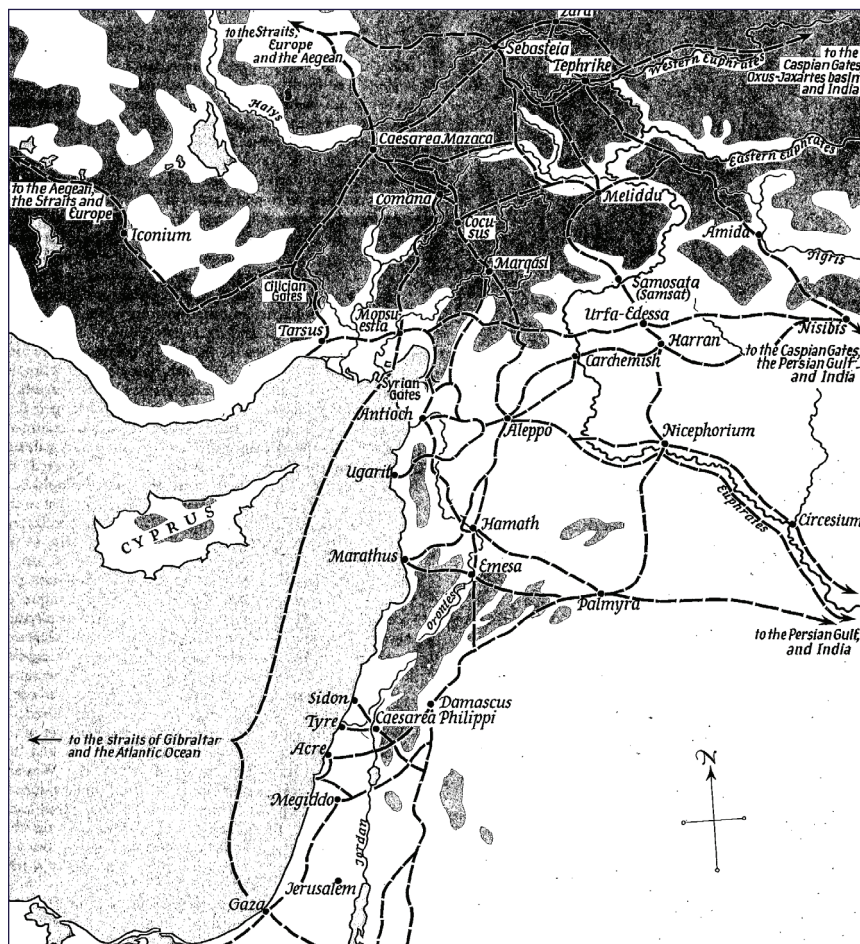


# THE CARAVAN

A Publication of the Hoover Institution on Contemporary Dilemmas in the Greater Middle East

## STRATEGY IN SYRIA: BEYOND ISIS



### SYRIA: DANTE'S EARTHLY CIRCLE OF HELL

by **Charles Hill**

On *Time* magazine's cover in 1947 was Arnold Toynbee, the then world's most renowned scholar, author of the monumental ten-volume, *A Study of History*, praised for "Taking all the knowable human past as his province, he has found rhythms and patterns which any less panoramic view could scarcely have detected."<sup>1</sup>

Toynbee's reputation soon plummeted when historians turned away from big ideas to nibble at small-scale trends. But Toynbee's unique perceptions

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still leap to mind. Today, we recall his remarkable recognition of historic geostrategy: that “two relatively small patches of geography” – one in “the Oxus-Jaxartes basin,” i.e. Afghanistan, and the other in Syria, have been “Roundabouts” where traffic from any point of the compass can be switched to any other point in alternative combinations and permutations as civilizations and religions jostle and collide at exceptionally close quarters.<sup>2</sup> This “Caravan” features the Syria Roundabout.

Simply to list the disruptive forces – “the traffic” in Toynbee’s term – now jostling one another in the Greater Syrian space is to know how each holds potential for shoring up or battering down one or another elements of international order. Three categories stand out:

The state as the fundamental unit of world affairs. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate after the First World War the entire Middle East region was brought on course to enter the modern international state system. If that structure is collapsing, world order as a whole is jeopardized. The possibilities reveal the stakes: what of America’s long commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon? Can Saudi Arabia define itself as a true state rather than a tribal royal family? Iran’s double game of playing a legitimate state role while pursuing its revolutionary ideology has been exposed, but not repulsed even as it accelerates preparations to attack Israel from Lebanon. Can Iraq be guided to relative stability as a reformed state encompassing Shia and Sunni and protective of minorities? Should the Kurdish people establish a state? Autonomy short of statehood has served the Kurds well; declaration of a Kurdistan could arouse the dogs of war on every border of such a new state. The maelstrom of these forces is Syria: even if the state borders of Syria are re-affirmed, the likelihood of even more horrific layers of war with big power involvement is mounting.

International Conventions. The Roundabout exercises a centripetal pull, drawing violations of major international agreements toward it, then spinning them out centrifugally to infect other parts of the region and beyond. Iran’s 2015 “deal” with the U.S. has made Tehran a de facto threshold nuclear weapons state while failing to constrain its advances in ballistic missile technology or its omnidirectional undermining of regional order. The Syrian Roundabout has been used by Iran to extend a form of neo-imperial sphere of influence in a corridor to the Mediterranean, further enhancing its nuclear weapons-power profile. Other regimes in the region now must consider whether to match Iran’s nuclear breakout.

If left unaddressed, Iran’s nuclear program will mean the end of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, one of the pillars of the international system. Is the idea of a Nuclear Free Zone for the Middle East on the order of the 1967 Latin American Treaty of Tlatelolco an utter impossibility?

The Assad regime’s repeated use of chemical weapons and its continuing possession of a variety of CBWs after the U.S. “red line” was not enforced and Russia stepped in to claim that all such weapons had been located and collected, is demonstrating that the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 is being rendered nugatory by the Syrian War. Evidence that North Korea is linked to the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons reveals that the Roundabout’s spin-off effect can reach around the world.

The Genocide Convention also has been mocked by the course of seven-plus years of conflict in Syria. The numbers of killed exceeds one-half million with several million displaced or in refugee flight through the region and beyond, amounting to the most extensive human disaster since the Second World War. The language of the Genocide Convention was so specifically drawn as to make it easy for governing authorities to conclude that virtually no major human cataclysm precisely falls under the Convention’s terms. Now, when international commitments so evidently require renovation and enforcement, they instead are circumvented and openly defied.

And the fundamental principle of the Laws of War – that states must field professional militaries – repudiated by Russia in Ukraine was even more blatantly violated by Russia’s battalion-sized unmarked attack on the U.S. base at Deir al-Zor in early February.

Alliances. The Roundabout War which began in 2011 has drawn in Russia, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, the Kurds and an array of factions. A second Roundabout War is in the offing and likely to add Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, the Gulf Arab states, and others. As dangers gather and threats expand, the question of alliances is paramount. There is no current alliance-category relationship of the U.S. in the Middle East that does not urgently call for restrengthening, reappraisal, revival, or revision. If the very concept of America’s alliances is not shored up, deterrence will fade, partners and friends will make new accommodations, and the chances of avoiding a new, wider war will vanish. While Turkey remains in NATO, President Erdogan is shaping new quasi-alliance relationships with Russia and Iran. The possibility of a “great alliance shift” with grave consequences for Asia as well as the Middle East, will worsen.

The “Caravan” series increasingly has revealed that tensions and conflicts in the Middle East have a significantly negative impact on larger world order. Turbulence from the current Syrian Roundabout has pulled outside powers into the region’s conflicts and made power rivalries with wider war a dangerous likelihood. The U.S., for its own national interest as well as the survival of the modern international state system, must take on this primary responsibility.



### **Charles Hill**

Charles Hill, a career minister in the US Foreign Service, is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. Hill was executive aide to former US secretary of state George P. Shultz (1985–89) and served as special consultant on policy to the secretary-general of the United Nations (1992–96).

<sup>1</sup> William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays*. U. of Chicago, 1986, 127.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, revised and abridged, Portland House, 1988, 195-6.



# WHY OFFENSE IS THE BEST DEFENSE AGAINST RUSSIA AND IRAN IN SYRIA

by Tony Badran

In January, the Trump administration unveiled its strategy for Syria. In an address at the Hoover Institution, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out five key objectives, in the process, made clear that the top priority was containing Iran. The US, he said, would deny Iran the “arch” it is building from Tehran to the Mediterranean, and it would prevent Iran from using Syria as a springboard from which to threaten neighboring countries.

These goals make perfect sense now, and they should have appeared equally cogent to the Obama administration as well. Rather than pursue them, however, President Obama allowed Tehran to expand its influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (to say nothing of Yemen). He also turned a blind eye to Russia’s intervention in Syria which only served to strengthen Iran and to help it consolidate its gains. The result has been a strain on US regional alliances and NATO, along with the reemergence of Russia as a revisionist power in the eastern Mediterranean.

