to them, let alone to help them pursue their interests. Russia promised to sell Iran the advanced S-300 air defense system in 2007, for example, but did not deliver it. Tensions over Moscow's prevarications on this issue led Iran to begin court proceedings to claim financial damages from Russia for failure to deliver the system.[60] These tensions regularly evoked bitter complaints against Moscow's unreliability and duplicity from Iranian regime figures. Oscillations in rhetoric about the Iran-Russia relationship as well as in the relationship itself are not new, therefore, and are likely to persist indefinitely, even if the missiles arrive as the Kremlin has promised.[61]

Iran nevertheless requires a strong relationship with Russia because of the capabilities Russia alone could provide Tehran. Iran has been developing its indigenous arms industry aggressively, but it needs foreign assistance to bring its conventional military capabilities up to the level at which they could reliably deter the U.S. and Israel. It is looking primarily to Russia for this assistance, and various defense officials have publicly discussed plans to purchase Russian combat aircraft and advanced T-90 tanks.[62] Both Russian and Iranian officials are now saying that delivery of the S-300 is underway, although Iranians and foreign analysts would be justified in remaining skeptical until the system is actually visible on Iranian soil.[63]

Iran also relies on Russia to advance its interests through international negotiations. Russia has played a pivotal role in the nuclear negotiations, in stopping numerous UN Security Council Resolutions against Assad, in getting Iran a seat at the table in international negotiations about Syria's future, and most prominently in helping President Obama abandon the red line he had drawn regarding Assad's use of chemical weapons.

Russia is also providing Iran with asymmetric military capabilities it desperately needs to pursue its objectives in Syria. Iranian expeditionary military forces are primarily light infantry units. The Iranian air forces have no ability to conduct precision strike missions, and Iranian Special Forces units generally do not appear able to conduct targeted kill-capture missions or brief-but-intense ground combat operations as would American SOF or Russian SPETSNAZ. The deployment of Iranian military advisors and then limited combat forces into Syria, therefore, has had a largely linear effect on the battlefield. It helped keep Assad's forces going and has improved their capabilities somewhat, but it has

not been sufficient to give Assad the upper hand against forces whose capabilities are also continuously improving.

Russian military intervention in Syria has been more game-changing. The Russian air force has limited precision-strike capability, but even that limited capability has made a significant impact on Syria's stalemated battle-lines. Russian attack helicopters and aircraft dropping "dumb bombs" have also changed the balance of combat power much more significantly than any deployment of Iranian airframes could have done. Russia may also be providing assistance in designing and coordinating more complex military operations than the IRGC is capable of, and there are indications that some Russian SPETSNAZ units are operating in Syria as well.[64]

Iran and Assad are becoming dependent on Russian direct military support. Assad is unable to generate military power to replace what the Russians are providing, and the Iranians do not appear to be attempting to do so. Both will thus remain dependent on Moscow until and unless they are collectively able to weaken the opposition to a point at which they can continue operations without Russian assistance. Such a development does not seem in any way imminent. Protecting and strengthening the Russian alliance is thus a central requirement of Iranian regional, as well as global, strategy.

Iran on al Qaeda and ISIS

The Iranian regime sees al Qaeda and ISIS as dangerous foes that must be defeated. It is providing military support, including its own troops, to the fight in Syria and Iraq against these enemies among others.[65] This fact has persuaded some in the West that Iran is a natural ally in this fight, just as Putin's propaganda has persuaded some that Russia is a natural partner.[66] The myopic focus on the fight against ISIS leads some analysts and policymakers to overlook fundamental incompatibilities of the Iranian regime's grand strategic objectives with those of the West and to favor a grand coalition that includes Iran. This sentiment has grown significantly following the conclusion of the nuclear agreement, which some hope could be the basis for a fundamental resetting of American relations with Iran and the establishment of a broader partnership for dealing with regional problems including terrorism.[67]

This notion founders on the reality that Iran's national security decision-making apparatus remains committed to its policy of enmity toward the U.S. and the expulsion of the U.S. military from the region. It also encounters the same definitional problem as the idea of partnering with Russia in this fight, moreover, because the Iranian regime's classification of these enemy groups is fundamentally different from the West's.

The Supreme Leader and the IRGC have persuaded themselves that ISIS is a creation of the U.S. for the purpose of sowing disorder in the Middle East.[68] They do not believe that the U.S. is serious about fighting ISIS for this reason. They are also inclined, like Putin, to lump almost all armed Sunni opposition groups together with terrorist organizations and Salafi-jihadi groups.

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Iranian Sectarianism

The leaders of the Iranian revolution from Khomeini to the present have always claimed that their ideology is pan-Islamist and not Shi'a-focused. There are, indeed, elements of the ideology that transcend sectarian bounds, but its core teachings require a Shi'a logical and theological infrastructure. Abstract debates about the inherent sectarian nature of the Iranian regime aside, Tehran acts in the real world in an almost completely sectarian fashion. It continually champions the rights of Shi'a and Shi'a sects such as the Alawites in Syria or the al Houthis in Yemen against Sunni governments. The proxies through which it operates in the region, moreover, are highly and militantly Shi'a sectarian groups with the exception of HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which are Sunni.

These proxies have become steadily more sectarian over the past decade, moreover. The Badr Organization re-entered Iraq in 2003, as we have seen, and infiltrated the Iraqi Security Forces. Proxy groups used their positions in those forces to turn Iraqi Security Force units into sectarian killing machines, avenging the oppression Saddam had inflicted upon Iraqi Shi'a by murdering innocent Sunni. Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi forces conducted their own sectarian cleansing campaigns, while Kata'ib Hezbollah performed more targeted attacks on American targets and on targets of particular interest to the Iranian regime, such as Iraqi air force pilots who had bombed Iranian cities during the Iran-Iraq War. The sectarian activities of these groups helped drive Iraq's Sunni into the arms of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Ba'athist insurgency even before the full evolution of AQI's own campaign of sectarian attacks and murders that climaxed with the destruction of the al Askaria Shrine in Samarra in February 2006. These groups generally supported Prime Minister Maliki's efforts to marginalize Sunni Arabs during the draw-down and withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and then to target the peaceful Sunni protest movement that emerged in 2011. They have been active in Syria and were fully revived as para-military groups in Iraq as the Maliki government lost control of areas south of Baghdad, Fallujah,

and Mosul to ISIS. Some of these groups now continue campaigns of sectarian cleansing in the areas they control.[69]

Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's oldest and most reliable proxy, has always been an overtly sectarian organization and claims to represent Lebanon's Shi'a community. The Assad regime has also always been sectarian in the sense that it jealously kept control of the Syrian state in the hands of the Alawite minority, using brutal oppression to prevent Syria's Sunni from contesting that control. The Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War have made the regime even more explicitly and violently sectarian, however, to the point that it is almost inconceivable that a primarily Alawite government could be accepted as legitimate by Syria's Sunni majority. Even in Yemen, where sectarianism has been largely absent, the al Houthis are increasingly embracing the pan-Shi'a cause, at least rhetorically, while the Gulf States backing their opponents portray them (with great exaggeration) as Shi'a puppets of Iran.[70]

Iranian military and political engagement in Iraq, Syria, and throughout the region is thus highly sectarian, whatever the intentions or feelings of Iran's leaders. The groups Iran supports engage in sectarian cleansing and support sectarian retribution attacks that in turn radicalize Sunni populations. These sectarian actions support the narrative that only groups like al Qaeda and ISIS can and will defend the Sunni against the Iranian-backed Shi'a threat. The more Iran engages in regional conflict, the more the sectarian nature, violence, and radicalization of that conflict will increase.

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RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVES

Russian President Vladimir Putin's pursuit of political longevity shapes Russia's current grand strategic and strategic objectives. Putin seeks to prevent the emergence of a robust opposition that could threaten his increasingly absolute rule over Russian society. Putin's geopolitical grand strategic objectives, including his desired reversal of the outcome of the Cold War, are intertwined with his primary domestic objective of regime preservation.

