

## **Beyond Partisan Bickering: Key Questions About U.S. Strategy in Syria**

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The second debate between Republican presidential candidates, recent testimonies by the Administration, testimony to bodies like the Senate Armed Service Committee, and statements by more neutral voices like General John Allen, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, and General Lloyd Austin III, the Commander of USCENTCOM, at first appear to have little in common. In fact, however, they all find ways to ignore the key issues shaping U.S. strategy in Syria.

The Administration ignores the issues by putting a positive spin on a steadily deteriorating situation. Republican candidates and members of Congress ignore them by blaming the Administration for problems that are now beyond its control and by offering half-defined solutions that cannot work. General Allen and General Austin focus on parts of the problem with few public specifics and no clear picture of an overall U.S. strategy and the issues it raises.

So what are the issues that U.S. strategy in Syria should address? They are not the issues covered by the media, nor are they addressed in the questions raised by members of Congress from either party. The most critical issues raise far more serious questions about the options available to the United States with regard to one of the worst civil wars in recent history, and one that will soon enter its fifth year.

### **A War of Four Major Factions, Not a War Against ISIS**

There is something inherently absurd in the different ways in which the Administration and its Republican critics – along with far too many media reports and think tank comments – focus on ISIS or finding some easy and simple political solution to the fighting. The key question is not defeating ISIS or negotiating some exit for Assad or compromise between Assad supporters and outside exile movements that no serious set of fighters in Syria now care about.

ISIS is only one of four major factions shaping the war in Syria. The Assad regime, which has its own divisions and Alawite militias, is one. The Syrian Kurds are a second, and a group of some 26-30 other largely Islamist factions that include the Al Nusra Front, which is still tied to Al Qaida make up the third. All are fighting for their own space and areas of control. None at this point show any signs of becoming strong enough to achieve the objective of taking over all of Syria, being able to govern, or being able to establish any form of stability and popular security.

The Syria that existed in 2011 no longer exists today, and no one can recreate it. Only the Kurds have some natural boundaries within Syria, but they cannot be separated from their ties to Turkish and Iraqi Kurds. ISIS has taken advantage of two civil struggles – in both Syria and Iraq – and has no natural boundaries to its ambitions. Assad claims to govern

all of Syria, but is fighting both ISIS and the loose coalition of other rebel movements for control of the heavily populated areas in western and central Syria. The other rebel movements are fighting both the pro-Assad forces and ISIS.

There are no natural boundaries or viable economic areas that separate enough Alawites from Sunnis to create stable entities without a stable peace, just as the Syrian Kurdish areas have their own mixed populations and links to Kurds in other countries. More than that, more than 4 million refugees have shrunk Syria's population from over 22 million to around 18 million, and there are well over 7 million internally displaced persons who have lost their homes, jobs, businesses and access to schools and effective medical care.

The Syrian economy probably has about a quarter of the income flow to the Syrian people that existed in 2011, and was badly underdeveloped, and had badly distributed income, and high levels of corruption even then. Much of Syria now lives on aid, or in gross poverty. No one can measure just how bad the situation is, but it is clear that it will take years of peace, stability, and massive foreign aid to rebuild any major conflict zone in the country, and little of Syria's social structure, governance, or economy will be anything like what it was before.

Put bluntly, any statement – by Republican or Democrat – that focuses largely on ISIS, is inherently dishonest and/or incredibly ignorant. A working strategy has to focus on Syria as it now is, and the factions that actually have influence and power. It may well have to wait until the various factions exhaust themselves and can agree on zones of control, or one comes to dominate, and it may then have to take account of the fact that no agreement will be stable, there will be no security that permits effective reconstruction, only limit numbers of refugees will return, and the displaced will stay displaced on return to cities, homes and jobs that have been largely destroyed. Syria will at best be the land of least-bad options, and least bad is likely to be really bad for at least the next half decade.

### **Real World Military Options**

Given this background, there is a certain absurdity to some aspects of the current debate over military options in Syria. Far too much attention has been paid to the fact that the United States has made so little progress in training some 5,000 Syrian volunteers. The real issue is what on earth would such a force do if the United States succeeded? What would happen if the United States could magically train overnight all of the 15,000 that were supposed to be trained over three years? What are they supposed to do? Where are they supposed to go? Who are they going to be aligned with? What moderate political faction could they back that has enough real world influence to matter?