In practical terms, however, an effective Iran strategy would also contain Russia, which is almost completely dependent on Iran for ground troops in Syria. But this requires a shift in American thinking. For the past decade, counterterrorism has dominated US policy in the region. Washington’s attention has been focused on non-state actors such as ISIS, which has led to ignoring, or even enabling, dangerous geopolitical shifts and the

empowerment of adversarial states. It is noteworthy, therefore, that the National Defense Strategy, also released in January, emphasized that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” In the context of the Middle East, this is an important principle to right America’s strategic posture and alignments, upended by Obama’s pro-Iran policy, and should serve as the foundation for US policy in Syria.

The Trump administration, however, has so far been more effective at enunciating compelling principles than at translating those principles into policy. There remains a gap in the administration’s rhetoric. At a House Armed Services Committee hearing in February, CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel removed the military component from the strategy. Even as he described Iran as “the major threat to US interests and partnerships” in the region, Gen. Votel explained that countering Iran in Syria was not “a US military objective,” but rather a broader “US objective,” which could be pursued “other than through military means.”

If the American military were to compete more aggressively with Iran in Syria what would that strategy look like? Recent developments point the way. On February 7, a battalion-size force of pro-regime fighters, including groups commanded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Russian mercenaries, and Syrian militia, attacked a compound



of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) near the Conoco gas fields in Deir Ez-Zor. Within hours, the American military annihilated half of the attacking force.

The firepower the US brought to bear and the swiftness with which it dispatched Iran's and, notably, Russia's forces ought to give some perspective about the powerful capabilities American forces wield. Stated differently, the issue for the US in Syria is not one of capability. Rather, it is one of posture and clarity of purpose. Limits on the use of American military, economic and political power in Syria are often arbitrary and self-imposed. Now that US policy no longer accedes to Iranian control in Syria, these limits must be rationally and carefully evaluated and re-thought within the framework of the declared strategy.

The American show of force in Deir Ez-Zor sent a crucial message to the local Sunni Arab population: the US will not allow the Iranians and the Assad regime to encroach on the area not just controlled by the US, but also by its allies. Lastly, the US made abundantly clear it will deny the Assad regime and its external supporters access to the energy resources now under American control in eastern Syria. This combination of superior military force, staying power, and protection of economic resources is a critical foundation to deny Iranian and regime forces the territory of eastern Syria and the border with Iraq.

Despite these merits, the US attack on the Russian and Iranian forces was entirely defensive. It aimed only to deter the Iranians against trying to capture areas in the US zone of control. Such a defensive posture will not achieve Tillerson's stated objectives of cutting off Iran's territorial continuum and degrading its position in Syria.

If the administration is sincere about these goals, it must consider two additional steps: going on the offensive, if only to attain limited and clearly defined goals; and working more closely with regional allies, especially Israel.

Israeli assets can augment US capabilities considerably. A few days after the skirmish in Deir Ez-Zor in February, Iran flew a drone into Israeli air space. Israel responded by destroying the Iranian command center at the Tiyas military air base near Palmyra, and then proceeded to bomb a large number of Iranian and Assad regime targets. The episode again underscored the vulnerability of Iran, to say nothing of the brittle Assad regime. Close coordination with Israel to expand this ongoing targeting

campaign against Iranian and Hezbollah infrastructure, senior cadres and logistical routes, and amplifying it with US assets in the region, would have a devastating effect on Iran's position in Syria.

By going on the offensive, the US will also strengthen Israel's hand with Russia, reducing its need to petition the Kremlin and thereby diminishing Moscow's ability to position itself as an arbiter on Israeli security. For instance, instead of haggling with Russia to obtain its commitment to keep Iran 5 or 7 kilometers away from the Israeli border, the US could adopt the Israeli position on Iran's entrenchment in Syria and assist Israel in enforcing it. Such a posture would have a direct effect on another critical ally, Jordan, whose role is of high importance in southern Syria and in the US zone in the east.

Assad and Iran are the scaffolding on which the Russian position stands. Targeting them, therefore, undercuts Moscow and reduces its leverage. By merely forcing Russia to respect Israeli and Jordanian needs on the border, the US would undermine Russia's attempt, more generally, to leverage its position in Syria to make headway into the US alliance system.

In addition to adopting a more offensive military posture, the US should also intensify the economic chokehold on Assadist Syria. US policy, as Sec. Tillerson made clear, is to "discourage economic relationships between the Assad regime and any other country." The US should not only deny the regime access to "reconstruction" money, but also it should increase and tighten sanctions on the regime and its allies. Leaning heavily on neighbors that help Assad evade sanctions, especially Lebanon, which continues to facilitate the Assad clique and its cronies in circumventing sanctions, should be a priority. Likewise, the US should encourage Amman to continue denying Assad access to the border crossing in Deraa and prevent a resumption of trade. The regime should effectively be treated as North Korea on the Mediterranean.

An economic blockade would also place responsibilities on the United States. With the skirmish in Deir Ez-Zor, the US showed it will deny the regime and its backers access to the resources of east Syria. The US should turn this attitude into a principle of policy. It should, that is to say, make clear to local allies in the US zone that it stands firmly against so-called "reintegration," political or economic, with the regime. These resources are to be used to help locals in the US zone economically,

which, along with military means, is an important tool to keep the regime from making inroads with parts of the population in the area. Along with proper economic management of those resources, alternate trade relationships will need to be developed especially with Jordan and Turkey.

Which brings us to what is perhaps the thorniest challenge: repairing the relationship with Turkey. President Obama's policy deliberately upended geopolitical alignments in Syria, most visibly with Turkey. The counter-ISIS campaign has hardened this misalignment by deepening the US relationship with the Syrian Kurdish PYD party and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the terrorist PKK group at war with Turkey. The concerns of NATO ally Turkey need to be addressed to avoid further deterioration that benefits Russia and increases its leverage.

At the same time, however, the US cannot allow either the YPG or Turkey to undermine the principal US objective in Syria: countering Iran. The good news is that both sides need the US and want its support. The US will need to try and chart a middle path, imposing strict limits and conditions on the YPG and accommodating Turkish requests, while also extending certain guarantees to the Syrian Kurds, who already enjoy undreamed of levels of autonomy thanks entirely to US support. For all their problems, at this point it's neither in the interest of Turkey nor of the US to have the YPG go from under

the American thumb to become a potential instrument of Russia and Iran. At the same time, the US needs to develop Sunni Arab allies and structures to hold and govern Arab majority areas in order to avoid Kurdish-Arab tensions that the regime and Iran could exploit.

This is a tall order, to be sure. However, the US cannot lose sight of its overriding interest in Syria: breaking Iran's position. As the US Syria strategy correctly notes, "expelling Iranian influence from Syria" depends on ending the Assad regime. Going after Iranian and regime assets, in close coordination with Israel, will simultaneously undercut the Russian position and push back against its drive to translate its presence in Syria into geopolitical gains and incursions into US alliances.

To do this, the US needs a change in mindset, away from counterterrorism toward an emphasis on strategy and balance of power. The US doesn't lack the means for this task. It just needs clarity of purpose and seriousness in pursuing its objectives. That means going on offense against Iran in Syria.



**Tony Badran**

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# THE SYRIAN CRISIS: STRATEGIC CHALLENGES FOR THE UNITED STATES

by Itamar Rabinovich

The Syrian crisis, which since 2011 has been the focal issue in the Middle East, has now entered a new phase, confronting the United States with fresh challenges. From the early stages of its evolution, the Syrian crisis has unfolded on three levels: domestic, regional and international. The Assad regime's success in capturing Aleppo in late 2016 marked a turning point in the war's domestic dimension. With massive Russian and Iranian help the regime has been consistently striving to recapture more and more of the national territory. It now controls about 50 percent and, if unchecked, will gradually increase that percentage. The declining importance of the domestic conflict has diminished the significance of two aspects of the crisis in earlier years: the huge number of civilian casualties and the movement of refugees into neighboring countries and to Europe. The emphasis has shifted to the regional and the international dimensions: Iran's quest to deepen its military presence and political and economic influence, Iranian-Israeli tensions in southern Syria, and Turkey's capture of Syrian territory in the north and its military offensive against local Kurdish forces. Putin's Russia seeks with considerable success to play the role of "the broker" in the Syrian crisis while the US is grappling with the need to put together and implement a strategy that will serve its own interests and those of its Middle Eastern allies.