Putin views the U.S. as a threat to the preservation of his regime and the primary obstacle to the expansion of his power. The majority of Putin's grand strategic and strategic objectives and the methods he has used to pursue them revolve around a central concept of aggressive competition with the U.S. Putin's grand strategic objective to reassert Russia as a great power rival to the U.S. is nested within his vital interest in preserving his own rule. Putin's confrontation with the U.S. serves his grand strategic objective of regime preservation by mobilizing domestic support against a foreign enemy and insulating Russian society from U.S. influence. Putin seeks to diminish U.S. power directly, including by expelling sources of Western influence from Russia and by building

RUSSIAN OBJECTIVES

Russian Grand Strategic Objectives

- >Regain lost territory and spheres of influence
- >Diminish U.S. influence globally
- >Re-establish Russia as a global power
- >Preserve Putin's regime
- >Preserve Russian territorial integrity
- >Rebuild Russian military power

Russian Strategic Objectives

- >Prevent emergence of robust political opposition
- >Diminish Western influence in Russia
- >Deter Western action against Russia
- >Divide & Deter NATO
- >Divide and weaken EU
- >Expand influence in Middle East and Europe
- >Expand freedom of action in former Soviet Union
- >Increase leverage over U.S. and its allies
- >Preserve façade of Russian international legitimacy
- >Expand Russian military footprint in Arctic, Pacific, Middle East, and former Soviet Union
- >Contain North Caucasus insurgency
- >Prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons
- >Modernize military & develop asymmetric capabilities

Divergent with U.S. Objectives

Convergent with U.S. Objectives

partnerships to counter the U.S. abroad. He also seeks to diminish U.S. power indirectly, by revising the rules of military engagement and driving wedges between U.S. allies, among other methods. Putin's December 2015 national security strategy and December 2014 military doctrine demonstrate his equation of Russian security with regime survival and his underlying view of the U.S. as the primary threat Russia faces.[71]

Putin's grand strategic and strategic objectives and the methods he has used to pursue them revolve around a central concept of aggressive competition with the U.S.

Putin views NATO and the European Union (EU) as vehicles for U.S. influence in Europe and seeks to weaken both organizations.[72] Putin portrays NATO expansion, capacity building, and force projection as major threats to Russian security.[73] He opposes NATO's eastward expansion because it denies him access to historical spheres of influence in Europe and serves as a humiliating reminder of Russia's Cold War defeat.[74] Putin has halted further expansion of the EU and NATO in the former Soviet Union (Ukraine and Georgia in particular) by coercing his allies and destabilizing his opponents, in several cases using frozen conflicts as sources of leverage. He pressures NATO by violating the airspace of NATO states and their non-NATO partners, including Sweden, Finland, Norway, the Baltic States, and, most recently, Turkey in order to test the alliance's limits and demonstrate its ineffectiveness. He exploits divisions within the EU by supporting far-right and far-left European parties that seek to devolve power from Brussels to national governments.[75] Putin has stressed geographical divisions within NATO and the EU by threatening eastern members, such as the Baltic States and Poland while maintaining friendly relations with other members, including Italy, Greece and Hungary.[76] He seeks to maintain and expand Russian influence in Europe by building robust bilateral partnerships and increasing European dependence on Russian energy. Russia's latest national security strategy claimed that NATO and the EU were unable to combat the "spectrum of modern challenges and threats" and called for the formation of an "open system of collective security on a clear contractual and legal basis."[77] This rhetoric suggests that Putin ultimately seeks to present Russia as a rival center of power for European security.

Putin seeks to establish Russia as an accepted great power in a multipolar world order so as to preserve and expand his freedom of action in Russia and the former Soviet Union.[78] He seeks to create a new sphere of influence that is impervious to Western influence. Unlike the Soviet Union's, Putin's rule is not defined by a single ideology to counter the U.S. that can be implemented domestically and exported abroad. Domestically, and in some pockets of the former Soviet, he uses Russian orthodoxy, conservatism, and nationalism as rhetorical tools to distinguish Russian society from liberalizing Western forces. He uses kleptocratic authoritarianism, described as an alternative "development model," to shield Russian society and Russia's international partnerships from Western influence while keeping Russian power-players dependent upon him.[79]

Putin views the potential for a pro-Western revolution in Russia as a key threat to his regime's survival.[80] He has taken several actions domestically and abroad to diminish Western influence in Russia since his return to the presidency in 2013 amidst major opposition protests.[81] He has targeted Russia's liberal opposition, cutting off sources of support from Western and Western-backed non-governmental organizations (NGOs), cracking down on opposition leaders, curbing political freedoms, and targeting independent media.[82] He utilizes propaganda about Western efforts to orchestrate a revolution inside Russia and its neighbors to justify his expanding control over Russian civil society. He invaded and continues to destabilize Ukraine to prevent the emergence of a prosperous pro-Western Ukraine independent of Russian influence. He exploited the preexisting national identity gap between Ukrainian and Russian-speakers in order to present Ukraine's pro-Western revolution as an intrinsically anti-Russian movement, thus reinforcing his efforts to stifle liberalizing forces at home.

PUTIN'S VIEW OF TERRORISM

Russia's national security strategy lists terrorist groups alongside foreign intelligence services and foreign NGOs as threats to Putin's rule, euphemistically described as the "constitutional system," "the internal political and social situation," and "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values."[83] Putin's regime portrays armed opponents of its client states as terrorists and extremists, labelin the U.S. and its allies as their backers. Putin's sweeping demonization of protestors involved in Ukraine's 2013-2014 "Euromaidan" as fascist radicals is similar to his blanket characterization of most of Syria's armed opposition as terrorists. Putin blames the U.S. and its allies for supporting Ukraine's radicals and Syria's terrorists as part of his broader propaganda effort to cast U.S. influence as the cause of global insecurity.[84] Putin's conflation of terrorism and radicalism with U.S. influence and regime change serves to condition his domestic population against the primary threat facing his rule, namely the emergence of a robust pro-Western Russian opposition.

Putin does, however, view terrorism in Russia as a real threat to his image as a necessary stabilizing force in Russia. Putin's military doctrine defines terrorism in Russia as a threat to Russian sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity.[85] He

founded his strongman cult of personality during his rise to power in 1999 through his brutal use of military force in Chechnya. He presented the war as a counter-terrorism campaign when in reality Putin was pursuing his grand strategic objectives of bolstering his regime, regaining lost territory, and preserving Russian territorial integrity against separatist forces.[86] Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev hailed Putin's quelling of the Chechen insurgency as a "business card" for Russia's counter-terrorism capabilities while a 2014 poll indicated that a majority of Russians also viewed the campaign, which was marked by egregious atrocities and human rights violations, as successful.[87] Putin's rhetorical championing of the anti-ISIS fight thus directly builds on his existing image as a stabilizing force against insurgents, which remain active in Russia's restive North Caucasus. ISIS's expansion in the North Caucasus has the potential to accelerate the insurgency, threatening Putin's strategic objective of containment.

Putin views the emergence of ISIS as an opportunity to re-establish Russia as a great power rival to the U.S.

Putin views the emergence of ISIS as an opportunity to re-establish Russia as a great power rival to the U.S. He presented his intervention in Syria as a counterterrorism effort designed to preempt the escalation of the low-level insurgency in the North Caucasus.[88] ISIS does threaten security in Russia with the group's declaration of a wilayat, or governorate, in the North Caucasus in 2015 and the presence of an estimated 2,000 foreign fighters from the region fighting in Iraq and Syria. While Putin does likely seek to degrade Caucasian groups fighting in Syria, his rhetoric about ISIS and the need for international cooperation against the group is grounded in his grand strategic objectives of diminishing U.S. influence and asserting Russia as a global power, not defeating Russia's domestic insurgency. Russia's latest revision of its national security strategy, released three months after the intervention in Syria, blames the actions of the U.S. and its allies for turning the Middle East into a hotbed of terrorism and enabling the expansion of ISIS.[89] By contrast, Putin falsely presents himself as a unifying global leader in the fight against terrorism, capable of bridging the Russia-NATO, Sunni-Shi'a, and Syrian regime-opposition divides.[90] Putin has demonstrated his intent to exacerbate these divides, however, while simultaneously leveraging his forward position in Syria to draw partners out of the United States' orbit, from France and Jordan to Syrian Kurds.[91]

