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'Uncoordinated Deconfliction' in Syria: A Recipe to Contain, Not Defeat, ISIS

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If Washington continues to bomb ISIS while sidestepping the question of Assad's future, Syria may wind up partitioned between jihadist and Iranian-backed forces.

Washington's nascent policy of "uncoordinated deconfliction" with Bashar al-Assad's regime in the fight against the "Islamic State"/ISIS may not be a formal alliance, but it does have the potential to foster serious problems. The regime's tacit agreement to avoid firing on coalition strike aircraft -- juxtaposed with long delays in the Obama administration's train-and-equip program for the Syrian opposition and the president's October 2014 letter to Iran's Supreme Leader on cooperation against ISIS -- is creating widespread perceptions that the United States is heading into a de facto alliance with Assad and Tehran regarding the jihadists. If Washington continues this policy as is, it will merely contain ISIS, not "defeat" or "destroy" the group as called for by President Obama. Worse, it could lead to a deadly extremist stalemate in Syria between Iranian-backed/Hezbollah forces and jihadists, amplifying threats to U.S. national security interests.

THE ADVENT OF UNCOORDINATED DECONFLICTION

Following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the United States discarded its policy of "constructive engagement" with the regime and called on Assad to "step aside." Yet as the conflict progressed and President Obama decided not to decisively arm the rebels or enforce his "redline" on regime chemical attacks, jihadists such as ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra quickly filled opposition-controlled areas of Syria, providing strategic depth for offensives back into Iraq. The dramatic ISIS campaign against Mosul, the collapse of the U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces, and the execution of U.S. hostages led President Obama to call for the group's destruction. To reach this goal, the U.S.-led coalition launched a two-pronged approach: a bombing campaign and the arming of selected anti-ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria.

To carry out the first part of the strategy, Washington orchestrated a policy via Baghdad that one unnamed U.S. official referred to in a December 1 *Washington Post* story as "uncoordinated deconfliction." Last September, right before U.S. airstrikes expanded into Syria, Iraq's Shiite-led, Iranian-allied government sent National Security Advisor Faleh al-Fayyad to see Assad. While the meeting's exact details were not made public, the understanding forged was clear -- since then, over 900 coalition sorties have flown over Syria without regime forces firing a shot at them.

The second part of the strategy involves arming substate actors, most notably the Peshmerga in Iraq and Syria's moderate opposition. U.S. assistance to the Peshmerga is carried out with the permission of the Iraqi government, but the situation is much more complicated in Syria, where the opposition must be trained and equipped without the consent of the "legal" host government. This is something the U.S. military does not like to do but has pulled off in the past, as seen with the Peshmerga during Operation Northern Watch in the 1990s. A complicating factor is that Syrian rebels have shown less political cohesion than their Kurdish counterparts, raising the question of what entity a U.S.-trained force would report to.

While implementing the strategy has worked thus far in Iraq, its two prongs have been at cross-purposes in Syria. When striking ISIS targets, U.S. forces prefer to fly over Syrian territory without the Assad regime shooting at them. In order to truly defeat ISIS, however, the United States and its allies need to train and equip an opposition force to take over Sunni-dominated areas now controlled by ISIS, much to Assad's chagrin.

Unfortunately the optics of the first part of the strategy have seriously hindered the second. When U.S. bombing raids targeting ISIS unexpectedly expanded in September to include Jabhat al-Nusra in western Idlib province, the latter turned on the Western-backed Free Syrian Army groups in their area, dramatically overrunning the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazm. The decimated groups had been armed with U.S. TOW missiles and were therefore widely reported to be part of the American covert support program. While some of these forces have since regrouped, the U.S. bombing campaign -- combined with President Obama's November statements that Washington was not actively discussing ways to remove Assad -- has nearly collapsed the long-fraying rebel support for the United States. Meanwhile, the jihadist vs. Assad fight has been escalating.