In her memoirs, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton defined the Syrian crisis as a "wicked problem" by which

she meant that the US was hard put to find attractive policy options. Indeed, Syria will likely be one of the most negative aspects of the Obama Administration's foreign policy legacy. It is moot to speculate on the hypothetical consequences of a more assertive US policy in Syria in 2011/2012, but there is no denying the fact that Obama's failure to respect his own red lines in 2013 created a vacuum that Vladimir Putin used well. Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis in 2015 tilted the balance in the civil war and resulted in the regime's survival and in placing Moscow in its current position with regard to the Syrian crisis as well as larger Middle Eastern issues.

When the Trump Administration came in, it seemed for a brief period that the US was about to change course in Syria. During his visit to Saudi Arabia and on other occasions, the president articulated the priority he attached to checking Iran's ambitions and expansion in the Middle East. Syria was the natural arena for checking Iran. Trump's decision to attack a Syrian air base after yet another use by the regime of chemical weapons against civilian population, the downing of a Syrian fighter jet and a pro-Iranian drone in eastern Syria were seen at the time as potentially marking such a change. The Trump Administration inherited from its predecessor a well-managed campaign against ISIS and an effective partnership with the Kurdish militia in north-eastern Syria. The anti ISIS campaign was crowned by the capture of Raqqa, the capital of the organization's virtual

state in eastern Syria. The next question was whether the Administration would continue this drive by seeking to ensure direct or indirect control of eastern Syria or whether it would relinquish it to the Assad regime and its Iranian patrons. For Iran, control of/or hegemony in eastern Syria was and is a crucial element of its campaign to build a land bridge to the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. In the event, it turned out that the Trump Administration decided not to invest the massive effort required for denying Iran's ambitions. But the administration decided to keep 2000 US special troops in north and northeastern Syria in order to support and demonstrate its support for its Kurdish allies.

In mid-January, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered a major speech articulating US strategy in Syria. In the Secretary's own words:

*"As we survey Syria today we see the big picture situation characterized by three factors:"*

- 1) *ISIS is substantially, but not completely defeated.*
- 2) *Assad controls about 50 percent of Syria.*
- 3) *Continued strategic threats to the US other than ISIS persist (I am referring principally to Iran).*

*The US's five key "end states" for Syria:*

- *ISIS and al-Qaeda suffer an enduring defeat.*
- *The underlying conflict is resolved through a UN led process (stable, unified independent Syrian state under post-Assad leadership).*
- *Iran influence is diminished.*
- *Refugees return.*
- *Syria is free from WMD.*

The Secretary of State stated that "the Trump Administration is implementing a new strategy to achieve this end state. This process largely entails increased diplomatic action ... but let's be clear: the United States will also maintain military presence in Syria." Unfortunately, only the first "end state" objective is potentially achievable. The other four are unrealistic, and are unlikely to be achieved under current circumstances.

The US faces a number of major challenges in Syria: Russia's position as the arbiter of the Syrian crisis resonates in the Middle East and is seen as a major success in Putin's ambition to restore Russia's position as a major actor in the Middle East. Iran continues to embed itself in Syria, and its military buildup puts

Teheran and Jerusalem on a collision course. Iran's decision to send a drone from Syria into Israeli territory was an unprecedented provocation. Israel's massive response was yet another indication that the danger of another war on Israel's northern frontiers is real and that war could engulf Syria and Lebanon. US support of the Syrian Kurds is seen by its ally, Turkey, as a dangerous provocation and has driven a further wedge into an already problematic relationship. Washington's Sunni allies in the Gulf, headed by Saudi Arabia, are worried by its failure to match its anti-Iranian rhetoric with effective action.

In order to cope with these challenges, an effective American strategy needs to assume that a neat solution to the Syrian crisis is not feasible in the foreseeable future and that the Syrian arena will continue to be the focal point of several regional and international conflicts. In order to have an effective say in the ongoing conflict over Syria's future it is indeed important to keep a US military presence on the ground. The Kurdish area occupies about 15 percent of Syria's territory, but it is on the country's periphery. The US should invest in a massive diplomatic effort and display ingenuity in order to persuade Turkey to accept its ongoing relationship with the Kurds. Another effort must be invested in Syria's southern territory in order to prevent an Israeli-Iranian collision. The original agreement on areas of "de-confliction" should be used and improved in order to push Iran further away from Israel's Golan Heights. It is obviously very difficult for the Trump Administration to deal effectively with Russia's position in Syria as long as the shadow of investigation threatens the president. But at some point, the US will have to find a way of dealing with Russia with regard to Syria and to put together a strategy that will exploit the existing cracks in its partnership with Iran. At present, Russia and Iran are strategic allies in Syria, but their long term interests are not identical and a larger American-Russian understanding could turn Russia into an effective partner in achieving at least some of Washington's aims in Syria.



**Itamar Rabinovich**

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# AMERICA AND SYRIA: LIFE AFTER HEGEMONY

by Camille Pecastaing

The 24-hour news cycle has offered a sequential, fragmented vision of the Syrian conflict. A chemical attack here, a temporary cease fire there; a wave of hopeless refugees, a gruesome terrorist attack; the fall of a besieged city, yet another round of negotiations. Caught in the fractional details, few looked at the bigger picture of how the position of influence the US had secured in the Middle East from the mid-1970s unraveled. As Washington stood by, the Syrian war somehow ushered Russia back into the region, shattered the stability of the European Union, terminally fractured Yemen, solidified Iran's land bridge to the Mediterranean, and accelerated Turkey's transition into yet another rogue autocracy.

This new Middle East is Obama's child, who disowned Syria the same way Bush had claimed Iraq, although arguably history would have flowed toward the same outcome whatever the decisions of those men. Many may feel the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a colossal mistake that unleashed chaos, but had the cruel Ba'athist regime endured through the 2000s, it would have been caught like the other Arab states in the hope and fury that followed the Tunisian revolution. Iraq's Arab Spring would have ushered in another conflagration, for sure a different one, but tragedies and commotion always were in that country's future.

The United States struggled in Iraq, and lost, one IED at a time, the aura of hegemonic invincibility it had acquired at the turn of the 1990s, when the Soviet Union

was chased from Afghanistan by American proxies, and Iraq was swatted out of Kuwait by American tanks. This tactical ease was only a memory by 2004, when Anbar and Nineveh and Salah al-Din became killing grounds. And yet, a combination of vulnerability and tenacity somehow grounded America's presence in the region. A generation of American officers had become *abna al-balad*, sons-of-the-land; they spoke local languages, sometimes decently, and had acquired a genuine if critical understanding and appreciation of local cultures. America was another dog in the pit; simultaneously sought after and rejected, alien yet familiar, it belonged. That's what made America's no-show in Syria so unnerving. It was forfeit, desertion almost.

Obama had his sights on a nuclear deal with Iran, and while he negotiated with Tehran's power brokers the rot of civil war spread across North Africa, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Arabia. Bush's America had brought violence to Iraq, but also aid and medicine and commerce (or at least piles of cash). Obama's drone-only policy exposed an America that was cowardly and self-centered: Arab children were gassed or starved or shelled with impunity while US missiles launched from afar were reserved for terrorists (and their hapless collaterals). To protect civilians, America had reluctantly *led from behind* in Libya, a beguiling doctrine, but then it took a pass on Syria. The enormity of the crimes committed absolved from responsibility, confirming the adage that if one murder is a tragedy, millions is a statistic.

A new Administration came to this wasteland intending to regain the lost ground. Assertive messaging harked back to a time when America was dominant, but concessions were made all around to repair frayed alliances, and rolling back rivals was an uphill struggle. Washington made amends with Tel Aviv—or is it Jerusalem now?—and echoed the delusions of previous American Presidents that it was in their reach to deliver peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It ‘refriended’ Riyadh, even though the revisionist agenda of its newly anointed crown prince was well outside America’s comfort zone, and the Saudi-led war in Yemen was a fiasco of Syrian proportions. It had harsh words for Tehran, yet little action to back them up. It inherited the robust and pragmatic relationship with the Kurds, but stood by when Iraqi and Turkish troops crushed them. And it has been as meek as ever when faced with the thuggery of the regimes in Ankara and Moscow.

The ghosts of *Al Qaeda* have been the West’s Moby Dick, the shadow that allowed the prey to draw circles around the hunter. This blindness started with the attacks of 9/11, which shaped perceptions and priorities for a generation. Soon after, the ruthless killings of Shia civilians by an early incarnation of *Daesh*, the Islamic State, derailed the American plan for post-Saddam Iraq and killed hopes of a better, less brutal Middle East. During Obama’s tenure, gory performances of crowd murder—bombs and shooting sprees and rampaging trucks all across Europe—reinforced the understandable if misguided obsession with Islamists. Reflexively, American forces found themselves fighting with Russia and Turkey on the side of Iran and its protégés, Abadi in Iraq and Asad in Syria. By selling itself as a global threat, *Daesh* had set the course for its own destruction, but it had provided the distraction for Syria’s autocrat to claw his way back from the brink.