Putin has demonstrated that he views diminishing ISIS's ability to escalate Russia's domestic insurgency as a tangential goal by targeting the Syrian opposition with the majority of Russian airstrikes.[92] His efforts to weaken and divide NATO and the EU with pressure applied from Syria in fact align with ISIS's objectives of destroying the current states system and international order. His support for anti-immigrant factions in Europe is also assisting the very groups that ISIS seeks to empower as part of its strategy to provoke oppression of European Muslims, thereby making them more open to ISIS expansion, as we shall see.[93]

Putin intervened in the Syrian Civil War to achieve an array of geopolitical strategic objectives unrelated to countering terrorism. The Russian intervention has allowed him to establish a forward military base in the Middle East, to solidify an alliance with Iran that alters the geopolitical balance of the region in his favor, and to keep Russian society mobilized behind his regime. His campaign in Syria has given him greater leverage to exploit divergent interests within both NATO and the EU. Russia aims to divide NATO by simultaneously threatening its eastern and southeastern flanks while lobbying the West to reengage Russia as a partner against ISIS. Putin is undermining security and straining ties within the European Union by accelerating the Syrian refugee crisis with his deliberate targeting of opposition safe havens.[94] He aims to compel Europe and the U.S. to partner with him in the fight against ISIS, partly to gain leverage that will allow him to undermine the sanctions regime imposed on him for his actions in Ukraine, partly to shape, marginalize, and control American military operations in the region, and partly to compel the West to accept the establishment of a permanent Russian military presence in the Middle East.

Putin has demonstrated that he views diminishing ISIS's ability to escalate Russia's domestic insurgency as a tangential goal by targeting the Syrian opposition with the majority of Russian airstrikes.

The Kremlin's reaction to ISIS's October 31 downing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai Peninsula demonstrated that Putin does not see international terrorism as a threat to vital Russian interests. He views it, rather, as both a challenge to his image as a strong leader and as a geopolitical opportunity. Domestic dissent over Russian military casualties represents a constraint on Putin's freedom to aggressively pursue his revanchist agenda, as demonstrated by his actions to silence reporting over Russian losses in Ukraine.[95] ISIS's attack on a civilian airliner just weeks after Putin's intervention in Syria threatened to deflate popular support for the campaign, presented domestically as an anti-ISIS effort. Moscow initially

discounted assessments by Western governments that a bomb downed the airliner, therefore, and warned against connecting the incident with Russia's intervention in Syria.[96] Putin only acknowledged the terrorist attack after the November 13 ISIS attacks in Paris, despite the fact that Russia suspended flights to Sinai within a week of the plane downing.[97] The Kremlin recognized the Sinai crash as a terrorist attack on November 17 in order to pose as a natural partner for France, which agreed to coordinate airstrikes in Syria with Moscow, advancing Putin's objective of dividing NATO.[98] Putin then immediately introduced strategic bombers in Syria as a show of strength to his domestic audience and as an escalation to deter Western military action against ISIS that did not involve coordination with Russia.[99] The timing of Putin's acknowledgement allowed him to assure the Russian people that ISIS's bombing of the airliner was not a targeted response to his operation in Syria but an example of the growing threat of global terrorism that he had used to justify the intervention.

Russian Methods

- *Suppress political freedom and freedom of information in Russia*
- *Propagate anti-Western Russian conservatism*
- *Expel sources of Western influence from Russia*
- *Maintain Putin's image as a necessary stabilizing force*
- *Build robust international partnerships insulated from U.S. influence*
- *Build interoperable counter-U.S. military coalition with Iran and Iranian allies*
- *Establish military base in Syria and preserve client regime in Alawite areas*
- *Exploit ethno-religious divisions while cultivating appearance of neutrality*
- *Direct Western decision-making with strategic deception, reflexive control, and campaign phasing*
- *Bend rules of military engagement*
- *Support Euroskeptic movements in EU*
- *Destabilize pro-Western former Soviet republics*
- *Deepen integration with allied former Soviet republics*
- *Project force against NATO's eastern and southern flanks*
- *Test and demonstrate new military hardware and capabilities*
- *Export Russian military equipment and fossil fuels*

RUSSIAN METHODS

The Russian military remains unable to seriously challenge the United States and NATO forces in a conventional fight. A single American carrier air wing could destroy the small force of aircraft and helicopters Putin deployed to Syria rapidly and with little risk. Putin is therefore calculating that the U.S., NATO, and their regional partners will allow the fear of any military confrontation with Russia—even one that they could easily win—to deter them from actions (i.e. removing Assad from power) Putin wishes to prevent. His calculation is paying off handsomely so far.

Putin has taken a page from the Soviet book on how to cause his opponents to follow courses of action that advance his interests and subsequently weaken themselves. Putin is employing the Soviet doctrine of "reflexive control" in Ukraine, as Maria Snegovaya has shown, and has now expanded the use of this doctrine to Russian operations in Syria and the Middle East.[100] Reflexive control involves "conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."[101] The process includes using military force and diplomacy, placing disinformation, influencing the opponent's decision-making itself, and causing the opponent to misread the situation and make a decision hastily.[102]

Putin is using all of these methods in his operations to weaken NATO and to shape U.S. and Western policies and strategy in Syria. He is also relying on a fundamental principle of judo, his favorite sport, by seeking to drive his opponent – President Barack Obama – in a direction in which he already desires to go, namely inaction.

RUSSIA'S MIS-DEFINITION OF ISIS AND JABHAT AL NUSRA

Putin's definition of the opposition in Syria diverges significantly from that of Western analysts and strategists. Russia's portrayals of the warring groups overly simplify complex ground relationships, showing only five organizations controlling territory and fighting one another within Syria: the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish forces, ISIS, and Jabhat al Nusra. Russian defense ministry and state media maps (see Appendix) erroneously show ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra controlling all territory in northern Syria not held by the regime or the Kurds, implicitly and incorrectly folding forces such as U.S.-vetted opposition groups that have received TOW missiles into either ISIS

or Jabhat al Nusra.[103] The Russian simplification also obscures key differences and relationships within Syrian opposition forces, primarily the difference between true terrorist groups and Islamist groups that might be brought into a Western-backed faction. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) has assessed from the spread of airstrikes that Russia is primarily targeting U.S.-backed groups and anti-Assad groups rather than ISIS, demonstrating the divergence between U.S. and Russian objectives.[104]

Putin is therefore calculating that the U.S., NATO, and their regional partners will allow the fear of any military confrontation with Russia to deter them from actions Putin wishes to prevent.

This misrepresentation of the relationships among various opposition groups and between those groups and al Qaeda and ISIS supports Putin's false narrative that all of Russia's airstrikes are aimed at terrorists, even as they weaken groups that the United States and its allies have been working to empower. It also supports Putin's narrative, shared by Iran and the Syrian regime, that the U.S. and its allies are themselves providing resources to al Qaeda and ISIS.[105]

Putin may in fact believe his own propaganda or he may be cynically misrepresenting the situation on the ground in support of his larger objectives. The effect is the same in any case: Putin's military operations in Syria weaken all of the groups that are fighting against the Assad regime regardless of their relationship to al Qaeda or ISIS. His propaganda is affecting the debate in the United States and Europe, moreover. Many political leaders, analysts, and journalists uncritically accept Putin's claims that he is fighting ISIS even as the majority of Russian airstrikes have struck territory held by the Syrian armed opposition.[106] They argue that Putin's aims in Syria are congruent with the West's and should form the basis of a grand coalition against terrorism. Putin's information operations, therefore, are persuading his opponents to ignore fundamental incompatibilities between his goals and interests and their own, accomplishing his objectives of reflexive control. Joining a grand coalition with Russia runs counter to U.S. objectives and will run counter to U.S. anti-ISIS efforts in the long term.

Russia and the West can only jointly pursue their shared counter-terrorism interests in Syria if the West is prepared to commit to supporting the regime of Bashar al Assad or his successor in its efforts to crush the Sunni opposition to its rule and reestablish its control over Syria by force and oppression. The situation in Syria and the options available to the West are so poor that even some responsible people recommend doing precisely that: "recognizing the reality" that Assad is the best bet for containing the terrorist threat at least at this time. The planning group considered this possibility in detail, evaluating the feasibility and requirements of supporting Assad in his efforts to reconquer Syria. It concluded that Assad cannot reconquer Syria, even with the support of Russia and Iran, and that the additional military requirements for the U.S. and the West to back the regime successfully are far beyond what the West would or should be willing to provide for such an effort. This contingency is discussed in the "Framework for Developing Courses of Action" section above.

