



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

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

A Testimony by:

**Melissa G. Dalton**

Senior Fellow and Deputy Director,  
International Security Program  
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

**February 14, 2017**

**2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

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

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

### *Why Syria Matters*

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

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

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

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

### *Current Operational Dynamics*

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Fragmented Territorial Control

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Current Diplomatic Efforts*

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

### *Policy Choices*

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

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

---

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

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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

The major policy options are:

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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



### *Recommendations*

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

#### Diplomatic Initiatives

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

#### Economic Measures

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

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

### Military Operations

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

### Intelligence Operations

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

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

#### Legal Measures

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