Now, seven years in, the Syrian war is reaching a new paroxysm of violence. As an end feels near, the victors seek to consolidate their position. Ankara is pressed to cut down in size Kurdish centers of power. Tel Aviv, discrete until now, is signaling its red lines with force. And a resurgent Damascus continues to depopulate urban areas where the rebellion had taken roots, a massive cleansing aimed at a territorial demographic distribution manageable over the long-term. To justify its toleration of murder, Washington reminds itself that the killers have paid lip service to the struggle against *Daesh*. But within the disintegrating rebellion, distinctions between Islamists and non-Islamists have lost all meaning, factionalism being driven by personal rivalries and opportunistic

alignments with competing foreign patrons. Syria is a game of power, not ideology, and if Washington prefers to ignore this reality it is because this is a game it is losing. Portraying the Syrian civil war as a counterterrorism operation against lunatics obfuscates the dramatic shifts in regional and global influence that have come to pass.

America’s losses in terms of reach are made up for by gains in degrees of freedom. After years of upheaval, there is no status quo to defend; after years ignoring humanitarian calls, there are no moral principles to uphold—no one would blink if Washington pursued hard and dirty realism. Politically, the only imperative is to keep oil flowing (for now) and avert a terrorist attack on American soil. Beyond that, the US has options, with the caveat that there are no right policies for the Middle East, only trade-offs and Faustian pacts.

The US had been a quasi-hegemonic caretaker for the region since the 1970s, and it must first decide whether it is desirable to restore and then maintain such a position in a global energy landscape that will be less dependent on fossil fuels. China and the EU are the region’s main trading partners, but it is American forces that are positioned year round from Kuwait to Djibouti. America is still the peacemaker by default, when all interregional conflicts crystalize around Iran, more specifically around Iran’s enmity with Israel on one hand, and Saudi on the other. Leaving Islamists aside—and they should be left aside, because they are derivative to the ailments that afflict the states, not causal to the states’ failures—that makes the relationship between Washington and Tehran the pivotal variable of the regional equation.

A radical diplomatic approach would resurrect the Kissinger-era primary alliance with governments in Jerusalem, Riyadh, and Tehran, thereby marginalizing Russia and Turkey. Washington probably still has enough financial and political leverage to get buy-in from Israel and Saudi Arabia if it pushed the issue. To court Iran, it could put on the table a removal of all remaining sanctions, and acquiescence to the *fait accompli* of Tehran’s extension to the Mediterranean. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps will be institutionally and existentially, if not ideologically, reticent, because its *raison d’être* is to protect the revolution from America’s evil designs. Already unpopular, the Corps may not survive a genuine rapprochement with Washington. To overcome this opposition, the US would be inspired to craft a central role for the Corps in this new order, using some form of military assistance to reorient its priorities toward what have been historically and strategically Iran’s natural rivals, and are not America’s

friends: Turkey, Russia, and the Af/Pak region, home to Pashtuns and Baluchis.

If not diplomacy, a bold military approach would use the Syrian battleground to bleed America's rivals. Russia has no real strategic interest in Syria: this war is a vanity vehicle for Putin, bringing in at best tangential leverage in the Crimean/Ukrainian affair. So far, Russia has had it easy, but if the cost increased to the point of undermining its primary objectives at home and in Central Europe, it could cut its support with little loss. Many would shudder at the idea of rebels, including Islamists (for they have been the most tenacious fighters), shooting Russian aircrafts with American-provided ground-air weapons systems, but control of the skies is key to control of the region. With Russia gone, Tehran would have to foot the bill alone, with limited air power. The recent wave of protests across Iran shows that domestic support for the Syrian campaign is lacking, and an escalation could place the Corps in a precarious position. The Iranian regime thrives in a soft spot of tension with America, but in its current form it may survive neither a genuine rapprochement, nor an open conflict, with the US.

Against those scenarios there is the path of least resistance, the safer course, the current course: neither

acquiescing to the new distribution of forces in the region, nor doing anything sufficient to reverse it. Living with the delusion that America is in control because it says it is, and dismissing the repeated violations of the American order as temporary glitches that can be fixed through the theater of international negotiations and UN resolutions. Even if satisfactory in the short-term, bad diplomatic fixes poison the future. Precedents from Northern Ireland, Palestine, Taiwan, North Korea, northern Cyprus or the Western Sahara show how transitional solutions become permanent limbos and feed conflicts for generations. The order of Sykes-Picot, which carved Mesopotamia at the end of WWI, is no more. It is better to write off the loss and look creatively and boldly at the future, than to pretend fixing notional countries like Iraq or Syria.



### **Camille Pecastaing**

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# US MILITARY IN SYRIA MUST RELY ON POLITICAL DETERMINATION AND A MARSHALL PLAN

by Fabrice Balanche

In January 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson described American strategy in Syria as including maintaining a troop presence in the region until at least 2021 while building a Kurdish-Arab force of 30,000 men, both with the ultimate objective of blocking Iranian influence. As laudable as that goal is, achieving it will require addressing a complex nexus of interrelated issues. First, while Kurdish forces have been important allies of the US in the war against ISIS, NATO ally Turkey treats them as a mortal enemy. Second, relations between Syrian Kurds and Arabs remain fragile as best and require considerable attention from the US in order to prevent the development of further tensions that could lead to deleterious political realignments. Third, to succeed the US has to recognize the full extent of the political and economic slump in northern Syria, which has only exacerbated tensions between Arabs and Kurds. These are difficult matters that demand careful diplomatic attention as well as the investment of considerable resources which will be necessary to counter Iran and the Assad regime.

This last issue is crucial for US policy, however, I would like to emphasize on another equally issue. It seemed that the US was not aware of the full extent of the political and economic slump in northern Syria, which has only exacerbated tensions between Arabs and Kurds. I would

also definitely mention that we were in January 2018 in Northern Syria and that impression is not speculation from Washington, but the result of a field research.

## The Kurdish Challenge for US strategy

Only a few days after Tillerson's presentation of US strategy, Turkey launched an offensive on the Kurdish area of Afrin. The US evidently underestimated Turkey's determination to fight against the YPG. Even more important than the fact that the US was caught off guard is the disturbing implication of Ankara's having received the green light from Moscow for its operation against the YPG in Afrin. Russian strategy includes the goal of demonstrating to the Kurds that the US is unable or at least unwilling to protect them against Turkey, despite the sacrifices they have made against IS. Clearly Putin aspires to having the Kurds break their alliance with the US and for them to permit the Syrian army to return to northeastern Syria in exchange for protection against Turkey. If the YPG were to withdraw from the Turkish-Syrian border area and then share sovereignty with the Syrian army, Erdogan would no longer have a reason to attack Kurdish territory. The US should be taking steps to prevent the Kurds from succumbing to Moscow's wooing. This will have to include coming to some arrangement with Turkey which will not be easy at all.



However, a substantive policy toward the Kurds even within Syria (i.e. leaving the relations to Turkey aside) requires addressing the significant tensions with the Arab population in the Kurdish controlled regions. Even in areas with Arab majorities, the Kurdish “comrades” of the YPG control all administrative and political bodies, from simple local councils (Kommun) to the leadership of the «Democratic Federation of Northern Syria». Syrian Kurds keep a tight control on governance and largely exclude Arabs from positions of authority. Of course this Kurdish domination exasperates the Arab population, especially the tribal leaders marginalized by the new power. If the US hopes to build a Kurdish-Arab force, it will have to address these tensions by working toward a more functional collaboration of the two groups. This is far less than old-style “nation-building,” but it does mean becoming involved in an internal political process and structures of governance.

These tensions are especially acute in the military sector. Arabs are the majority in the SDF (Syrian Defense Force) and constitute a quarter of the YPG. However, leadership remains exclusively Kurdish, and Arabs have no chance of promotion within the YPG. Within the SDF, the Arab militia have no freedom of action, and they are furthermore fully dependent on the YPG for weaponry. The US has chosen to make the YPG its sole interlocutor in order to avoid the problems of disorganization (as it experienced with the FSA). However, the YPG actively prevents the emergence of a united Arab force within the SDF, in order to forestall the emergence of any competing force so that it can remain indispensable to the US. The challenge to the US is clearly to keep the Kurds in its camp while also motivating them to develop a more equitable and productive relationship with the Arabs who are prepared to fight at their side but who understandably may resent structural discrimination.

### **An economic disaster**

Arab men in the region join the SDF and especially the YDF for multiple motivations, including both political opposition to Assad and the Iranians, but also the real advantages of a salary, given the drastic shrinking of the economy in the region.

Before the war, Northeastern Syria (Raqqah, Deir al-Zor and Hasaka provinces) produced two-thirds of the wheat and almost all the cotton of the country. Half of the population earned its living from agriculture, and while this fraction has only increased during the war, the real scope of agricultural production has declined steadily

since 2011, due to lack of fertilizer, poor irrigation and the on-going disruption of the agricultural market. In 2018 the agricultural sector may continue to face dramatic declines, potentially leading to a food crisis, as a drought has returned after six years of normal rains. In the Euphrates Valley, where irrigation is essential, the state irrigation network is no longer functioning due to recent destruction and the absence of a management authority.