SAUDI OBJECTIVES

Saudi Arabia's grand strategic objectives are to preserve the House of Saud regime through the current succession crisis, maintain domestic security, lead the Muslim world, and be a regional hegemon. The Saudi royal family envisions itself as the rightful leader of the Muslim and Arab world, protector of the Muslim holy sites, especially Mecca and Medina, and defender of the Sunni globally. It therefore must preserve the Islamic way of life as the regime defines it, both domestically

and internationally, and protect Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity and economic welfare.[107] Secularism and counter-religious movements present a threat to Saudi Arabia, as do major inflections in the global economy. The Kingdom is also in the throes of a major succession crisis that is both distracting attention from and driving its foreign policy.

The Saudis identify Iran as the principal threat to their security and position in the region and in the Muslim world. They have been deeply concerned by the expansion of Iran's nuclear program and determined either to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or to acquire a Saudi nuclear deterrent. How much the Iranian nuclear deal has allayed these concerns is not yet clear. The deal and the apparent U.S. shift toward closer relations with Iran at the expense of Saudi interests, however, has given rise to a real fear of American abandonment and even regional strategic realignment based on an entente with Iran.[108] Riyadh thus also seeks to prevent and hedge against a realignment of American partnerships in the region. The lifting of sanctions against Iran on January 17, 2016 gives Iran much greater scope to rebuild its economy and expand its influence throughout the Middle East. The Saudis thus seek to stop or at least slow Iran's rise in the region with greater urgency than before.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Saudi Arabia is pursuing a number of strategic goals to support these grand strategic objectives:

- Replace Syrian President Bashar al Assad with a Syrian government or governments that are not Iranian proxies;
- Drive Iranian forces and proxy forces from Syria, Iraq, and Yemen;
- Lead a broad-based Muslim coalition against Islamist threats, particularly ISIS; and
- Maintain a strong alliance with the UAE and Sunni Arab states generally.

These goals prescribe certain policy decisions and lines of effort that Saudi Arabia is visibly pursuing regionally and within the Muslim-majority world. Sunni Arab states perceive a common threat from Iran and from some Islamist extremists that has largely united them behind Saudi Arabia. This alignment is unlikely to be permanent because there are clear differences among these states regarding their own strategic objectives, but it will have a significant impact on the course of events in the Middle East in the near term.

The House of Saud's view of the threat from Salafi-jihadi groups is complicated by the tight interweaving of Wahhabis and the ruling family. Muhammad bin Saud, the founder of the first Saudi state, allied with Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab, a Salafist preacher, in the mid-18th century; the Saudi family has remained closely tied with the Wahhabi movement ever since. The Wahhabi clergy provides critical religious legitimacy to the Saudi regime, which helps explain why the Saudis have been either unwilling or unable (or both) to stop Wahhabis from supporting the spread of Salafism globally and funding even Salafi-jihadi organizations such as al Qaeda.[109]

Osama bin Laden forced the Kingdom to adjust its views on Salafi-jihadi groups, however, by declaring the Saudi regime apostate and declaring war on it. He called for the overthrow of the monarchy shortly before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and launched a terrorist campaign in the Kingdom almost immediately. The Saudis responded aggressively, suppressing the insurgency, denouncing al Qaeda as heretical, and beginning a reeducation program as well as expelling many al Qaeda members from the Kingdom.[110] The royal family has regarded al Qaeda as a threat and an enemy ever since then, although it has not succeeded in bringing all of its members, let alone the Wahhabi clergy, along with it.

The Islamist threat, as seen from Riyadh, is nevertheless confined to al Qaeda and ISIS and does not extend to Salafi groups that do not threaten the House of Saud.[111] Saudi Arabia thus seeks to prevent al Qaeda from gaining a base of support inside of the Kingdom or being able to conduct successful attacks against Saudi targets, but is prone to support other Salafi-jihadi groups without fully considering the degree to which that support transfers to Riyadh's enemies. The Saudis see ISIS as heretical and as an existential threat to the Kingdom and thus find opposing it more straightforward. The fact that ISIS does not integrate with other Salafi-jihadi groups makes it easier for the Saudis to concentrate on fighting it than on, for example, Jabhat al Nusra, with its tentacles wrapped all through the Syrian opposition.

ISIS's declaration of a caliphate also poses a more significant problem for Saudi Arabia than might be apparent in the West. President Obama and others have been at pains to deride the declaration of the caliphate and mock both the Islamism of ISIS and its claim to a state. But the concept of the caliphate is central to the history and religion of Islam and the word has great resonance. The Saudis naturally reject the legitimacy of the ISIS claim, but the claim raises a question: If there were to be a new caliphate, who would be the rightful caliph? The raising of that question puts subtle and interesting torques on Saudi thinking.

The nature of the Saudi regime thus makes Riyadh a complex partner in fights against Salafi-jihadi groups. The Saudis themselves can be relied on to fight ISIS and al Qaeda. Their inclinations to support other Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups, however, run counter to the requirements for Western national security in the region. The West cannot parse the Salafi-jihadi movement as the Saudis do, but

the Saudis will have great difficulty rejecting the entire movement as the West does. Important as the alliance with the Kingdom is, the U.S. must not imagine that it can subcontract fighting Salafi-jihadi groups to Riyadh.

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SUCCESSION CRISIS

The Saudis are becoming a problematic partner for another reason: The House of Saud is facing the most significant succession crisis it has seen in decades. King Salman is the last of the sons of King Abdulaziz who founded the modern Saudi state. Abdulaziz died in 1953, and succession has passed only among his sons, of whom Salman is nearly the last.[112] Salman is old and reportedly unwell, and so the House of Saud faces the long-delayed moment when succession must pass from among the sons of Abdulaziz to the next generation. This generational transition will have enormous ramifications within the royal family, as it will empower the sub-clan of one of the sons of Abdulaziz over all the others with the wealth of the Kingdom at stake.

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz attempted before his death in January 2015 to ensure that Prince Mohammad bin Nayef would succeed Salman. The 56-year-old bin Nayef is the current Interior Minister and is well thought-of as an experienced and competent leader who can help the Kingdom navigate the immense social and economic challenges it is also facing. But King Salman desires his own son, Mohammad bin Salman, to succeed him. The roughly 30-year-old bin Salman is currently the Defense Minister and would become the heir to the throne after bin Nayef succeeds.[113]

The stakes for the U.S. and the West in this succession drama are low in a certain sense as the candidates for succession do not appear to hold materially differing views on Saudi Arabia's objectives or interests. The threat of Iran's rise, fear of American withdrawal, and concern about both ISIS and al Qaeda all tend to push members of the royal family toward a common view of foreign and national security policy.

But the succession crisis is reportedly heating up as King Salman appears to be maneuvering to bypass Mohammad bin Nayef and arrange for his own son to succeed him directly.[114] This maneuver would require removing Mohammad bin Nayef from his position as Crown Prince and also, most likely, as Interior Minister. The latter position is of extreme importance in the Kingdom, because it controls the Saudi Arabian National Guard.

The National Guard is responsible for internal security, border security, and providing support to the Ministry of Defense as needed, among other things. It consists of around 100,000 troops organized into five mechanized and six infantry brigades with supporting units.[115] It also has a large, tribally-based militia. It is somewhat larger than the Saudi army, although the latter is more heavily armed.[116] These statistics may matter if King Salman attempts to sideline bin Nayef and the latter resists. It is by no means clear that the young, brash, and inexperienced Mohammad bin Salman could defeat bin Nayef's forces if matters came to a violent head, nor is it clear that the army would fight for bin Salman in such a scenario.