A RECIPE FOR PARTITION AND CONTINUED CHAOS

Flipping back to support the Assad regime against ISIS will not solve Washington's problems, however. Beyond the terrible optics of assisting a president who has used chemical weapons and Scud missiles against his own people, the Assad regime is financially and militarily crippled and therefore unable to retake and hold areas currently controlled by ISIS. Its capture of territory over the past year has been the product of controversial "ceasefires" essentially imposed on besieged populations, as well as military operations carried out by Iranian-trained, Alawite-dominated irregulars from the National Defense Forces as much as army regulars. This means that whatever areas the regime attempts to retake in the coming months will see an influx of increasingly minority-dominated, Iranian-directed forces. In short, Bashar's comeback is not a legitimate ruler returning order to his country, but substantially a product of Iran's foreign legion of substate actors. This fight -- part of Tehran's effort to radically transform the Fertile Crescent -- is something that the region's Sunni powers will continue to oppose, most notably Turkey and the Gulf Arab countries.

Iran's deep and direct involvement in Assad's attempt to shoot his way out of the Syria crisis has implicated Tehran in the mass slaughter of Sunnis and set off a sectarian war that has engulfed Iraq and threatens to spread beyond. Iran's Syria campaign would make more sense if sectarian demographics were not so firmly against it. Syria is 75 percent Sunni Arab, roughly the same percentage as the overall Middle East minus Iran. And the rural areas that ISIS dominates in Syria and Iraq are upwards of 95 percent Sunni Arab. Such figures indicate that Iran will not be able to shoot Sunnis into submission; rather, it could end up in a grinding conflict that many have already described as "Iran's Vietnam."

FOUR STEPS TO A SUSTAINABLE ENDGAME IN SYRIA

Although this trend is unlikely to produce a "regime victory," it could spur Assad and his Iranian sponsors to focus on their parts of lesser Syria and commit to a de facto nonaggression pact with the jihadists. This might help avoid Iran's Vietnam scenario, but it would lead to the worst of both worlds for the United States and its allies: Assad and ISIS both holding on, perhaps permanently. To avoid this scenario and better pursue U.S. security interests in Syria, Washington should adopt the following approach:

1. Accept that Syria will be a divided, failed state as long as Assad is permitted to remain in power -- something akin to Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, when the regime's policies cost it control over the Kurdish north. Unlike that scenario, however, Assad's continued presence would be a powerful magnet for jihadists and a major driver of Sunni-Shiite tension.
2. Do not lessen the pressure on Assad. Instead of allowing the regime's strength to grow, Washington should weaken both Assad and ISIS by encouraging the fight between them, weakening Iran's foreign legions and the jihadists at the same time. Assad often brags about fighting terrorism, so the United States should let him do it on his own dime, hanging responsibility for ISIS around his neck and weakening him and Iran's forces in the process. Key issues for Washington to consider include when to ramp up or scale back airstrikes against not only ISIS, but also regime forces -- especially if Assad follows through with the threat he issued on January 20, when he told *Foreign Affairs* that the regime would attack any U.S.-trained moderate forces entering Syria. Only then would Damascus and Tehran be pressured to make substantial concessions.
3. Focus on helping the moderate opposition consolidate their lines of control against the jihadists and regime alike, in addition to sharply increasing humanitarian assistance for displaced persons and efforts to protect civilians. The United States cannot organize and regiment the entire opposition, but it can back any faction that retakes areas from ISIS. The only way to motivate the rebels to do so is to openly support their justified stance against Assad remaining in power.
4. Develop a strategy to remove Assad via diplomacy, information messaging, and military/economic power. The longer he is in place, the longer Syria will be divided. Once Assad goes, it will be possible to put the pieces of Syria back together again.

Andrew Tabler is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics. His publications include ["Syria's Collapse and How Washington Can Stop It"](#) (Foreign Affairs, July-August 2013) and the 2011 book [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](#).

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