Farmers have taken their own measures to adjust to the environmental strains. Many have abandoned their land in order to raise sheep, while others have begun to plant barley instead of wheat — a plant that requires less water and fertilizer. As for cotton, plans for an April planting appear to be negligible. As a result, the two main sources of income for farmers—wheat and cotton—have disappeared. The Federation of Northern Syria will no doubt have to import cereals at a great expense in order to compensate for the lack of significant grain storage in the population. This is a real snub for the Kurdish radicals in the PYD, which advocates for food self-sufficiency according to the principles set out by Abdullah Occalan. Yet this disastrous situation was inevitable because of the strong economic dependence existing between Northeastern Syria (which the Baathist regime shaped exclusively for the production of agricultural and energy raw materials) and the Western industrial Syria.

Officially, the PYD wants to break its economic dependence on the rest of Syria by building a self-sufficient economy. It advocates the creation of agricultural and artisanal cooperatives in accordance with a neo-Maoist ideology. Fortunately, the implementation of Occalan’s ideology has been minimal because of the priority given to military combat. However, the creation of cooperatives does not favor a free-market economy or any private initiatives that are already restrained by a stifling bureaucracy.

### **An explosive situation that benefits the Syrian regime**

On the one hand, the political domination by the Kurds and on the other, the economic decline, exacerbate ethnic and tribal tensions. In January 2018, the tribes of Manbij, in Northern Syria near the Turkish border, protested against the Civil Council (the local government) when it wanted to impose conscription. Eighteen months after the liberation of the city by SDF forces, the lack of public services, unreliable electricity and a stagnating economy contributed to widespread disappointment. In Raqqah, the population is still recovering from the devastating battle, but soon a similar frustration is likely to develop. Raqqah’s people have been expecting massive aid from the West,

but currently there is nearly no aid on the ground and no promise of stabilization in the future. As a result, the rumor spread that the West destroyed Raqqa only because of the threat it sees in ISIS, but with no genuine interest in liberating, let alone rebuilding the city.

The Assad dictatorship is all too eager to take advantage of such discontent. Its propagandists argue that in areas under its control, electricity has come back and the other utilities are functioning. Such representations have a strong impact on a population impoverished by the war. After years of fighting, many Syrians are craving a modicum of normalcy. Even as Bashar al Assad wages a brutal war in the west, most recently in Ghouta, he also senses an opportunity to regain control of the Northeast, biding his time, throwing a little oil on the smoldering fire and trying to rally the political elites. In January 2018, most of the tribal chiefs of Northern Syria were in Damascus preparing for the Sochi meeting. In fact, these discussions in the Syrian capital focused on their future political position and opportunities for a future in which the Syrian army could return.

### **Stop Turkey and rebuild the area**

If the US plans to stay in Northern Syria, it must solve two major issues. First, it must stop the Turkish offensive. However, it must not do so by ceding Manbij to Turkey, which will only embolden Erdogan who will demand more concessions, in response to which the YPG will switch towards Russia. In this complex terrain, the US must show clear political determination both to retain its local allies and to gain Turkey's respect. Yet that political route alone will not be sufficient. The US also needs to engage more effectively on the ground. If the US does

not rebalance the power relations between Kurds and Arabs, the latter will turn to Damascus, just as the former have the option of turning to Moscow. Disengagement or withdrawal will not improve the situation. On the other hand, the US must work seriously to improve the standard of living of the population through significant economic aid that goes beyond mere stabilization. Blocking the expansion of Iranian hegemonic ambitions requires an American initiative that offers the peoples of the region a compelling alternative. A comparison from the middle of the twentieth-century is not far-fetched.

The Trump administration should be as ambitious as President Truman when he launched the Marshall Plan for Europe, as this was an appropriate response to protect Western Europe from Communism. An analogous response to the structural difficulties in the Middle East, in the face of the Iranian shadow, has to be developed for the same reasons that Truman evinced.

The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive.



### **Fabrice Balanche**

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# THE SYRIAN GREAT GAME

by Reuel Marc Gerecht

By definition “great games” are complicated with lots of moving parts. Battles on the ground, intense, myriad, and sometimes fratricidal, always connect, however indirectly, to the larger collision of great powers. In Syria, the tug-of-war is a lopsided affair, where Iran, Russia, and the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad are invested in winning. The opposing side—Syrian Arab Sunnis, Sunni Gulf Arabs, Israel, the United States, and Turkey—is barely an entente. In the most destructive conflict the modern Middle East has seen (the runner up, the Iran-Iraq war, though comparably lethal, was less destructive to civilians), Tehran and Moscow may not be able to reclaim all of the territory lost by Assad, but they have invested what is needed to regain the most essential parts of the country.

One possible exception: the Syrian north where the Turkish Army has intervened. Ankara has so far been a big loser in the Syrian war. It has likely made its Kurdish problems worse by invading, guaranteeing that it can no longer play Syrian Kurds against each other, and against other Kurds, Damascus, and Tehran. Meddle, divide, and conquer has been the tried and true formula for big power manipulation of this obstreperous minority. Radicalized Turkish Kurds, which once again appear to be growing in numbers, and Syrian Kurds now have an active hatred of a common enemy. Kurdish-Turkish clashes in Turkey have increased since Ankara intervened in Syria in August 2016. The Kurdish problem always has the potential of destabilizing the republic, from Istanbul to Diyarbakir.

The Turkish invasion has given Iran and Russia leverage

with Syrian Kurds that is unlikely to decrease, which isn't the case with America's support of the Kurds, which is as transient as Donald Trump is fickle. If Ankara decides to stay in Syria to ensure that Syrian Kurds do not develop further cross-border supply lines with their Turkish Kurdish cousins, the paramilitary-cum terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, it's unlikely that Russian, Iranian, or Iranian-controlled Shiite militias will attack Turkish soldiers. It's a near certainty, however, that Assad and his allies will supply the Kurds materiel to bleed the Turks, on both sides of the border. In a battle of wills and military supplies, the Tehran-Moscow-Damascus axis has the upper hand.

Like Turkey, Israel has become a loser in Syria's Great Sunni Rebellion as Iran has taken control of the Assad dictatorship, which is hamstrung by demographics: even with the massive slaughter and flight of Sunni Syrians, the minority Alawites, a heretical Shiite offshoot, just don't have the numbers to wage a protracted war over Syria's 71,500 square miles. The Iranians and their non-Iranian Shiite expeditionary forces have tried to fill the void. Jerusalem is now unavoidably invested in denying the Islamic Republic the means in Syria to launch missiles, a ground war, and terrorist/paramilitary operations against the Jewish State. However, Jerusalem is so far not willing to put Israeli troops into action, using only air power to dissuade its enemies.

Neither has Israel shown any desire to develop a Syrian proxy army, as it once did among the Lebanese Christians. It isn't clear that the Israelis have the will or the means

to prevent the clerical regime from creating a land route from Iran to Hizbollah-controlled Lebanon. Israeli aircraft haven't once, so far as we know, interdicted Iranian troop and supply planes that travel frequently from Iran and Iraq to the Levant. Israel surely has the intelligence to do so. Jerusalem appears willing so far to play only an aggressive defense, reacting to Iranian and Russian moves. Given the Islamic Republic's long-standing desire to have a front-row seat in the "resistance" against the Jewish State, given the integral role anti-Zionism plays in the development of Iranian-controlled Shiite militias, a war between Israel and Iran is now likely, in either Syria or Lebanon or both, with a possible exchange of missiles between Israel and the Islamic Republic, and even conceivably Israeli air raids on Iranian Revolutionary Guard–Shiite militia bases inside Iraq and Iran. But Jerusalem will surely try to avoid a regional war for fear of the missiles Tehran has sent to or built in Lebanon.

Israel's predicament is acute because Washington is willing to do so little. The United States is presently more "in" than Israel in Syria, but its post-Islamic State objectives remain unclear and its resolve appears to be declining. American foreign policy is fundamentally shifting as large slices of the American left and right see intervention abroad as baleful and the Muslim Middle East as too complicated, recalcitrant, and demanding. Washington has developed Syrian proxy armies—the Arab and Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces—for use against the now fading threat of the Islamic State. The Pentagon may keep Special Forces in country to harass remnants of this group and affiliates of al-Qa'ida. How long President Trump will be willing to do that, however, is uncertain. His reluctant decision to stay in Afghanistan likely prevents him from overriding his "instincts" twice. It's no secret that Trump wants Russian President Vladimir Putin to "handle" Syria. We may assume that Trump sees Putin in Syria and a reborn Islamic State as somehow mutually exclusive even though Russian and Iranian military actions, which haven't been primarily aimed at the Islamic State, suggest that both see utility in allowing the organization and other radical Sunni groups some running room. The clerical regime has certainly strategically benefited enormously from the Shiite chauvinism that has grown in Arab lands since sectarian conflicts became white hot. Since 2005, when Tehran started aggressively arming militant Iraqi Shiite groups, Iranian influence in the Middle East has expanded primarily through Sunni–Shiite bloodshed.