The only real moderate elements that were fighting in Syria were largely defeated by other rebel factions tied to the al Nusra front in late 2014 and early 2015. A total of 5,000 to 15,000 U.S.-trained forces would still be a token force with no clear moderate political faction with real influence over any of the existing groups of fighters. The only one of the four factions we have been successful in backing has been the Syrian Kurds, and this backing has now run in to major problems because Erdogan has chosen to start a new round of fighting with the Turkish Kurds as part of his effort to dominate Turkish politics. Basing rights in Incirlik has come at a serious cost.

It is also rather striking that no one involved in the public debate over U.S. strategy has asked how our policies and training efforts interact with Turkish, UAE, Saudi, Kuwaiti, Qatari, and Jordanian support of various elements of the other rebel forces that oppose both Assad and ISIS. This is a bloc of fighters that is taking on both Assad and ISIS, but has its own Islamist extremists and sometimes has serious local clashes between its own elements. It is clear, however, that some of these elements are getting outside arms, money, and some training. Unlike the U.S. efforts to train vetted moderates, these other efforts really matter, and discussing U.S. options as if they did not exist is ridiculous.

It is also ridiculous, for that matter, to talk about deploying U.S. troops or U.S. advisors without stopping to think about where they will enter the border areas, how they will be supported, and above all, what factions they will oppose and what factions they will back. At present, the only faction that might support a U.S. presence seems to be the Kurds and they would only do so to achieve some form of autonomy or independence – something that might do even more to alienate the other Arab rebel factions. This is no longer 2012. That real time window to support the moderates is not only closed, it is bricked over.

### **Non-thinking “No Fly” and “Security” Zones**

It is equally dangerous to talk vaguely about “no fly” or “security” zones. A security zone in an unpopulated desert over no security for any of the displaced, and no meaningful role for rebel forces. The zone the Turks seem to favor is a conflict zone with little capacity to absorb the displaced or refugees, seems designed to help contain the Syrian Kurds, and also designed to help shift the fighting from its present focus on ISIS to one that would affect the Assad forces and other rebel factions.

“No fly” can mean either fixed wing or both fixed and helicopters, and helicopters and barrel bombs are one of Assad’s primary killing and terror mechanisms. It can mean engagement with Assad’s land-based air defenses, and Syrian and possibly Russian fighters. “No fly” does not mean “no move,” and a limited security or “no move” zone would still give Assad missile and rocket attack options. “No move” also would not easily exclude the other rebel factions and forces – creating the risk that the zone becomes a safe area for Al Nusra or other non-ISIS extremists.

None of this means that the United States cannot support other rebel factions or that “no move” or “security” zones can’t work. But any politician, policymaker, senior officer, op-ed writer, or think tanker that does not precisely define what they recommend when they talk about such ideas is spouting vacuous nonsense.

### **The Air Campaign Must Look Beyond ISIS**

The air campaign raises equally serious issues. It does seem to be having a very real impact. General Austin described this impact as follows in his September 16<sup>th</sup> testimony to the Senate Armed Service Committee,

“Today, despite some slow movement at the tactical level, we continue to make progress across the battlespace in Iraq and Syria in support of the broader USG strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. We have achieved measurable effects against this enemy; and, looking ahead, we are postured to continue to make progress on multiple fronts across the combined joint operations area. Key to the enduring success of the military campaign is sustained pressure on ISIL,

both from the air and on the ground; and, using indigenous forces to help create and sustain that pressure, while also curbing the flow of foreign fighters and cutting off the enemy's ability to resource himself.

Today, although ISIL is still able to conduct attacks and incite terror, the organization's overall capability has been disrupted. While Iraq's security forces have experienced some setbacks, they continue to make progress, enabled by Coalition airstrikes and our advise and assist and building partner capacity efforts. They have executed a number of Coalition-enabled operations against the enemy. In northern Iraq, the Kurdish Peshmerga have performed exceptionally well. The Kurdish-Arab Coalition in northeast Syria also is achieving substantial effects."

