
Wanted: a U.S. Strategy for Syria and Iraq

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FIFTEEN MONTHS SINCE THE U.S.-LED COALITION BEGAN ITS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA (ISIS), ISIS REMAINS A FORMIDABLE FORCE IN BOTH COUNTRIES. Although coalition airstrikes and local forces have taken back some territory in the northern regions, ISIS maintains military momentum, continues to lure recruits internationally, and retains control of substantial areas in Syria's north and east and Iraq's west.

Meanwhile, Russia's airstrikes in Syria, backed by Iranian-supported local ground forces, buttress the foundering Assad regime by targeting Syrian opposition groups, broadly defined—including some that have received U.S. assistance. U.S. efforts to train and equip Syrian opposition forces have been painfully slow and set back by attacks from the Assad regime and militant groups.

In Iraq, deep Sunni doubt over Baghdad's commitment to an inclusive way forward have stalled coalition efforts to push ISIS out of key strongholds. The humanitarian

consequences of these conflicts are profound, contributing to the world's largest wave of migration since World War II. The U.S.-led fight against ISIS is faltering because it has taken a narrow approach to a broader conflagration, addressing only the symptoms of a deep-rooted problem. The U.S. deployment of less than 50 special operations forces to northern Syria reflects a recognition that the campaign's ground component is faltering, but it will not fill the gap alone.

A major reason for ISIS's survival in its various incarnations since the mid-2000s is the lack of credible governance and security provided by Baghdad and Damascus for Sunni populations. ISIS's brutality attracts some recruits, but distances it from the vast majority of Muslims, and therein lies one of its vulnerabilities.

The Islamic State's mandate to secure territory and govern also presents a vulnerability, particularly given that, like many closed societies, it does not have a sustainable economic model. Reported food and fuel shortages



and daily exhibitions of terror and violence evince the difficulties ISIS is facing in governing its territory. However, in the absence of an alternative political pathway for Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, ISIS will likely endure.

If the United States is to succeed in degrading support for ISIS, it must have an affirmative political strategy for Syria and Iraq. Degrading ISIS through military and economic tools is important, but this is only a supporting component of a strategy.

A political strategy does not have to involve a nation-building exercise, and the United States should certainly be wary of hubristic visions. The lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan should underscore prudence, and yet, reticence could be equally as damaging to U.S. interests. Rather, the United

States should have a more balanced approach.

The United States and its partners must first work with Syrians and Iraqis to establish political and military structures at both the central government and local levels upon which these countries can build a viable framework of governance. There may be some hope of sewing together a decentralized but inclusive Iraq over the next several years, but mending Syria will take much longer.

Second, building on the momentum of concluding a nuclear deal with Iran, the P5+1, including Russia, should lead efforts to bring a political end to Syria's civil war. Any viable approach will likely require a multiyear transition, resulting in Assad eventually stepping down. This diplomatic effort would also

need to engage Syrians, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. A starting point for a Syrian political transition process is the framework developed at the 2012 Geneva talks, engaging not only expatriate Syrians but also local leaders identified by the aforementioned assessment process.

These diplomatic efforts would need to be coupled with the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force to protect civilians and enable the passage of humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance, likely through a secured buffer zone on Turkey's southern border with Syria.

A third leg of the strategy would involve rallying Gulf partners, Turks, and other Europeans to help Syrians build a credible security force capable of protecting civilians and countering terrorism. Channeling these efforts through a single stream rather than through conflicting ones, and coordinating those forces with the multinational peacekeeping force, would be critical to make the Syrian security force an enduring part of a new Syria.

Neither the peacekeeping force and buffer zone nor the building of Syrian security forces will succeed in the absence of a strong political framework for a new Syria.

In Iraq, the United States and its partners should press Baghdad to create a political framework for an inclusive and decentralized system of governance that addresses the grievances of Iraq's Sun-

nis, the aspirations of the Kurds, and the concerns of the Shi'a.

Within this framework, in addition to strengthening the Iraqi security forces, the United States and its Gulf partners should step up their support for Sunni tribal forces, coordinating with Baghdad but also working directly with the tribes to fund and expedite their training. The United States should also send additional military advisors to Iraq to assist with the training. Initially, Sunni tribal forces should be trained to protect civilians and deter further ISIS incursions into Iraqi territory.

Over time, they could push ISIS out of Iraq's cities, coordinating their moves with coalition airstrikes.

Meantime, Russia will want to maintain its military foothold on the Mediterranean, and Iran will want to maintain its strategic resupply routes to Hezbollah and its influence in Iraq, and so the United States will have to decide whether those are prices worth accepting for Russian and Iranian pressure on Assad to step down. Increasing U.S. and partners' covert efforts to de-

grade Iranian proxy capabilities in the Levant and the Gulf, and building ties with Iraqis and the new Syrian political leadership, could mitigate some of those risks.

None of this will be easy nor come without costs. Yet keeping the focus solely on degrading ISIS is not a strategy, will not result in a durable solution to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and will further imperil U.S. interests. The next administration will need to tackle these challenges head on and offer an affirmative vision and strategy for moving out of the morass. □

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