Senior American officials now talk about a presidentially-dictated 12-month deadline for American ground

operations inside Syria. Since the White House has shown no willingness to engage in "nation-building," which would demand a long-term commitment of US resources to prevent the rebirth of globally-minded jihadists or the conquest of the region by Iranian-led forces, the presence of US troops has diminishing relevance. If the United States were to stay in any strength, American soldiers would perforce start securing the areas in which they operate, directly and through their Syrian partners. "Nation-building" is what American soldiers do if they deploy in numbers with no time-line to depart and no desire to hunker down and watch the neighborhood fall apart.

Against Sunni radicals, the administration is on the verge of adopting "a whack a mole approach," hoping that the number of globally-minded jihadists is finite and that the risk can be managed through special-forces operations and targeted assassinations. This is Obama redux. So far the administration has been unwilling to provide offensive military support to its Syrian "partners on the ground" in confrontations with the Assad regime and its foreign allies. As telling: where President Trump responded quickly, if not robustly, against the Syrian regime's use of sarin gas, he has not answered the regime's repeated use of less lethal chlorine agents.

Assad and his allies constantly probe. The Pentagon has killed Russian, Iranian, and Syrian-regime forces on the battlefield, but this was, most probably, not by design. "Countering Iran is not one of the coalition missions in Syria," General Joseph Votel, the head of U.S. Central Command, recently told the House Armed Services Committee. If the president keeps his schedule, the American military will soon not engage in defensive actions at all. And fear of global jihadists among the Sunnis will likely be sufficient to keep a withdrawing America from transferring effective anti-aircraft weaponry to Syrian Sunnis to protect civilians and soldiers from devastating Russian and regime air attacks.

What the United States appears to be gearing up to do is to harass Iran, the Lebanese Hizbollah, and the Assad regime primarily through sanctions. Such sanctions are worthwhile. As the recent nationwide anti-regime demonstrations revealed, average Iranians aren't enamored of the theocracy's expensive adventurism. The mollahs, their stepchild, the Hizbollah, and their Alawite dependent desperately need more money to maintain the status quo. Denying them the requisite financial means is common sense. Washington is late in developing policies to help the Christian and Sunni



Lebanese protect their financial institutions from Hizbollah and to discourage Assad's cooption of Lebanese banks. Whether the Trump administration can do this now isn't clear, especially if it decides to maintain the nuclear deal with Tehran. Lots of potentially devastating non-nuclear sanctions are allowed by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Secretary of State John Kerry regularly told us so). But the "spirit" of the atomic agreement, and European mercantile habits, move us the other way.

The retreat from American hegemony inevitably alters the mentality and analytical capacity of Americans. The unacceptable becomes acceptable. The unthinkable becomes wise. President Obama's accommodation of the clerical regime (and Russia)—the strained analysis that suggested the nuclear deal would somehow moderate Tehran's behavior—makes perfect sense if one just wants to put the Middle East in the rear-view mirror. It makes no sense if one believes American retrenchment

creates a more dangerous world. In a "great game," as in checkers and chess, not every confrontation determines victory. But if one loses the wrong pieces at the wrong time, one loses. What is so wry about America's current disposition is that Washington thinks it can avoid even playing, that it can pick another (easier) battle, somewhere else, to demonstrate America still has red lines. We will see. What always matters most is not how we see the world; it's how our enemies do.



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# THE DESCENT OF SYRIA INTO THE ABYSS

by Samuel Tadros

“Greetings, softer than the breeze of Barada .... I send my tears, which will never dry, O Damascus.” The opening line of Ahmed Shawqi’s famous poem was written as news of the Syrian defeat by the French in 1920 reached Egypt. Less than two years earlier, Faisal I had entered Damascus and raised the flag of Arab nationalism. The jubilation was felt across the Levant. Egypt, confident in its own newly discovered national identity, had little appetite for the illusions of Arab nationalism, but the pain of Damascus could not be ignored. Euphoria would visit the city again in 1958 as the Damascene crowd crowned Nasser the region’s indisputable king, but those moments were few and short lived, and soon gave way to disappointment. That city would know little but pain as coup gave way to coup, before the specter of Hafez Al-Assad rose tormenting its inhabitants.

Nearly seven years have passed since the outbreak of protests in Syria calling for change. By now, many illusions have been shattered. First was the illusion of the ‘reformer son’ of the late strongman. The shy, eye doctor was surely different from his father. John Kerry and Nancy Pelosi had fallen for his charm during the Bush years, and the Obama administration still held the same hope. It was not to be. Syria’s great poet Nezar Qabbani had described the breed well in his *Autobiography of an Arab Man of the Sword* “I decided to ride this people from now until Judgment Day.” The son of the butcher of Hama would outshine his father adding the names of Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and countless others to his list of butchery. Next was the illusion of a regional solution led

by Turkey. Erdogan may have fancied himself an Ottoman sultan, but Suleiman the Magnificent, he was not. A more appropriate resemblance was with Abdul Hamid II, a ruler of a crumbling state daydreaming of grandiose designs,

There was, of course, the hope of a future democratic Syria, as many brave young Syrians dreamed of, but the Syria of 2011 was a country that had known little but cruelty. “Men are not angels,” Fouad Ajami had written of Libya’s descent into carnage, “these were the hatreds and the wrath that the ruler himself had sown; he had reaped what he had planted.” The sectarian divides had been too large to overcome and the wounds too deep to heal. Then there was the illusion of the Syrian conflict remaining within the country’s borders, but as Charles Hill has written “Syria is the roundabout in which all the forces face one another and spin off consequences, for good or ill, around the compass.” What happens in Syria can never remain just in Syria, as the Iraqis soon discovered. We turn to Ajami again; “If the Sunni Arabs had lost Baghdad to the Shia, there was suddenly within grasp the prospect of restoring Damascus.”

Most painful was the illusion of a world consciousness that would be moved by atrocities and a U.S. President who had drawn a red line. Obama, a man who “has made a fetish of caution,” as Ajami described him, had little interest or sympathy for the children of the Levant. An accommodation with Iran would be signed in Vienna with the blood of Syrians.

A year ago, President Trump came into office riding a wave of discontent, not just of economic frustrations, but also disillusionment with America's adventure in the Middle East. Long gone were the days of enthusiasm for the fall of Saddam's statue. Candidate Trump had made his skepticism of nation building in the Middle East known, and his skepticism was warranted. America had visited the region once already, and had no appetite for another try. In between Bush's adventure and Obama's inaction, the administration has chosen a middle course: bombing Assad for his use of chemical weapons, allowing the Pentagon to send more troops and to keep them there, and drawing a red line east of the Euphrates, as the Russians soon discovered; but troop levels and firepower is no political strategy, let alone a political solution and settlement.

If America has lost its excitement for adventure, and Obama's abandonment has been exposed for its hollowness, neither are the current measures equipped to achieve a much better result. The Islamic State may be defeated for now, but a fire smolders under the ashes. Assad continues his savagery aided by Russian airpower and Iranian militias. Israel's security is threatened by an expanding Iranian presence, and Turkey is unhappy with the U.S. assistance to Syria's Kurds. Besides half a million killed, there are more than five million refugees with not only no prospect of returning home, but with others soon to follow as enclave after city falls to Assad's bombardment. Confusion reigns supreme. The U.S. is an ally of the Kurds east of the Euphrates, but abandons them west of the river; it will neither accept an Assad victory nor is it interested in his defeat.

At the center of the U.S. failure to develop a coherent strategy towards Syria lay two illusions that continue to shape the administration's approach to the conflict. The first illusion is that there remains and should remain a country named Syria. Writing of Sykes Picot, Ajami had warned that "it is rarely a good idea to draw maps in a hurry," but equally problematic is accepting those same maps as set in stone. Even if Assad were to manage to defeat the various militias fighting him, rebuilding Syria as a functional state is beyond his abilities, let alone within his interests. Neither will the Sunni majority accept him, nor does he want a Syria with an overwhelming Sunni majority. "The bonds between them and their rulers," as Ajami warned, "have been severed." Too much blood has been spilled and the wound will not heal. More likely is an Assad strategy of emptying the country of as many Sunnis as possible and achieving a more balanced demographic balance, even if this means giving up some territory on the periphery of his core territory.