This statement is fine as far as it goes. An air campaign that flew some 7,000 strike sorties in 2014, and more than 15,000 more through the end of August in 2015, has to have had a serious impact. The monthly total of munitions has risen from a low of 211 in August 2014, to a high of over 2800 in July 2015, and there have been some 2,200 additional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) sorties in 2014, and over 6,000 through the end of August in 2015.

The actual impact on any given land battle is less clear, but it certainly seems to have been of major aid to both Syrian Kurdish and Iraqi government forces. The "body count" data on fighters killed issued by a few U.S. and British officials seems to have no credible source or methodology, but the claims striking some 10,600 physical targets as of August 8, 2015 do seem credible. Many are vaguely described and this total included over 10,000 generic "staging areas, buildings, fighting positions, and other" but this seems a valid way to count strikes on a widely dispersed, heavily sheltered, and largely infantry force.

It has also been an air campaign where extraordinary care has been taken to avoid civilian casualties – although no credible estimate of such casualties seems to exist. The level of restraint is indicated by the fact that only some 1,400 of the strike sorties delivered actual munitions in 2014, and 4,700 in 2015. This is some 25% of the total strike sorties in 2015, and less than a third in 2014 – and this ignores the fact the strikes were supported by a total of well over 8,000 additional IS&R sorties.

But, the air campaign is largely an "Iraq first" campaign that is largely decoupled from any clear strategic objectives to bring stability and security to Syria. It is largely directed at containing ISIS while waiting for the unknown day when some combination of Iraqi government forces and the various Iraqi Shi'ite, Sunni, and Kurdish militias become strong enough to liberate most of Iraq. There is no clear picture of what will happen then if Syria is still unstable and ISIS is operating on the Iraqi border.

No U.S. official or officer has ever addressed these issues, and it is unclear that any member of Congress or other outsider has really questioned what the air campaign is doing in Syria in meaningful strategic terms.

### **Negotiating Some Form of Peace Agreement**

This failure to ask hard questions has been equally apparent in reports on negotiating efforts. Russia and Iran seem to be the only outside country involved that have clear goals: They back Assad or the Assad-faction – although most Russian statements only

talk about Assad and ISIS and ignore the Kurd and the other Arab rebel groups that are actually doing more to defeat the Assad forces in heavily populated areas than ISIS.

The United States, its allies, and the UN seem to take the position there is some moderate Syrian rebel group that has real standing in Syria. It is far from clear that the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Syrian National Council, or any feasible mix of outside political bodies now have major support from the factions actually fighting, broad support from the Syrians still inside Syria, and needed political skills and ability to govern.

Even if Assad is eventually willing to step aside, it is equally unclear that any negotiated settlement reached on the outside will survive engagement with reality, bring stability and security at the local level, and be backed by the massive aid and reconstruction effort that will be necessary. Difficult as reaching any agreement will be, an agreement will be pointless if it cannot resolve the sectarian and ethnic differences in Syria to the point where the fighting actually ends, a half-way effective government is created, and some form of normal life and economy can be created.

So far, the negotiating efforts do not seem to meet any of these criteria. Case after case of failed peace attempts over the last half century are a warning that hope rarely triumphs over experience. Any meaningful U.S. strategy must address these issues as well, and so far, no aspect of the U.S. political debate over Syria really addresses these issues. The U.S. aid effort is vital in helping Syrian refugees and IDPs, but the negotiating effort seems to be an increasingly hollow exercise in good intentions at a purely political level.

### **Administration, Congress, and U.S. Strategic Interests**

It is probably an equal exercise in letting hope triumph over experience to suggest that U.S. national interests require a far more honest and informed debate, and that waiting until a new Administration comes into office in 2017 to seriously address any of these issues on a bipartisan basis will be incredibly costly to the Syrian people.

It may be equally futile to point out that it will be just as costly to America's reputation and standing at a time when Putin and Iran are certain to keep up the pressure in support of Assad, and when Israel and our Arab allies have critical questions about the quality and competence of our leadership. And, when the struggle in Syria cannot be separated from key policy challenges to U.S. interest in dealing with Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the broader U.S. confrontation with violent extremism.

It would be nice, however, if at least one Administration voice, and even one Republican candidate, actually did come to grips with the realities involved. It would be equally nice if the Congress could at least focus partisanship around the real issues necessary to have a meaningful debate.

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