Reports of King Salman's intentions remain rumors that may be unfounded. The King might succeed in drawing enough of the other princes to his side that bin Nayef would step aside gracefully in favor of bin Salman, avoiding a drawn-out and dangerous crisis. Uncertainty over the intentions of both men, however, is having a number of important effects on Saudi foreign and national security policy. It is placing great pressure on Mohammad bin Salman to win the conflict in Yemen that is seen very much as his war. It also virtually ensures that both bin Salman and bin Nayef will keep the bulk of their armed forces in the Kingdom until the succession is finally decided, thus ruling-out the deployment of any significant Saudi military forces to Syria. The succession struggle is thus driving Saudi foreign policy in directions that diverge from U.S. interests and requirements, particularly in Syria, and that divergence is likely to last for some time.

Mohammad bin Salman's War in Yemen

Saudi Arabia has not fought a war beyond its borders since 1991 and has not commanded an external war for decades. Its military intervention in the Yemeni Civil War in March 2015 thus marked a significant inflection in the Kingdom's foreign and security policies. The timing of the intervention—two months after Salman ascended the throne—was not accidental, nor was the choice of leadership: Mohammad bin Salman, who had taken over the Ministry of Defense the day his father took power.[117] Bin Salman's reputation is now inextricably linked with the outcome of this operation, which means that the Saudi army is unlikely to focus heavily on other matters for the duration of this conflict.

Saudi Arabia began conducting airstrikes targeting al Houthi positions in Yemen on March 26, 2015, under "Operation Decisive Storm."[118] The military intervention began just after Yemeni President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi fled the country and his government's last holdout in Aden was about to fall to the al Houthis and their allies.[119] Within a month, Saudi Arabia's coalition included pledges of combat

forces from at least eight countries and had received public backing from others.[120] The launch of "Operation Golden Arrow," a ground campaign to regain control of Aden, and the subsequent deployment of Saudi troops into northeast Yemen further committed Saudi Arabia and coalition members, particularly the UAE, to the war in Yemen.121

The Saudis view the al Houthis as Iranian proxies, an assessment that is very likely over-stated. The al Houthis do have strong ties to Iran and receive some Iranian support, but they are not yet Iranian stooges under Tehran's full control, as the Saudis appear to believe.[122] The Saudi objective in Yemen is nevertheless the destruction of the al Houthi movement as a potential Iranian support vector in Yemen, and the installation of a central government in Yemen that is stable and responsive to Saudi policies.[123] A secondary objective is the defeat of ISIS, which is part of Saudi Arabia's broader efforts against the ISIS threat. Countering al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) will not be among Saudi priorities unless AQAP fully constitutes the capability to generate a threat inside of the Kingdom.

The Saudi coalition, and particularly Mohammad bin Salman, requires a victory in Yemen. A loss, read loosely as a win for Iran, would set the stage for a full collapse of the Yemeni state that produces expanding safe havens for ISIS and AQAP, and would be a mark against the prospects of a strong Sunni Arab joint military force. Saudi decision-making on the Yemeni conflict is thoroughly entangled now in the succession struggle, as Mohammad bin Salman's reputation and ability to build support for his line of succession rests in considerable part on how the coalition, particularly Saudi Arabia, fairs in Yemen.

The prospect of a significant Saudi land force being part of an "Arab army" in Syria is thus badly undermined by the intervention in Yemen. Saudi forces are caught in a Yemeni civil war that has no foreseeable peace deal or prospect of transition to local forces. There has not been a decisive military action in Yemen, and it is not clear what one would be now. The coalition will not be able to advance much farther than the current front line of fighting due to a natural fault line in the human terrain. Nor is it likely that coalition-backed forces will lose the gains made since summer 2015.[124] In effect, the Yemen fight is stalemated and the Saudi army is committed.

Saudi Methods

- *Financial support to opposition groups in Syria*
- *Financial support to Jordan and Egypt*
- *Convene Syrian opposition*
- *Expel Iranian proxies from Yemen militarily*
- *Expand quality of Saudi military forces*

Losing Petroleum Power

The House of Saud has relied on its oil wealth rather than its military as the basis of its influence throughout the region and the world for many decades. It controls 18 percent of known global oil reserves.[125] It has historically used that wealth to punish adversaries reliant on oil revenues to finance national and subnational actors whose objectives align with the Kingdom. The Kingdom's wealth remains one of its fundamental foreign policy tools.

The prospect of a significant Saudi land force being part of an "Arab army" in Syria is badly undermined by the intervention in Yemen and the succession crisis.

That tool is now in jeopardy, however, due to a perfect storm of extremely low oil prices, expanding domestic spending requirements, and the costly war in Yemen. The International Monetary Fund estimated in October 2015 that the Kingdom would run out of cash within five years at then-current levels of expenditure and projected oil prices.[126] The Saudis are taking steps to meet this challenge, announcing in their 2016 budget plans to reform subsidies, privatize, and introduce a value-added tax. That budget nevertheless projects a large deficit for the second year in a row.[127] The impact of these reforms on a regime that has relied on using its wealth to rent the support of its people is unclear, particularly in the context of ongoing social unrest amidst generational turnover. The Kingdom's ability to throw money around the region to purchase influence will be increasingly undermined.

Any reduction in Riyadh's ability to use money as a tool of foreign policy can profoundly affect the stability of important front line states in the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda, as well as the contours of the Syrian opposition.

Jordan. Saudi-Jordanian relations are extensive and Saudi Arabia has historically provided budget security to Jordan.[128] A strong Jordan provides Saudi Arabia with security to its northwest, but the Jordanian state is now weak.[129] A faltering economy, exacerbated by a declining tourism industry, and the government's apathy over meaningful reform drive domestic grievances.[130] Moreover, spillover from wars in Iraq and Syria and the spread of ISIS directly threaten the survival of the Jordanian state. Jordan has absorbed hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees as well as Iraqis and is a key partner in the fight against ISIS. It may also face internal

threats from Salafists linked to al Qaeda or ISIS in Syria. Saudi support to Jordan sustains the Jordanian monarchy and helps preserve Jordan as a buffer state against the turmoil in Iraq and the Levant. The fragile Jordanian state probably cannot survive the loss of any significant amount of Saudi funding unless the U.S. and Europe are willing to cover it.

Egypt. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) each pledged $4 billion in investments to Egypt in March 2015, to help shore up Egypt's flagging economy and support President Abdel Fattah al Sisi's government. Saudi Arabia pledged additional support to Egypt's economy in December 2015, agreeing to invest $8 billion.[132] Saudi and Egyptian relations had been strengthening rapidly in the face of common threats, though the two governments disagree on the full definition of the Islamist threat and how to address Iran's newfound influence.[133] ISIS's affiliate in the Sinai is waging an insurgency against the Egyptian state, and has brought terrorism once again to Cairo and Egypt's prized tourist sites.[134] Saudi Arabia and Egypt signed the "Cairo Declaration" on July 30, 2015, which lays out six points of cooperation within the military, economic, and political sectors.[135] The pact lays out the objective of establishing a joint Arab military force, with the specific objective of combatting terrorism. The Saudi-Egyptian partnership further bonds the two states in the fight against ISIS and adds another state in support of Saudi Arabia. The partnership rests much more on Saudi cash than on shared values and interests, however. Reductions in Saudi financial support could leave Egypt open to other bidders, such as Russia or even Iran, although it is more likely that the Emiratis would come to Cairo's rescue at least in the first instance.

The Syrian Armed Opposition. Saudi Arabia is one of the largest sources of financial support for the Syrian armed opposition, and uses its partnerships with opposition groups to counter Iran's growing influence in Syria. Saudi Arabia has funded individual and often competing opposition factions over the first nearly five years of the Syrian Civil War, often bypassing joint opposition coordinative structures to provide direct support to preferred groups. Saudi Arabia is a prominent benefactor of two major Salafi-jihadi powerbrokers within the Syrian opposition: the Damascus-based Jaysh al Islam and the major cross-front actor Ahrar al Sham (Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya or HASI). Saudi Arabia's partnership with Jaysh al Islam provides Riyadh with influence in Syria's capital, which it can use to block Iranian proxies from dominating any ultimate resolution of the Syrian Civil War.[136] Turkey has increasingly complemented Saudi Arabia's support to Ahrar al Sham since late 2014, reflecting a renewed partnership between these two countries.[137] Saudi Arabia and Turkey provided major financial support to create a new joint opposition military coalition led by Ahrar al Sham alongside Syrian al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra.[138] Saudi Arabia appears to consider its support and empowerment of Ahrar al Sham as an effective means to contain Jabhat al Nusra's influence in Syria while exploiting Jabhat al Nusra's military capabilities against the Assad regime and its Iranian backers. The support for the coalition therefore represents Riyadh's pragmatic resolution to the competing requirements of checking al Qaeda, supporting the Syrian opposition, and blocking Iranian aspirations.