A more problematic illusion is that of an Assad regime fighting militias. While the United States has removed its Ambassador from Syria, it has technically remained committed to a mindset that views Assad and his cronies as a regime, albeit a brutal one. The reality is starkly different. There is today no Syrian regime. There are instead various militias fighting each other, and Assad is merely the leader, if we can even call him that as the Russians humiliation of him during Putin's December 2017 visit exposed.

Abandoning these two remaining illusions would allow the United States to think clearly about what its goals in Syria should be. While the U.S. cannot completely end the Syrian civil war, curtailing the level of destruction and bloodshed remains an objective, not merely on humanitarian grounds, but also on strategic grounds, as the prolonged violence will continue to attract foreign intervention and have a spillover effect on neighboring countries destabilizing them further. While a military confrontation with Russia is to be avoided, a Russian victory has to be denied. A Putin victory in Syria would embolden him further in expanding his influence in the Middle East, undermining U.S. interests and sending a clear message that he is the new sheriff in the region.

And while stopping Iranian involvement in the Levant is a long term project, checking Iranian moves and containing those remains within immediate U.S. interests. Most important in this regard is reinforcing the Israeli red line in the southern part of Syria, ensuring that no Iranian expansion takes place in the area. Instead of hoping for a permanent solution to the Syrian civil war, the U.S. should aim for an equilibrium in Syria. The United States is incapable of stopping Syrians and their neighbors from killing each other, but it can surely remove their ability to inflict so much death and increase their costs of doing so.

How to go about achieving these goals? As things stand, there is no reason for Assad and his masters to compromise. From the Russian and Iranian perspective, they are winning. With the current cards in their favor, what is needed is a reshuffling of the deck to force the parties to come to an agreement. As long as Bashar Al Assad remains in the picture, there is little reason to believe a settlement of sorts is possible. As such, the U.S. should explore ways to offer a combination of carrots and sticks to Alawites and other supporters of Assad, assuring them that no massacre would take place if Assad is removed, while also inflicting damage to the Assad militia's power. The goal should be to convince enough supporters of Assad that there is no path forward for victory in Syria and that an accommodation, without Assad, is both possible and desirable for their long term interests. Assad has no

place in the future of Syria, and a settlement of scores with the man responsible for the deaths of countless American soldiers in Iraq is long overdue.

What of the Syrians longing for a better future? The world is a cruel place. In 2011, a path forward for them could have been devised, a path that would have avoided countless deaths and destruction, but we are not in 2011. For these inhabitants of the land once known as Syria, I have little to offer, beyond returning to another line from Shawqi's poem "Children of Syria, leave behind your wishes ... Forget your dreams, just forget them!"



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# SIX COMPONENTS OF A SYRIA STRATEGY

by Karim Sadjadpour and Emile Hokayem

US policy toward Syria has been debilitated by an irresolvable conundrum. Empirical research suggests most civil wars are concluded by military victories, not political settlements. Yet in the war between the murderous regime of Bashar Assad—backed by Russia and Iran—and fractured Islamist rebels, the United States does not want either side to prevail. This ambivalence, while understandable, has produced the worst of all worlds: Assad remains in power; Iran and Russia are emboldened; extremism has flourished; half a million Syrians have been killed; twelve million Syrians have fled their homes; and there is no end in sight.

While the United States has led the fight against ISIS, in the broader Syrian context it has been a secondary player reacting to adversaries who ignored the mantra that “there is no military solution in Syria.” As the fight against the Islamic State reaches its denouement, the Assad regime’s ongoing siege and massacre of over 20,000 civilians in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib are a reminder that the broader strategic context continues to loom. Yet in lieu of a Syria grand strategy that fits on a bumper sticker but lacks viability—i.e. “Defeat Assad” or “Let Assad Win”—the US must navigate multiple objectives concurrently, including the following:

- Recognize the Geopolitical Significance of Syria’s Humanitarian Tragedy

Any discussion of US strategy toward Syria must first begin with the horrific statistics: Among the 500,000

Syrians that have been killed, nearly 250,000 have been civilians, including over 27,000 children and 25,000 women. The displacement of 12 million Syrians—half externally—has fueled the greatest refugee crisis since WWII. More than 13,000 Syrians have been tortured to death, and thousands more have been killed by the Assad regime’s chemical weapons. In addition to the humanitarian urgency of helping Syria’s suffering masses, the radicalism and refugee crisis fueled by Syria’s devastation has imperiled the politics and security of key US allies in Europe and elsewhere.

Though politicians and analysts increasingly use apolitical language—“both sides are to blame”—to describe the Syrian tragedy, the primary role of Assad and his sponsors in ongoing massacres must be acknowledged. Assad’s breach of the Geneva Protocol and other norms of war—including the deliberate targeting of civilians, mass population transfers (less charitably called “ethnic cleansing”), the use of rape and sexual violence as a tool of repression, and the regular use of chemical weapons—will have a lasting and adverse impact on future conflicts.

- Finish Defeating ISIS and Prevent Its Return

While the defeat of the Islamic State’s Caliphate will not eradicate jihadism nor ISIS loyalists—many of whom will go underground to fight another day—it will strike a psychological blow to Islamist extremists the same way the collapse and proven failure of the USSR punctured the illusions of international communist supporters. It is

critical, however, that victory not be declared prematurely, and that lands recaptured from ISIS are protected, secured, and replaced with decent governance. As Steve Coll illustrates in his important book *Directorate S*, the US government's failure to secure the post-Taliban peace in Afghanistan—due in part to highly corrupt and incompetent Afghan governance—provided fertile ground for the Taliban's reemergence.

- Counter and Expose Tehran's Destructive Regional Policies

The 2015 Iranian nuclear deal—known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA—proved that pressure and engagement are often complementary tools of diplomacy. Although Barack Obama was keen to pursue a nuclear deal with Iran from the outset of his presidency, Tehran did not begin to seriously negotiate until several years later, when it faced a global economic embargo. Following the nuclear deal, the Obama administration used only half of this formula—engagement—to persuade Iran to reconsider its support for regional militias and clients, such as Assad. The results are self-evident: Tehran's network of Shia proxies has expanded in size and reach, serving to project Iranian power, while affording it plausible deniability.

Given nearly 100 percent of Iranian trade is with countries other than the United States, Washington must work closely with Tehran's largest economic and strategic partners—including China, Europe, Japan, India, and South Korea—to compel and coerce Iran to cease abetting murderous allies such as Assad. Persuading U.S. allies to do more to counter Iran's destructive regional policies will require continued US adherence to the JCPOA—a worthy trade-off. Washington should simultaneously continue to expose the high costs of Iran's regional policies—such as an estimated \$700m annual support to Hezbollah—at a time of growing economic and political discontent in Iran. “Leave Syria alone, think about us” was among the numerous slogans chanted during Iran's anti-government protests in December 2017/January 2018, a palpable sign that Tehran's regional adventurism has become a source of internal resentment.

- Protect and Support America's Kurdish Allies

The military defeat of ISIS would not have been possible without the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party or PYD—despite its moniker, an authoritarian party with a narrow base—and the Arab groups that coalesced around it. While these groups are prominent partners in helping to achieve Washington's articulated objectives in Syria,

danger is looming. Assad sees the PYD as the last obstacle to his plans to reconquer eastern Syria; Russia views it as a US lackey; and both Iran and Turkey oppose PYD ambitions, fearful that growing Kurdish autonomy in Syria would resonate among their own disenfranchised Kurdish communities. The Kurds themselves realize that Washington is an uncertain ally, and have begun hedging, by keeping open lines to both the Assad regime and Moscow.

Washington should recognize the limits of the PYD's appeal and encourage it to allow greater political participation by other Kurdish parties and Arab factions in the governance of their territory. Importantly, the US should clarify to the PYD that its financial and material support is contingent on not cooperating with the Assad regime beyond movement of goods and people, distancing itself with militant Kurdish parties in Turkey (such as the PKK), and on reaching US-mediated security arrangements with Ankara.

- Manage Turkish Anxieties in order to Limit Turkish Intervention

It is increasingly hard to tell that Turkey is a U.S. ally, and the feeling is mutual in Ankara. Aside from the troubling authoritarianism of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey regularly attacks America's Kurdish allies in Syria, flirts with Russia, and threatens the EU over refugee flows. From Ankara's perspective, it has paid the price for Washington's strategic incoherence on Syria, including over 2.5 million Syrian refugees (the highest number in the world) and numerous jihadist attacks, including at the Istanbul airport. However problematic Turkey's internal and external behavior, however, it is better managed as a NATO member than as an aggrieved power untethered from Western (and democratic) institutions. Its flirtation with Russia reflects realpolitik—balancing and securing its interests in Syria—rather than a strategic shift. Turkey's January 2018 military intervention in the northern Syrian region of Afrin should compel the US and EU to try to foster a modus vivendi between Ankara and Syria's Kurdish factions.

