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# U.S. Wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen: What Are The Endstates?



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DoD photo by Lance Cpl. Darien J. Bjorndal, U.S. Marine Corps

## **U.S. Wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen: What Are the Endstates?**

### **Anthony H. Cordesman**

It is one of the many ironies of the 2016 presidential campaign that the United States is at war in varying degrees in four different countries in the Middle East and North Africa—Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen—as well as continuing its “longest war” in Afghanistan. All five of these wars now involve ISIS to some degree—ISIS is the central focus of the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Libya—and probably to a degree that seriously threatens the future stability of the MENA region and U.S. strategic interests.

Neither Trump nor Clinton have seriously addressed U.S. policy for any of these five wars, and the Obama Administration has not publically stated its grand strategy for any conflict. For the first time in its national history, the United States may get through a Presidential campaign amidst multiple wars without seriously debating or discussing where any of its wars are going, or what their longer-term impact will be.

If anything, both American politics and the media seem to focus far more on whether or not President Obama failed to keep his 2008 campaign promises to end very different wars. This focus disregards whether or not his legacy involves the ability to actually win any of what are now very different conflicts in a form that will have an outcome that serves U.S. interests and those of our allies.

### **True Victory in War is Not Shaped by the Military Outcome But by What Happens Once the Fighting is Over**

This lack of attention to America’s wars is dangerous in the case of all its wars, but it is particularly dangerous in the case of Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The United States is supporting a very different mix of forces in each country in different ways with what seems to be one narrow goal: denying ISIS the ability to control territory or the ability to establish some form of government and sanctuary. The key U.S. tools in each war zone mix air power and with U.S. train and assist efforts and arms transfers to local factions. The United States also provides some limited ground artillery and Special Forces support in Iraq, and a mix of more limited U.S. and allied support for very different types of factions in Syria and Libya.

In each case, the United States may be succeeding to the point where it is tipping the balance enough to achieve the narrow strategic goal of “defeating” ISIS to the point where ISIS no longer controls major cities or blocs of territory. Moreover, the United States may largely achieve this goal before a new President comes to office and can put his or her national security team fully in place. This may well be a “victory” in a narrow sense, and no one can deny that ISIS’s ability to control population centers, blocs of territory, and sanctuaries for fundraising, training terrorists and fighters, and for carrying out its indoctrination efforts made it a far more serious threat.

There is no prospect in any such war, however, that the United States will win a near term victory in either the broader strategic sense of fully defeating ISIS, or in the grand strategic sense of ending a war with a stable and desirable outcome.

Once again, the United States does not seem to be learning from its past. The real test of victory is never tactical success or even ending a war on favorable military terms, it is what comes next. World War I was a military victory that became a grand strategic disaster. World War II led to nearly half a century of Cold War, the creation of an existential nuclear threat to the United States, and a “peace” that still has not created a stable relationship with Russia. Korea has been locked into more than half a century of unstable stalemate that is now going nuclear. Vietnam has produced the irony of a long chain of U.S. tactical victories that have ended in a major strategic defeat, but have gradually been followed by steadily closer U.S. strategic relations with its former enemy.

### **ISIS Cannot Be Defeated Quickly and No Credible Form of Eventual Defeat of ISIS Will Defeat the Threat of Terrorism**

Moreover, America’s political leaders seem to be ignoring warnings from senior U.S. officials like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Director of National Intelligence, and experts in its National Counterterrorism Center that any victory which deprives ISIS of control over cities and major blocs of territory in Iraq, Syria, and Libya will be limited at best. U.S. military planners—like their Iraqi counterparts—are deeply concerned that “liberating” Mosul will trigger at least a year of constant ISIS attacks from the fighters that disperse or hide in Western Iraq, and no one seems to openly address how Western Iraq can be secured until IISS is defeated in Syria as well.

This, however, raises the broader issue of what will happen to tens of thousands of ISIS fighters if ISIS loses its major population centers in Iraq and Syria like Mosul and Raqqa, as well as control over the coastal strip in Libya around Sirte (Surt). Many will head back to their country of origin, others will go to a new front somewhere in the region or South and Central Asia, and some will stay. The organizations they join may or may not keep the name ISIS, but they are likely to stay violent Islam extremists whose terrorism in the United States and Europe continues to try to divide the true path of Islam from the rest of world, and threaten every moderate regime in the Muslim world.