Major Saudi reductions of financial support to the opposition are unlikely given the relatively low cost of the undertaking and the importance the Saudis attach to fighting Iran. Saudi financial woes could, however, offer the West some leverage in efforts to direct Saudi financing toward some groups and away from others. They could also create an opportunity for the Emiratis to expand their financial influence in Syria, a development that would likely be beneficial to the interests of the West because the Emirates do not share Riyadh's predilection for Salafi-jihadi groups and regard the Muslim Brotherhood as an enemy.

Organizing the Syrian Opposition

Saudi Arabia, in any event, is using its influence over major powerbrokers within the Syrian armed opposition to shape the Syrian opposition into a more cohesive, and therefore effective, bloc. Saudi Arabia was a driving force behind recent efforts to coalesce a coherent and unified front for the Syrian opposition ahead of internationally sponsored negotiations between the Syrian opposition and Syrian regime planned for January 25, 2016. Saudi Arabia hosted a conference for over 100 representatives of the Syrian armed and political opposition in Riyadh in December 2015. Saudi-funded armed opposition groups dominated the small list of 12 delegates from the Syrian armed opposition invited to the conference, which was dominated by Syrian political opposition figures. The conference participants agreed on a unified negotiating position and formed a "High Committee for Negotiations" to be made up of representatives from both the political and armed opposition blocs, although Ahrar al Sham withdrew from the process.[139]

This convening power positions Saudi Arabia to shape the character of the opposition delegation while its direct proxies provide Saudi Arabia with strategic military parity with Iran in Syria. The current international framework for

negotiations in Syria calls for international parties to agree on a list of designated terrorist organizations in Syria that can be targeted even during a ceasefire, which both Saudi Arabia and Iran are attempting to leverage in order to blacklist the others' local proxy forces. The negotiations are unlikely to end the war in Syria—even if an agreed upon terror list was feasible—rendering the Saudis' local proxies an important long-term vehicle to block Iranian objectives in the region.[140]

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia is unquestionably a pivotal player in Syria and in the larger regional struggle against ISIS and al Qaeda. Riyadh's interests run more closely parallel to those of the U.S. than almost any other major actor, yet they diverge at important points. The U.S.-Saudi relationship is particularly fraught because of the way in which the current U.S. administration appears to define and pursue America's interests in the region, moreover. Washington has appeared to favor rapprochement with Iran over ties with the Kingdom, abandoning (from the Saudi perspective) Riyadh's interests in the nuclear deal almost entirely. The U.S. has not engaged directly with the Sunni Arab populations in either Iraq or Syria in any serious way, working through the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad on the one hand and through Kurdish forces in Syria on the other. A U.S. policy more in line with the American interests identified in the previous report and this one would address these tensions, but divergences would still remain.

Saudi Arabia can be helpful in Syria, particularly with American leadership, but Riyadh's policies will not naturally or automatically support American interests there or in Iraq.

The Saudi royal family simply cannot just cast off its ties to and support for Salafism without risking the destruction of its religious legitimacy. It can and likely will work to shape that support to reduce the resources flowing to al Qaeda and ISIS, and it can actively fight against both groups within the Kingdom and throughout the region, as it has been doing. But individual Saudis will continue to support the terrorists, and the Saudi state will retain its proclivity for supporting non-al Qaeda, non-ISIS Salafi-jihadi groups that it does not see as threats to its interests or security. The more clearly the U.S. recognizes that even those Salafi-jihadi groups are a core part of the threat to its own security, the more that Saudi tendency will be problematic.

American policy-makers must also divest themselves of the hope that tens of thousands of Saudi troops will provide the Arab army they would prefer to see fighting ISIS in Syria. Conditions could change—the Saudis could somehow extricate themselves from both Yemen and the current succession crisis so as to make forces available—but not likely in any short period of time. Nor is the current Saudi military operation in Yemen encouraging as to the likely performance of Saudi armed forces against the battle-hardened forces in Syria. It is absolutely vital to recognize, moreover, that the principal target of Saudi military operations in Syria, according to Saudi interests, would be Assad rather than ISIS. The regional struggle with Iran is far more urgent in Riyadh than that against ISIS, and prosecuting it will take priority in the minds of Saudi rulers almost every time.

Saudi Arabia can be helpful in Syria, particularly with American leadership, but Riyadh's policies will not naturally or automatically support American interests there or in Iraq. Under no circumstances can the U.S. hope to have Riyadh lead the effort in either country to anything other than disaster. Rebuilding the tattered U.S.-Saudi relationship is important in that it can help Washington regain leverage in Riyadh that is badly needed to shape Saudi policies in ways that are constructive for American objectives. The U.S. must accept the reality even then, however, that Saudi power may well have peaked and started to fall, a fact that would have profound and largely unfortunate consequences for Western interests in the Middle East.

TURKISH OBJECTIVES

NEO-OTTOMANISM

The grand strategic objectives currently pursued by Turkey find their source in the unique policies of Neo-Ottomanism espoused by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkish President Recep Erdogan. Neo-Ottomanism leverages the historical legacy of the former Ottoman Empire to promote the resurgence of Turkey as an independent regional power. Turkey desires to reassert its economic, cultural, and political dominance over the former Ottoman territories of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans as well as its ethnic counterparts in Central Asia. This quasi-imperial sphere of influence would be bound under a new political community united by a shared Islamic and Ottoman identity. Turkey will pursue this vision of renewed imperial grandeur under the AKP even at the cost of its security and foreign policy ties with the U.S. and Europe.

Current Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu outlined the contours of this new vision of Turkey in his book Strategic Depth, published in 2001.[141] Davutoglu highlighted the "fundamental contradiction" between Turkey's imperial legacy as a "political center of its civilizational environment" and its current conception as a nation-state, arguing that Turkey had abdicated its regional leadership in favor of subservience to the U.S. and NATO. Davutoglu contended

that Turkey should balance its foreign relationships and avoid dependence on any one actor in order to maintain "strategic depth" on the international stage. Davutoglu also called for Turkey to conduct proactive foreign policy in its "indispensable hinterland" of the Middle East and North Africa in order to complement its existing ties with the West. This pivot towards the East provides Turkey with new markets to fuel its economy and new partners for regional outreach.

The wave of popular unrest in the Middle East and North Africa unleashed by the Arab Spring in 2011 gave Turkey an opportunity to try to establish a new regional order responsive to Ankara, Turkey's capital. Turkey expanded its assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamist groups as a means to bring about new regimes similar in outlook to the Justice and Development Party (AKP). In Egypt, Turkey provided strong political support to former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood and condemned his ousting by a military coup, fueling tensions between the two countries.[142] Meanwhile, Turkey granted military assistance to Sunni Islamist rebels in both Libya and Syria, including several groups with links to al Qaeda.[143] Turkey also appears willing to turn a blind eye to more extreme militant groups – including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Syrian al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra (JN) – so long as their activities advance Turkish strategic objectives.

Turkey's activist interests abroad have brought the country into increasing alignment with Saudi Arabia and other conservative Gulf States. Turkey and the Gulf States have cooperated extensively to provide financial, military, and political support to Sunni Islamist factions in the civil wars in Libya and Syria. Turkey also announced in December 2015 that it will establish a military base in Qatar – another key backer of the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East and North Africa.[144] Turkey has simultaneously bolstered its appeal across the Sunni Arab world through an increasingly belligerent stance towards Israel.[145] Turkey will continue to leverage the tools of military force and 'soft power' in order to assert its leadership over a Neo-Ottoman geopolitical space dominated by political Islam.

