

A Plan for Syria

The United States must think outside the box.

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In recent years Pentagon contingency planners have imported, from social science, the concept of the “wicked” problem—that theoretical future security crisis that defies solution. Today that future security crisis is here, and its name is Syria. How important is the eventual denouement of this catastrophic civil war? Apparently, important enough to draw major security responses

from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Qatar, Shiite Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and Sunni militant Islamists from across the Arab world.

Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan face major humanitarian relief burdens for displaced Syrian civilians, fleeing at a rate of more than five thousand per day. Iraq’s tenuous internal cohesion is being stressed by the sectarian breakup next door. France and Britain are exerting what leverage they can in domains they once controlled. Israel—after decades of fending off conventional and nuclear dangers from the regimes of Hafez al Assad and his son Bashar—now must contemplate a future northern neighbor in which Hezbollah may be further strengthened, a vengeful Sunni Muslim Brotherhood could vie for power long denied by the Alawite regime, and even jihadist Jabhat Al Nusra fighters from across the Arab world will seek a new operational base.

For the United States, Syria has long held strategic importance. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, President Nixon escalated the nuclear-alert level to DEFCON 3 to deter Moscow from sending Soviet troops to bolster Syrian forces fighting against Israel; Moscow was deterred. During President Reagan's intervention of U.S. Marines along with French, Italian and British forces seeking to stabilize Beirut after Israel's 1982 incursion against the PLO, Syria served as a staging ground for young Iranian fighters sent into Lebanon's Bekaa Valley to arm and train Shiite Lebanese members of the new militant Hezbollah organization, which then launched catastrophic truck-bombing attacks on U.S. diplomats and Marines in Lebanon. Kissinger's famous dictum, "No war without Egypt, no peace without Syria," is surely no less true now that Syria is engulfed in sectarian conflict.

American Ambivalence

The Obama administration, however, appears unconvinced of the impact Syria's crisis could have on future U.S. security interests. Obama has long been critical of the way President George W. Bush engaged forces in long and costly interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11, and no longer refers to a Global War on Terrorism. Today, as the death toll surpasses one hundred thousand and militant jihadists flock into Syria, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warns that any U.S. military mission beyond humanitarian assistance, provision of 'non-lethal' support and positioning of limited defensive assets with neighboring allies could require hundreds of combat platforms, thousands of troops and billions of dollars.

Obama administration spokespersons cite humanitarian aid to refugees in Turkish and Jordanian camps and 'non-lethal' assistance to opposition forces as evidence that the United States is seriously engaged in dealing with this crisis. Beyond the halls of government in Washington, however, the perception is quite the opposite. Clearly, the United States is expected to do more.

Two years ago, on August 18, 2011, President Obama said, "[T]he time has come for President Assad to step aside." Yet many observers believe Assad's position has only solidified, not weakened, in the interim. One year ago, on August 20, 2012, President Obama declared, "[A] red line for us is...chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus." Yet no such change seems to have followed the revelation on June 13, 2013 by Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes that the U.S. intelligence community, with "high confidence," assesses that "[T]he Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including sarin...against the opposition multiple times in the last year."

Rhodes' briefing was followed by word that President Obama intended to provide military aid to the opposition forces in Syria, yet to date there has been none. The opposition-force leader, Major General Salim Idriss, reportedly has all but given up on the U.S. pledge of military aid. Saudi Arabia's head of intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, reportedly proposed to Russian president Vladimir Putin on July 31 that Russia end its arms supply to Syria in return for which Saudi Arabia would buy \$15 billion in weapons from Moscow and encourage a bigger Russian role in the Middle East since, in the words of a diplomatic source, the United States is "disengaging from the region."

Writes David Ignatius, "The military situation in Syria is slipping away as the President ponders." New Zealand scholar and historian William Harris laments "the immensity of death, flight and destruction in Syria" perpetrated by the Assad regime, which "has become the crime of the 21st century." CIA deputy Michael Morell, concluding a 33-year agency career, rated the situation in Syria ahead of Al Qaeda and Iran's nuclear program as the number one threat to U.S. security interests in the world.

Too hard for Washington?

Some will say, not without justification, that President Obama's reticence reflects the hope of keeping new foreign entanglements from complicating his second-term agenda. Others will say, in so many words, that the Syria situation is just too hard, and nothing the United States does can ensure an end to the killing, destruction and displacement, or guarantee a more moderate and democratic Syrian leadership in the aftermath.