A terrorist by any other name is not a “rose,” and the threat both ISIS fighters and other such extremists pose will continue to be a threat indefinitely into the future. Moreover, all of the political, economic, social, and demographics forces that triggered the rise of such extremism and the massive upheaval that begin in 2011 have grown worse over the last half-decade – as have the tensions Muslims living in the West face as the result of the terrorism committed by a small minority.

The effort to counter the extremist message seems to be improving, but there is no similar success in addressing the complex mix of other underlying causes. Civil upheavals, civil war, sectarian and ethnic violence, a loss of investment and capital flight, massive refugee and IDP problems, a loss of tourist income, and a 40-60% drop in petroleum revenues do not alone produce some predictable increase in extremism or terrorism. Neither does fear of Muslims by non-Muslims, and discrimination against Muslims in the West and other areas outside largely Muslim states. These forces, however, are almost certain to make things worse.

Here, it is critical to look beyond the current U.S. obsession with ISIS and look at the broader threat. If one looks at the most recent START statistics on terrorism in the State Department annual report on terrorism, and only considers the top five threats, three are

clearly Islamist extremist: ISIS (in Syria and Iraq), the Taliban, and Boko Harum. There are more than 40 Islamist extremist groups listed in the START database, but even if one only looks at these top three, ISIS was responsible for only 37% of the attacks and 38% of the deaths.<sup>1</sup>

There is no clear way to assess the role of ISIS role in terms of all Islamist extremist attacks, but if one looks at the total numbers of attacks in the countries with the highest rates of terrorism in the MENA region (Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria), ISIS was responsible for 29% of the attacks in 2015, and 56% of the deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Islamic extremism does dominate global terrorism, but ISIS was only responsible for 9% of the attacks in the entire world in 2015, and 21% of the deaths. Depriving ISIS of control over population centers and sanctuary to raise funds and train fighters, and breaking it up as key organization, matters. Defeating it in any practical sense, however, will not begin to deal with the lasting threat.<sup>3</sup>

### **Looking Beyond ISIS: What Comes Next in Libya**

The problems of what comes next in the wars the United States is now fighting also goes far beyond ISIS. The issue is simplest in Libya. Defeating ISIS may or may not ease the tensions between Libya's two de facto governments in its west and its East. They have cooperated to some degree in fighting ISIS. It may or may not ease the internal tensions within each area that have sharply reduced Libya's petroleum exports and income. Other tribal and regional fighting may or may not emerge as more serious problems.

It is also clear –as it is in all four wars – that there are sharp limits to what the U.S. can do, and its overall capabilities in nation building. One American involved commented on an earlier draft of this report that,

...a narrowly defined mission in Libya to defeat ISIS will not address the underlying reasons why the group (and Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist organizations) exists there in the first place: the security and political vacuum that have persisted in the absence of real state building. We need to learn from the policies that the US tried to implement in Libya before ISIS announced an emirate there in late 2014 to be able to develop a viable strategy.

It is not that there was a lack of interagency coordination. It is also not that there was insufficient coordination with western allies, as there were also regular communications with foreign capitals about coordinating policy and assistance since at least 2013 (and earlier through the Friends of Libya meetings that began during the revolution).

Rather, we need to see why this type of "divide and conquer" strategy to international assistance to Libya has failed. In some ways, it was because no country took the lead on implementing assistance, a role relegated to the overburdened and underfunded UN political mission (UNSMIL). There was also great difficulty in making sure assistance provided was complementary, and concurrently covering all Libya's needs.

Part of the problem was that we did not include enough active countries in these discussions. Another part of the problem was that Libya's more pressing challenges, like demobilization, demilitarization and reintegration of militias or reforming public financial management, would require unpopular, expensive and long-term assistance programs no one country was willing to take on. A further reason past assistance failed is because the international community had no effective Libyan interlocutors who could help implement the assistance across weak and opaque institutions.

It was also not that there was no pressure on the US government to act on Libya. There has been immense pressure to "fix" Libya quickly, in part due to the politicization of the issue and in part

because there were so many other pressing regional problems. But because of the challenges mentioned above, as well as lingering Congressional resistance to any support to Libya post-Benghazi attack, there was a tendency to settle for lowest common denominator solutions (which were not solutions at all in the end). We must understand these challenges to be able to do better in the future.