TURKISH OBJECTIVES

Turkish Grand Strategic Objectives

- >Reassert role as independent regional power vis-à-vis the U.S. and NATO
- >Reestablish a quasi-imperial sphere of influence over the former Ottoman Empire
- >Promote the formation of Sunni Islamist governments across the Middle East
- >Achieve a position of leadership over the Islamic world
- >Restore the former imperial grandeur of Turkey
- >Advance Turkey as a model for successful Muslim democratic leadership

Turkish Strategic Objectives

- >Achieve economic dominance over former Ottoman Empire
- >Promote the formation of new Sunni Islamist governments in Syria and Libya
- >Challenge regional influence of Russia and Iran
- >Achieve integration into European Union to maximize strategic flexibility
- >Prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdistan

Divergent with U.S. Objectives

Convergent with U.S. Objectives

TURKEY AND RUSSIA

Russia occupies a historic role as a regional competitor to Turkey dating back several centuries. Davutoglu identified the "historic Ottoman/Turkish – Russian/Soviet/Russian rivalry" as a key challenge to Turkey's efforts to reassert its status over its former Ottoman sphere of influence. Turkey and Russia continue to engage in tit-for-tat competition across Central Asia, the Caucasus Mountains, the Black Sea, and the Middle East through venues as diverse as the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in Azerbaijan, the Crimean Tatars on the occupied Crimean Peninsula, and the Syrian Civil War.[146] Davutoglu asserted that the "counter-cultural resistance power provided by Islam" constituted the "greatest element" to overcome Russian influence.

The competing neo-imperial ideologies of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Erdogan have spurred further breakdowns in the relationship between the two countries. Although Turkey maintains strong economic ties with Russia and removed the country from its list of threats in its revised national security strategy in 2010,[147] the divergent interests of Russia and Turkey in the Syrian Civil War have undermined any potential for a cooperative relationship. Russia began a military intervention on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in September 2015, posing a direct threat to the Turkish vision of a Neo-Ottoman political order. The downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish warplanes in November 2015 was a result of these burgeoning tensions.[148] This conflict will only further escalate as Turkey moves to defend its regional ambitions despite pressure to reduce tensions from the U.S. and NATO.

TURKEY AND THE KURDS

Turkey maintains a multifaceted Kurdish policy in line with its conception of Neo-Ottomanism. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) ultimately conceives of a new regional order derived from shared religious and historical characteristics rather than exclusively ethnic nationalism. The AKP thus initially appeared more willing to incorporate Kurds into its vision of a future Middle East than other nationalist Turkish political parties like the Republican People's Party (CHP). Political analysts estimate that up to half of all Turkish Kurds support the AKP in nationwide elections due to their shared conservative religious stance.[149] Turkey also developed positive ties with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of KRG President Masoud Barzani.[150] Turkish President Recep Erdogan even spearheaded a historic ceasefire process with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 2013.[151]

Turkey perceives the risk of Kurdish separatism as a graver threat than that posed by ISIS or Jabhat alNusra. This stance has placed Turkey increasingly in opposition to the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition.

Turkey nonetheless remains vehemently opposed to the establishment of an independent Kurdistan that would splinter the country along ethnic lines. Turkey perceives the risk of Kurdish separatism – including both the PKK and the affiliated Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – as a graver threat than that posed by ISIS or Jabhat al Nusra (JN). This stance has placed Turkey increasingly in opposition to the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, which provides direct military support to Syrian Kurds as an effective ground partner against ISIS. Turkey reopened hostilities against the PKK in July 2015 in response to mounting Kurdish gains along the Syrian-Turkish border.[152] Turkey has subsequently attempted to limit or block further gains by Syrian Kurds along its borders, driving some observers to accuse the AKP of providing direct or indirect support to ISIS. These concerns – when combined with the desire to chart an independent foreign policy as befitting a regional power – will apply further strain to relations between the U.S. and Turkey in coming months.

Turkish Methods

- *Support Muslim Brotherhood and allied movements*
- *Provide military aid to Islamist rebel groups*
- *Strengthen economic ties with Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans*
- *Establish new regional military bases*
- *Insert Turkey into Arab-Israeli Conflict*
- *Leverage Syrian Civil War to extract concessions from U.S. and Europe*
- *Reopen conflict with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)*
- *Bolster Iraqi Kurdish alternatives to the PKK and its affiliated movements*
- *Assert capacity for regional military intervention*

CONCLUSION

The persistence of a Salafi-jihadi regional base in Iraq or Syria poses a clear and present danger to the United States and Europe. Targeted strikes cannot destroy military organizations with many thousands of fighters living among a population that tolerates their presence. That toleration will continue as long as people perceive a threat to their existence and see the Salafi-jihadis as essential to their survival. The perception of an existential threat will last as long as the communal sectarian civil war is ongoing. Eliminating the Salafi-jihadi base thus requires ending that sectarian struggle on terms acceptable to all parties.

Ending the communal civil war is only part of the battle, however. Such conflicts tend to flare up again if their settlements are not constructed with care and based on well-established historical patterns for ending internal conflicts. Those settlements often require the introduction of international peacekeeping forces and the attention of the international community for a long time. They must involve political and economic reconstruction, security force reconstitution, the resettlement of refugees, and the disarmament and demobilization of armed groups. History offers many lessons in these areas as well that must be taken into account.

These requirements, in turn, would benefit from a broad-based international coalition and, ideally, the support of the United Nations and other international organizations. They imperatively demand coherent whole-of-government strategies from every participating nation that coordinate political, military, economic, and diplomatic efforts in national capitals and on the ground. They require that the activities of all of the various participating states and international organizations aim at a common vision of the endstate with an agreed-upon set of objectives.

Here the logic of the case runs aground on the realities

of the significant interest misalignment among the key external actors in Iraq and Syria. Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Europe agree only that ISIS and al Qaeda are threats against whom action must be taken. They disagree on the importance of those threats relative to other national security interests and objectives. They disagree on the means by which to address those threats. Their desired endstates in Syria and Iraq diverge profoundly and are, in fact, mutually-incompatible with one another and with ours. They even have opposing visions of the relationship of external states to the region: Russia and Iran seek to drive the U.S. from the Middle East entirely, while Saudi Arabia and Turkey hope to re-consolidate their alliances with America and the West. The U.S., of course, aims to retain its position and influence in this critical region.

The persistence of a Salafi-jihadi regional base in Iraq or Syria poses a clear and present danger to the United States and Europe.

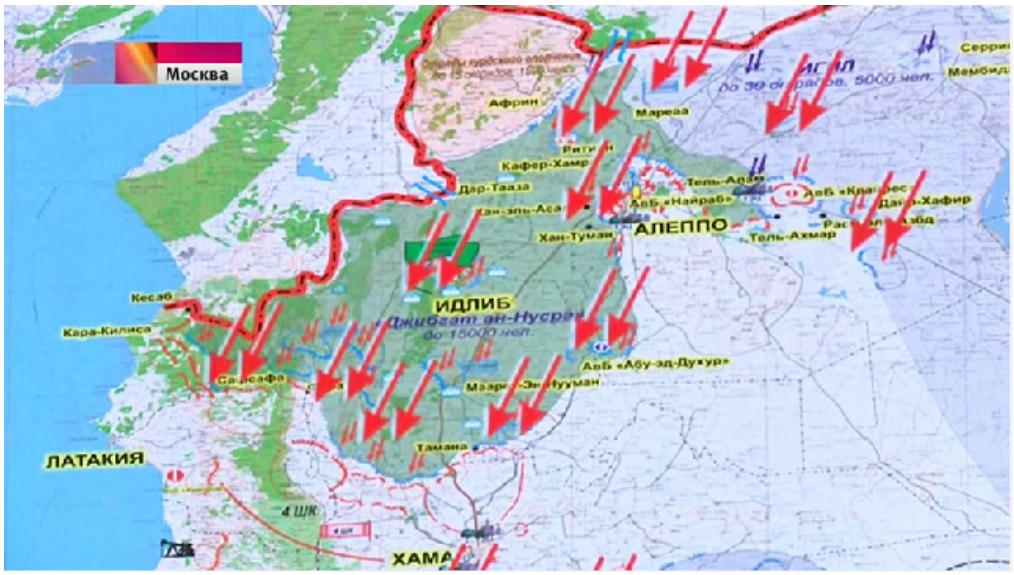
The methods by which the various external actors operate in Iraq and Syria are mutually-destructive, reflecting the divergence of their interests and goals. Russian airstrikes and Iranian ground forces attack opposition groups that the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Europe are supporting and, in some cases, arming. The U.S. seeks to focus attention against ISIS strongholds that are largely in eastern Syria. The Russian air campaign and Iranian deployments have been largely confined to non-ISIS targets in western Syria. The U.S. sees Iraqi and Syrian Kurds as excellent allies and a good source of ground forces against ISIS, while Turkey opposes strengthening Kurdish forces, particularly those tied to Kurdish terrorist groups that have attacked it. Saudi and Turkish proclivities to supporting Salafi and even Salafi-jihadi groups undermine American and European requirements to strengthen more moderate opposition factions. It is no wonder that the situation in Syria is drifting violently sideways.