The U.S. national security bureaucracy has, over the past seventy years, responded many different ways to circumstances assessed to be the number one security threat to our national interest. Doing virtually nothing because the problem is 'too hard' would, however, represent a novel foreign policy posture for the country long defined by its aspiration to remain the accepted leader of the free world.

Syria is indeed a wicked problem, and the President does have other priorities. But leaders in Tehran, Riyadh, Ankara, Doha, Amman and Moscow among others have obviously determined that their future interests require concerted efforts to influence the outcome in Syria, if only to stave off the worst contingencies. In the belief that no outcome is foreordained in Syria, that the Assad regime's use of military force against the population must not pass with impunity, and that American adversaries Iran and Hezbollah could be severely weakened while the security of Jordan, Turkey and Israel is reinforced—or the opposite, depending on what happens from here on—the United States is obliged to exert superpower influence on this crisis.

For many years now, Pentagon doctrinal documents such as the Quadrennial Defense Review, the National Defense Strategy, the National Military Strategy and others, have made reference to national-level efforts and whole-of-government responses. Yet, these concepts live on only in Powerpoint slide decks. In today's crisis-response playbook, the pages in between symbolic sanctions and verbal hand-wringing on one end, and introduction of military forces on the other, are sparse. The talk about 'whole-of-government' within DoD in particular has never been answered by the establishment of credible non-military capability within other departments and agencies that can exert leverage overseas, with or without military force, on a scale remotely comparable to a Pentagon operation. Even General Dempsey, in clarifying his position on a U.S. response to the Syria crisis, said, "I'm not suggesting that the international community do nothing. I am suggesting that you need a strategy to tie military options with other instruments of power."

Here is how it might be done.

A Transformed American Response to the Syria Crisis

The following represents a different kind of U.S. response to the Syria crisis, with three defining features: first, there are no U.S. military "boots on the ground" or pilots over Syrian airspace; second, many if not all of the elements deviate from the way Washington now operates; and third, incumbent practitioners in the concerned agencies would be expected to resist and dismiss as unrealistic most if not all aspects of such a reimagined American campaign. The change depicted here is, therefore, as much cultural as organizational.

STRATEGY—There must be unity of effort. This begins with a single leader, in command of the effort, whose mandate comes from the Principals Committee, to which he/she answers. The concept of command is not strong outside DoD, yet this commander should almost certainly be a civilian, preferably with expertise on Syria, perhaps Arabic language capability, professional knowledge of military and intelligence operations, and high-level diplomatic and negotiating experience. (Lest the reader consider this description a fantasy persona, it is not.) Task-force members and staff are hand-selected and seconded from various organizations, e.g., State, CIA, DIA, OSD, SOCOM, CENTCOM, funded by their parent organizations but answering to the commander.

All lines of effort among U.S. agencies, and preferably those of cooperating allies as well, are tailored in support of clear policy goals:

A) Assad and circle removed from power;

- B) Political process aimed at stabilizing conflict and protecting all communities' interests;
- C) Impose maximum political/reputational costs on Iran, Hezbollah, and Sunni extremists, and seek to deny them influence in post-Assad Syria;
- D) Maintain constant attention to security equities of Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Iraq;
- E) Seek maximum coordination, unity and mandate between the United States and like-minded countries for their mutual efforts toward these ends.

MANDATE—Given Russian and Chinese resistance, there will be no UN Security Council mandate for action. That should not stop Washington and allies from receiving a mandate to legitimate their intervention in Syria. The United States should lead an effort to draft such a mandate defining the terms and principles of an acceptable end state, and then pursue a "Resolution of the Willing." The task force should dispatch a team of diplomats to work with Jordan to request help from the Arab League, and lobby Arab League member states to support a resolution authorizing action in Syria and requesting help from NATO. Turkey should be encouraged to ask NATO for assistance, and NATO member states should be urged to authorize alliance support to the effort.

MILITARY INITIATIVES—The United States should arm the organized Syrian resistance, taking a calculated risk that foreign jihadists will find no lasting place in post-conflict Syria. Steps such as these should define the effort:

- A) As with efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan to train and equip new security forces, small arms should be sourced from countries other than the United States, but this time using measures the USG has applied elsewhere consistent with our international leadership in arms export controls and fighting illicit arms trafficking: using marking and tracing technology, embedding each weapon with microdot identification of the individual recipient and his city/village of residence in Syria. Each resistance fighter will be told that there will be a reward in the future for turning the weapon back in if requested by the authorities—perhaps food, medical attention for a family member, or a visa.
- B) The United States should not provide, and should discourage other countries from providing, shoulder-fired missiles (MANPADS) to the Syrian resistance. The costs of tracking these weapons later to prevent their falling into terrorists' hands exceeds their tactical value. Military experts will need to think of other means of combating regime air attacks against the resistance. Crew-served weapons, including antitank, antiaircraft and counter-rocket, -artillery and -mortar systems, should

be provided along with training in secure areas of Syria or in Jordan or Turkey. To curb risks still further, these weapons could be embedded with tracking and remote-disabling features.