- Compel Russia to Phase Out Assad

The US should seek to exacerbate, not ease, Russia's political and economic dilemmas in Syria. Given that Assad's survival is dependent on foreign forces rather than on domestic support, Russia will be forced to mobilize resources continuously to keep him afloat. Yet the more Assad feels secure thanks to Russian help, the

less inclined he is to make even the smallest concessions encouraged by Moscow.

Moscow wants Western donors to subsidize Syria's reconstruction, and it also seeks an international imprimatur for a political settlement on its and Assad's terms. The US and its allies should deny these benefits to Moscow, and elevate the costs for Russia of propping up Assad. The US could make it hard and costly for Assad to attract foreign investments by imposing sanctions on companies seeking opportunities there, especially Iranian and Russian companies seeking war booty. In parallel, the US should be prepared to offer a diplomatic opening to Russia that makes US flexibility conditional on phasing out Assad.

Achieving these objectives requires discipline, commitment, and leadership, all of which are lacking in a Trump White House marred by daily internal crises. Nonetheless, the US cannot ignore nor extricate itself

from Syria without durably harming its regional interests and the post-WWII liberal order it helped create.



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# THE SYRIAN REBELLION AND ITS INTERNATIONAL RESONANCE

by Russell A. Berman

With all the optimism of the Arab Spring, the Syrian rebellion began with the belief that the people of Syria deserve better than the cruelty meted out by Assad family rule. That aspiration alone ought to be sufficient grounds to stand with the democratic forces pursuing self-determination. Yet the United States has been hesitating, a legacy of the Obama administration's preference for tyranny in Tehran over freedom in Damascus. We should reject that sort of cynicism: not only because it is wrong to abandon the rebels pursuing a noble cause, but also because of the moral corruption we ourselves face when we dismiss even the possibility of genuine principles and bona fide ideals.

Yet one can approach Syria differently, for there is also reason aplenty to recoil on humanitarian grounds at the brute violence that Assad, backed by Tehran and Moscow, is heaping on beleaguered civilian populations. If our Zeitgeist precludes embracing the idealistic "democracy agenda" of the Bush administration, we might instead evaluate Syria in terms of basic human charity and a "responsibility to protect." The leveling of Aleppo and the onslaught on East Ghouta have elicited outcries around the world. In the long history of wars in the region, there is no comparable campaign of brutality against civilians on this scale. Pundits who shamefully equate Assad's campaign against the population with the American war on ISIS are transparent apologists for the dictator.

The Assad axis has never been fighting ISIS. Instead, it

uses the pretext of Sunni rebels, Islamist or not, real or imagined, to barrel bomb civilians in order to continue what has been, from the start, an intentional campaign of ethnic cleansing. The Alawite minority regime is still trying to eliminate or at least reduce Syria's Sunni majority (and the consequence of this programmatic depopulation is the "refugee crisis" in Europe). Hence the carnage in the Damascus suburb. On the long list of casualties in this devastation, one must now include the United Nations Security Council whose call for a cease fire proved to be absolutely inconsequential: what better symbol for the demise of that institution and the rule of law in international affairs.

One might prefer to make an argument based either on political principles, supporting the democratic rebellion, or alternatively on human empathy with the victims of the regime's violence. However, while we should not lose sight of such values, current political debate appears to have left them behind for more so-called realistic concerns. Yet even in narrowly realist terms, the United States has much at stake in winning the Syrian War. To describe these stakes means arguing in terms of American interests rather than the good of the Syrian people, which is necessarily troubling from an ethical point of view.

However, instrumentalizing Syria is hardly new. Perhaps it is the geographical destiny of a territory with the misfortune of a location between a Persian Empire, old or



new, to the East, and the Mediterranean world to the West. Syria's geopolitics are as uncomfortable as that of Poland, trapped between Germany and Russia. The most recent instance of this geographical destiny involved the Obama administration, whose reluctance to uphold international law in Syria followed from its absolute priority, a deal—any deal, or any terms—with Iran. The administration long knew of Assad's use of chemical weapons, but chose to do nothing. Not until the evidence could no longer be concealed did it respond to the killing, and then it would not even defend its own red line, for fear of antagonizing its wily interlocutors in Iran. Nor was it only Washington that behaved deplorably: The Europeans, supporters of the nuclear deal, were delighted to overlook the crimes in Syria, bedazzled as they were by the prospect of commercial opportunities in Iran. How else can one explain their reluctance to raise human rights concerns there, while they do so with such moralism elsewhere? For the West, Syria was only a means to an end, the pot of gold imagined in the Eldorado named Tehran.

It was that deal-making that transformed Syria from one more chance for an Arab Spring—full of hope, perhaps naïve at times, but certainly deserving of at least moral support and solidarity—into a tool for other powers to pursue their competing goals. This is how the Syrian Rebellion, an indigenous uprising against a dictator, has been replaced by a confrontation among outside actors, testing, probing, and challenging each other. A historical comparison (with all the limits of any such comparison) would be the Spanish Civil War where, on the terrain of a local conflict, the great powers of the era tested each other's mettle. That Spain was a gateway to a much larger war is not necessarily predictive here, but the example shows how much might be at stake, and why the US has an interest in its outcome. As the threat of ISIS subsides, Washington has to recognize that it is effectively engaged in a barely camouflaged war with Iran and Russia, and American strategy has to factor that international aspect into its calculations. The transition in the State Department may lead to clarity on this matter.

Iran: Since the Revolution of 1979, Iran has made hostility to the United States the cornerstone of its foreign policy. It is determined to drive the US out of the Middle East. Without anti-Americanism, the mullahs would have nothing to say. Despite handing Iran a sweetheart deal, the Obama administration failed to elicit any moderation from Tehran. The belief that there is anyone in the Iranian political class open to a reversal of its definitive hostility to the US has been exposed as a delusion. For Iran, Syria is vital as a pathway to the sea, via Lebanon which has

already fallen under Iranian domination through Hizbollah. Iranian access to the Mediterranean means the availability of shipping routes and therefore a significant advantage in minimizing the impact of American sanctions and evading some future blockade. Access to Lebanon also obviously brings Iranian military power closer to the border of US ally Israel, which Iran has promised to destroy. While the Israelis are certain to be able to take care of their own defense, the US has a significant interest in blocking the Iranian land route through the Euphrates Valley while also working to pry Lebanon free from the Iranian stranglehold.

Russia: Egypt expelled its erstwhile Russian allies in 1972, and Moscow's presence in the Middle East waned for decades. The Obama policies, including the promise to withdraw from the region, ushered in Moscow's return, as it rushed to the aid of the beleaguered Assad dictatorship. As a result, Syria has become terrain for a potentially direct confrontation between Russia and the United States, and not only for a competition between their proxies. In the fighting at Deir Ezzor in early February, between forces supporting Assad and their American-backed opponents, American airstrikes resulted in a significant number of casualties, including Russians, probably mercenaries. There are accounts that the US deployed its advanced F-22 stealth fighters in that battle. Two weeks later, on February 24, Russia reportedly brought in its Sukhoi-57, its own fifth-generation aircraft, equal to or potentially superior to the F-22. No better evidence is needed for the claim that Syria has become a showdown between Washington and Moscow. Washington has a vested interest in winning.

Without Iran and Russia, Assad would have lost long ago. By propping him up, they have also been pursuing their own hegemonic ambitions: Iran's route to the Mediterranean and Russia's return to the Middle East. If the US were to walk away from this conflict, it would be interpreted as a rout, an indication of declining American power with deleterious ramifications for our credibility around the world.

Yet one should not lose sight of the fact that the US has a much stronger hand than either of these opponents, with their fragile economies and, in the case of Iran at least, a very restive population. The more the US can raise the cost of the war for Moscow and Tehran, the more it can undermine their respective dictators. A visible blow to Russian forces—growing casualties or loss of aircraft—would weaken Putin's hand at home. Simply bogging the Iranians down into a more costly war would drain resources away from domestic spending, especially if coupled with tightened sanctions. Russia and Iran entered

Syria of their own accord, but they thereby made themselves vulnerable. The US can exploit this vulnerability, damaging its adversaries in Syria and, in turn, weakening them at home. Any blow against Assad degrades his defenders in ways that will echo in their distant capitals. Putin and the mullahs came to support Assad, but now undermining Assad can weaken Putin and the mullahs. While a realist American agenda should include ending the Assad regime in order to damage its patrons, it would simultaneously achieve the goal of the original rebellion, a Syria that provides for dignified lives for all its people.

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# THE CARAVAN

The Caravan is envisaged as a periodic symposium on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. It will be a free and candid exchange of opinions. We shall not lack for topics of debate, for that arc of geography has contentions aplenty. It is our intention to come back with urgent topics that engage us. Caravans are full of life and animated companionship. Hence the name we chose for this endeavor.

We will draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman and Charlie Hill co-chair the project from which this effort originates.

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The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world.

Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.



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