The only obvious step to take in response to this set of circumstances is to recognize that these opposing actions and objectives cannot be organized into a grand coalition or international partnership. The willingness of the U.S. to work with Russia or Iran is not the issue. We can be as willing as we please, but that will not change the fact that our aims and interests are fundamentally at odds with theirs in Syria and Iraq. Americans must face the reality that our declarations that defeating ISIS is our overriding priority and should be everyone else's do not make it so. We must design and execute strategies to achieve our vital national security objectives in Syria and Iraq within the context of competing interests and opposing forces. Such is, in fact, the normal state of international affairs. Situations in which all major states agree on goals and means are extraordinarily rare. This fact makes a hard problem harder, but it does not make finding a solution impossible. It does mean that Americans and Europeans must be prepared to immerse themselves in the complex local, regional, and international dynamics of Syria and Iraq and stop seeking arms-length answers through precision strikes or premature and ill-prepared negotiations. It also means that we must gird ourselves for a long involvement with these problems.

That is not to prejudge whether American or allied military forces will be required or, if so, in what numbers and for how long. This planning group will present a number of courses of action at various levels of military commitment in subsequent reports. But the U.S. policy debate must stop equating involvement with military deployments.

The first major commitment we must make is intellectual—the commitment to grasping the problem in its complexity, significance, and nuance and wrestling with the various possible ways of solving it. The second major commitment is temporal—we must accept that solving a problem of this magnitude will take time. The final major commitment is philosophical—we must ground ourselves in the realities of the situation in Syria, Iraq, the region, and the world. We must stop chasing magical solutions and the chimeras that the skillful disinformationists of our rivals and enemies present us. There is no simple solution that we are all somehow missing that would manage our problems if only we could find or accept it. There is, however, a best way forward to secure our people and values and advance our interests. The continuing reports of this planning group will help find and articulate that way.

APPENDIX: MAPS OF SYRIA RELEASED BY RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA



Referring to the map, deputy chief of staff of the Russian military Andrey Kartapolov said, "As I hope you can see, we are striking only the facilities of internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra."[153]

This map shows a large concentration of Russian airstrikes (circles) against rebel-held territory in Northwestern Syria falsely portrayed as under the control of Jabhat al Nusra (green). The map also displays the Free Syrian Army (blue) in Southwestern Syria, the only Syrian rebel group portrayed as a non-terrorist group. The characterization of the rebels in the northwest as al Qaeda affiliates suggests Russia will continue to target these groups, while the distinction made for the Free Syrian Army serves to deflect criticism that Russia does not discriminate between armed opposition groups.[154]

NOTES

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3. "Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe," Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, January 20, 2016. http://post.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-and-isis-existential-threats-us-and-europe.
4. The Taliban is a Deobandi rather than a Salafi group, but the distinction is immaterial for the purpose of this specific discussion about the resilience of jihadi groups.
5. See Jessica D. Lewis, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent," Institute for the Study of War, September 10, 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-iraq-resurgent, for an assessment of how the group was able to reconstitute inside of Iraq.
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10. "Living under Siege: the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, February 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/LivingUnderSiege.pdf; and "Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities under Siege," The Syrian American Medical Society, March 2015, http://syriaundersiege.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/For-web-_REPORT.pdf.
11. Jabhat al Nusra actively opposes a negotiated settlement in Syria, but allows humanitarian aid deliveries to occur in parts of Syria under its control. Jabhat al Nusra's leader Abu Mohammad al Joulani frequently articulates both policies in media appearances. See: Interview with Abu Muhammad al Joulani, leader of al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra, by al Jazeera reporter Taysir Alluni. Originally aired as part of the program "Today's Encounter," place and date not specified. Available in translation: "Syria's Al-Nusrah Front leader interviewed on conflict, political vision," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, December 22, 2013; Abu Mohammad al Joulani gave a two-part interview with al Jazeera on May 27, 2015 and June 3, 2015. Translation for the first half was provided by a Jabhat al Nusra fighter available by subscription through SITE Intelligence Group at: http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/translation-of-interview-with-nf-leader-provided-by-fighter.html; [First time on Orient news … statements from Jabhat al Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al Joulani], *Orient News*, December 12, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXgeoFlUY8Y. Excerpted translations available at: https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2015/12/19/jabhat-al-nusrahs-abu-muhammad-al-jolani-of-course-we-wont-be-bound-by-riyadh/.
12. *Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience*, compiled by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) under Stuart W. Bowen, Jr., details examples of this during the Iraqi reconstruction, particularly with the Ministry of Interior. The book concludes with an overview of the impact of reconstruction and perceptions that vary by sect rather than actual service delivery (pp. 318-319). See also General (Ret.) James L. Jones, "The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq," September 6, 2007, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/isf.pdf, pp. 44 and 88, cited in *Hard Lessons.*
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16. For a consideration of the historical lessons, see: Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2015, https://twq.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/twq.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Pollack-Walter_Summer%202015.pdf; Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War," The Brookings Institution, January 2007, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2007/1/01iraq-byman/01iraq_byman.pdf.
17. The requirements for an effective negotiated settlement outlined below are derived from the many historical examples of such settlements that have succeeded and those that have failed. See below for a more detailed discussion of these issues.
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en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syrian-revolutionary-and-opposition-forces.html.
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20. This is true unless one or more external actors choose to use military force to compel all sides to accept an agreement they find unsatisfactory. The planning group did not consider such scenarios because of their extreme improbability.
21. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic identifies cases of the violation of human rights or international humanitarian law in regular reports submitted to the U.N. Security Council. For example, the commission listed violations documented between July 15, 2014 and January 15, 2015 in a report published in February 2015, which included violations by government forces and "anti-government armed groups," ISIS, and the Kurdish People's Defense Forces (YPG), "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/28/69, February 5, 2015, http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/019/37/PDF/G1501937.pdf?OpenElement.
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45. This provision is not meant as a principled or lifetime declaration that shari'a court officials may never participate in government, but rather as a specific requirement for a period of time to protect a delicate transitional government and its institutions from the contrary aspirations of Salafi-jihadi groups.
46. ["Sistani calls on the Iraqi government to reconsider the new salary scale,"], *Shafaq News*, October 23, 2015. http://www.ara.shafaaq.com/35036.
47. ["Maliki and al-Amiri address protestors: We will resist any foreign interference… and we support cutting ties with Turkey,"], *Nasiriyah.org*, December 13, 2015, http://www.nasiriyah.org/ara/post/67303; ["Maliki leaves for Iran on an official visit,"], *Al-Sumaria News*, August 14, 2015, http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/143315/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9-%8A-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/ar; ["Maliki during the funeral of the martyr al-Muhammadawi: These men will achieve victory,"], *Al-Ghadeer Press*, July 14 2015, http://www.alghadeer.tv/news/detail/29296/; ["Vice President #Nouri_al-Maliki meets a delegation from the Islamic Resistance #Kata'ib_Hezb_Allah,"], Sumerian 313, Twitter, November 3, 2015, https://twitter.com/Sumeri313Iraq/status/661562333559455744.
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50. McInnis, *Iran's Strategic Thinking*, p. 5.
51. Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War and AEI Critical Threats Project, May 2013, pp. 19-25, http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Hizbollah for Supporting the Assad Regime," August 10, 2012, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1676.aspx; Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, April 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf.
52. McInnis, *Iran's Strategic Thinking*, pp. 17-18.
53. Sarah E. Kreps, "The 2006 Lebanon War: Lessons Learned," *Parameters*, (Spring 2007),U.S. Army War College, http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/07spring/kreps.pdf.
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