C) U.S. defense and intelligence agencies should embark on an aggressive "skunkworks"-style R&D initiative to configure remotely-piloted aircraft (RPAs) for kinetic missions beyond ground attack. Syria is the right place to develop, validate and employ RPAs launching air-to-air munitions and otherwise substituting for piloted attack aircraft operating in contested airspace. As with previous breakthroughs, a combination of innovative engineering and tactics, pursued with urgency, will be needed to prove the skeptics wrong.

D) The need will still exist for significant precision strikes against regime targets. DoD should develop standoff quick-strike packages for tactical purposes, mainly for well-timed psychological support of 'coalition' demands. Objectives may include hitting specific runways, regime weapons depots, aircraft on the ground, or infrastructure seen as important to the Alawite communities of northwestern Syria. A successful use of coercive military power will minimize destruction of Syrian assets and infrastructure important to its future recovery. Far preferable to leverage surprise and create shock and uncertainty within the regime and the Alawite community. Iran's aerial resupply nodes and Hezbollah's movements of troops and weapons within Syria (but not Russian vessels) should be approved for possible targeting as part of the operation.

INTELLIGENCE INITIATIVES—Undoubtedly the intelligence community already has some of these efforts underway:

A) Collection priorities:

- Identities of top security, political and economic individuals in the Assad regime
- Locations of the Syrian Army's key bases, infrastructure, and operations
- Locations of Iranian fighters and aerial resupply nodes in Syria
- Locations of Hezbollah fighters and weapons in Syria
- Key personalities and locations of the Al-Nusra Front and other extremist elements
- Media footprint and viewership map for Syria, and daily update of key media statements and themes by Assad regime, Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah, Iranian leadership, Al Nusra figures, etc.

B) Special security clearance category for cooperating Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians etc—The Task Force needs to be able to draw from the knowledge of selected Syrian nationals and expats and swear

them into a one-way clearance that gives them no access to any information other than the work they are assigned. There is a risk of leaks; it is an acceptable risk. To be avoided are months-long paperwork delays, tying up USG investigators who can never fully clarify foreign backgrounds. Given the dearth of U.S. government expertise on events on the ground in Syria, this program will provide an additional layer of policy support from people with language fluency, local ties and sources—quickly.

NONMILITARY LEVERS ON THE REGIME—As with military levers, each of these is an arrow in the Task Force Commander's quiver, all for the pursuit of the political ends defined by the mandate.

A) Prepare war crimes prosecutions now—Just as U.S. forces in Iraq circulated a deck of cards identifying top regime figures, the United States and its partners should develop a working list of Syrian key regime officials, with categories of ‘target’, ‘subject’ and ‘witness’ related to personal responsibility for the willful destruction of civilians and the use of chemical weapons. Rather than presuming indictment, this exercise should be an inducement for departure and defection of the civilian and security circle around Assad. People who abandon the regime and help the opposition should do so in expectation of separating themselves from otherwise certain culpability for crimes against humanity. Indeed, this enforcement mechanism for violation of international norms, rather than military action, should have been the administration’s tool of choice in setting the Presidential ‘red line’ on chemical weapons use.

B) Coordinated visa policy—A potential lever that senior diplomats are loath to consider because it can make them personally unpopular among influentials in their countries of assignment is the withholding of visas to relatives and key business partners of the leadership circles in Syria and countries that support it. Many elites in countries hostile to the United States own homes or have children studying or living in the United States and Europe. With a higher degree of resolve and cooperation by the United States and its allies, the influential families behind Bashar al Assad could begin to feel isolated and vulnerable, and put pressure on the regime to find an ‘out’.