What is clear is that these divisions and low-level civil war have made Qaddafi's terrible legacy in terms of poor governance and failed economic development even worse. Libya will need a decade of rebuilding and reform to produce true stability and raise its per capita income and income distribution to acceptable levels. This requires both stable internal politics and leadership, and serious international aid.

Once again, the civil dimension both in war and post-conflict is critical to any form of lasting successful outcome. Some form of "nation-building" is even more difficult than winning actual conflict, but is no less necessary. No real grand strategy is possible without it, and Libya faces critical challenges.

- Population 6.4 million; Median age 28
- Youth unemployment 48.7%; overall unemployment 30% (?)
- 79.7% urbanized
- GDP drops from \$130.2B in 2013 to \$92.6B in 2015. Per capita income drops from \$20,800 in 2013 to \$14,600 in 2015
- 33% of population below poverty line in 2014.
- As of 2015, 434,869 IDPs, 471,653 people of concern. OCHA Estimates in August 2016 that an estimated 2.44 million people are in need of protection and some form of humanitarian assistance. This includes internally displaced persons (IDPs), the non-displaced conflict affected population, refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. The crisis is predominantly urban centered with most of the fighting taking place in major cities such as Benghazi, Tripoli, Misrata, Sirte, Sabha and Darnah
- Libya's economy, almost entirely dependent on oil and gas exports, struggled during 2015 as the country plunged into civil war and world oil prices dropped to seven-year lows.
- Oil production and exports began to decline in 2013, when a rogue commander of a militia charged with protecting oil installations, Ibrahim Jedhran, held important eastern ports hostage, refusing to open them. In addition, ISIS assaults against oil fields/ports really ramped up after they relocated their headquarters in Libya from Derna to more central Sirte in 2015. In early 2015, armed conflict between rival forces for control of the country's largest oil terminals caused a decline in Libyan crude oil production, which never recovered to more than one-third of the average pre-Revolution highs of 1.6 million barrels per day.
- The Central Bank of Libya continued to pay government salaries to a majority of the Libyan workforce and to fund subsidies for fuel and food, resulting in an estimated budget deficit of about 49% of GDP.
- Libya's economic transition away from QADHAFI's notionally socialist model has completely stalled
- Libya's leaders have hindered economic development by failing to use its financial resources to invest in national infrastructure. The country suffers from widespread power outages in its largest cities, caused by shortages of fuel for power generation. Living conditions, including access to clean drinking water, medical services, and safe housing, have all declined as the civil war has caused more people to become internally displaced, further straining local resources.

- Extremists affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) attacked Libyan oilfields in the first half of 2015; ISIL has a presence in many cities across Libya including near oil infrastructure, threatening future government revenues from oil and gas.

Like all of the other countries involved, Libya is also creating a new generation young men with limited education, no real job experience, used to violence as away of life and no real loyalties beyond their family, tribe, sect, ethnic group or other primary affiliation group. Combined with the long delay even the best new government may face in restoring stability and development, this means that Libya faces yet another potential generational cause of instability,

This creates the threat that a new generation of Libyan's will emerge out of the fighting with little real loyalties beyond family, tribe, or a group of violent peers. Qaddafi never provided a clear, reason to be loyal to the state, and the decline into violent groups and faction over the last five years risks creating a generation young men with little education, no job skills, and no real loyalties beyond themselves.

This does not mean the United States needs a major aid mission or even has to take the lead. Working with other countries and international institutions like the World Bank and IMF would both help in creating a coordinated effort, and make it clear that no outside power was imposing its own solutions.

The United States does, however, need a clear strategy that looks beyond ISIS, does not simply hope for action by other countries, or simply leave a vacuum in its broader efforts while it bombs ISIS. It can lever limited civil and military aid, seek some kind of common effort with Europe, and develop an integrated civil-military approach to strategic partnership.

Past experience also shows that such efforts have to be public and transparent enough to put real pressure on State, USAID, and Defense to act. The past efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan simply papered over a lack of real planning, interagency coordination, and effective effort. It also papered over a lack of coordination with other countries, tolerance of failed efforts by key groups like UNAMA, and unwillingness to press coordination with the World Bank and IMF.