C) Assistance ‘escrow’ accounts by U.S. Congress and allied parliaments—When the United States is uncertain but hopeful of an outcome abroad, Congress usually waits for achievement of the outcome before voting for assistance. To the foreign parties being influenced, the message can be a negative one, that their endeavors have produced no U.S. assistance; and when they finally do meet our expectations, the appropriations cycle may have passed for the year. This proposal would create an accounting mechanism by which Congress can appropriate and then set aside multi-year funds as a

gesture of U.S. support, and maintain control of these funds, releasing them to the administration only when it determines that the desired goals have been reached. In Syria, if the United States and allies are acting in support of a post-conflict end state where the rights of women, and religious and ethnic minorities, will be protected, and an electoral system will remain participatory and competitive, such an escrow mechanism could generate a growing pot of money set aside as a future reward for the desired outcome—much like the Millennium Challenge Account. If other donors did the same and coordinated with the United States, this could be a significant tool of influence on the resistance as the end game develops.

D) Major, well-funded information operations effort—Not public diplomacy or strategic communications, this media operation would use local creative talent to produce appealing video, audio and print content for TV, radio and the web. Production and network placement could be funded by Arab allies, and would be unattributed. In today's Middle East, it is a significant liability that the United States can dominate the skies and hold any territory by military force, yet cedes the local media domain entirely to hostile and antidemocratic extremists. As long-time authoritarians Mubarak and Ben Ali learned, viral media exerts a powerful influence on popular attitudes and can be a potent engine of political change. The Task Force should be able to obtain detailed intelligence products depicting the geographic footprint and viewership of all broadcast outlets reaching Syria.

What one U.S. combatant commander used to call 'truth telling with a purpose' would advance, subtly but unmistakably, several key themes in its programming, e.g.:

- The scope of Bashar al Assad's crimes against his own citizens and country;
- the naked reality that Hezbollah, lacking any further pretense of Israeli-occupied Lebanese territory to "resist" (UNSCR 425 having been fulfilled), is now fighting Syrians next door, adding to the destruction of the country and sacrificing the lives of gullible young Lebanese Shiite followers, solely as a tool of Iranian hegemonic ambition;
- the \$6B that Iran is spending to prop up a secular government while Iran's citizenry suffers economically at home; and
- the worthy motives and mandate of the United States and coalition seeking to give Syria's future back to its people and avoid its being destroyed by sectarian conflict.

A special media package could be developed to portray the supply of sophisticated Russian weapons to the Assad regime, generating large revenues for Russia; it would portray the shocking destruction

of Syrian civilian communities using these weapons. Senior Russian officials should be privately confronted with the prospect of a well-funded media campaign saturating Sunni Arab airwaves throughout the Middle East with these images and this message, unless they cease supplying the Assad regime.

TACTICAL LINES OF EFFORT BY THE TASK FORCE AND ALLIES—

A) Defection operation—using positive and negative inducements, finding confidential channels to communicate with and reward major players who cross over to resistance and/or reveal key information.

B) Offer Assad family and close friends a safe exit—a potentially strong signal, with a deadline (e.g., 30-45 days), involving internationally arranged consent to allow these individuals to be transported safely with some financial assets to a willing country, never again to be involved in Syrian affairs. This is the kind of political initiative that could be psychologically supported, even prior to the deadline, by standoff precision strikes in or near the Alawite 'heartland.'

C) End-State planning—Work with Syrian resistance to plan reconstruction and political transition to a multiethnic, rights-based system, and transparent management and stewardship of national critical infrastructure (energy, communications, civil aviation) long controlled by the Assad 'syndicate'.

When a Call to Action Goes Unanswered

Has the world become a harder place for American leaders to exert leverage? The rise of fascism and war in Europe and the Pacific in the 1940s, followed by combat on the Korean peninsula and the rise of a hegemonic, nuclear-armed superpower beginning in the 1950s, did not dissuade American leaders from taking extraordinary measures—non-military as well as military—creating new organizations, tools and policy approaches as needed, to address formidable threats to global peace and stability. The one constant was Washington's steadfast belief, never doubted in the capitals of allies and adversaries alike, that the United States would lead and act in redressing these and other global security threats.

Admittedly, it is hard to conceive of a more 'wicked' problem set for U.S. national-security policy today than the Syria crisis. And yet, the seeming impossibility of forging an agile, speedy, unified and highly potent response to such a crisis from Washington's national security bureaucracy, including Congress—the inability to defy its policy stovepipes, jurisdictional rice bowls, and balky bureaucratic

culture in pursuit of swift, clever, game-changing impacts on such a crisis, all without writing a blank check denominated in American blood and treasure—may be the ‘mother’ of all ‘wicked’ problems for the United States.

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