Whether the next President chooses to use more force, rely on strategic partnerships, or do both, the U.S. has got to look beyond ISIS in dealing with Libya, and look beyond the threat alone, as well as look beyond the partisan domestic politics in the United States of the tragedy in Benghazi.

### **Yemen: Some States Stay Failed**

This need to look beyond ISIS and the threat of Islamist extremism is equally true in the case of Yemen, although for very different reasons. Yemen is fighting a civil war where terrorism has had a comparatively limited impact. Its causes date back to at least 2009, and a struggle between the central government and the Houthi Shi'ites that has become a much broader struggle between a coalition between the Houthi and the portion of the armed forces loyal to Saleh – the previous dictator -- and the elected government which is supported by a Saudi-UAE led coalition.

This struggle has both tribal and sectarian roots and is compounded by north-south splits within Yemen. Terrorism is an issue, but it is Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula

(AQAP) that is the cause. The START database on terrorism records some 805 terrorist incidents caused by AQAP between 2011 and 2015 and only seven for ISIS, Virtually all of the casualties were caused by AQAP.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. backing of the Saudi-UAE led coalition in Yemen has been limited largely to support of air operations, intelligence, and targeting data. It was cut back to an absolute minimum by August 20, 2016, and has always been the lowest level of U.S. involvement in its current wars – although a U.S. Marine amphibious force did prevent Iranian convoys from coming to Yemen at one point in the war. Yemen, however, is a military and civil strategic nightmare.

Yemen's elected (one candidate) government, the remnants of the Saleh regime, the Houthi Shiite rebels, the separatist factions in the south, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and various tribal factions have no clear reason to reconcile or stop fighting. Any peace is almost certain to be temporary and unstable. Worse, Yemen is so poor, so limited in water, lacking in economic development, so tied to a narco-economy, and so highly populated that it has no clear path towards nation building its various factions can agree upon.

Even if one ignores immediate issues like casualties, food shortages and people at risk from the war; Yemen faces a host of longer-term challenges like sharp population growth, critically low rate of development and critical water problems, and the following mix of immediate challenges:

- Population 27 million; Median age 19
- 40% of children underweight before war.
- Youth unemployment 37%; overall unemployment 27%
- GDP dropped from \$105B in 2013 to \$75.5 in 2015
- Per capita income drops from \$3,900 in 2013 to \$2,700 in 2015
- 54% below poverty line in 2014.
- As of 2015, 2.5 million IDPs, 267,000 refugees, 2.8 million people of concern.
- Ongoing war has halted Yemen's exports, pressured the currency's exchange rate, accelerated inflation, severely limited food and fuel imports, and caused widespread damage to infrastructure. At least 82% of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance.
- Rebel Huthi groups have interfered with Ministry of Finance and Central Bank operations and diverted funds for their own use. Yemen's Central Bank reserves, which stood at \$5.2 billion prior to the conflict, currently stand at \$1.5 billion.
- The Central Bank is exposed to approximately \$7 billion in overdraft, more than three times the legal limit, directly linked to the Houthis withdrawing \$116 million on a monthly basis.
- The private sector is hemorrhaging, with almost all businesses making substantial layoffs.
- The Port of Hudaydah, which handles 60% of Yemen's commercial traffic, was damaged in August 2015 as a result of the conflict and is only operating at 50% capacity.
- Access to food and other critical commodities such as medical equipment is limited across the country due to security issues on the ground.
- The Social Welfare Fund, a cash transfer program for Yemen's neediest, is no longer operational and has not made any disbursements since late 2014.

Once again, the problem of a new generation of youth with no clear loyalties beyond their tribe or violent peers becomes steadily more serious. In Yemen's case, however, there is no clear source of wealth to aid recovery or development; there are deep sectarian divisions, and far more serious problems with poverty.

Yemen's strategic position at the gates to the Red Sea and long border with Saudi Arabia do make it a potential strategic threat. At least for the foreseeable future, however, the most that one can hope for is to limit and contain its violence and role in terrorism and in the growing tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Any end to conflict is likely to be temporary or illusory, and serious nation building is likely to be impossible. The United States still needs a strategy for both the military and civil side of Yemen's fighting and instability, and it still has to make hard choices, but the best real-world strategy is likely to be an awkward and unstable mix of containment and finding the least bad options.

### **The Greater Strategic Challenges and Risks in Iraq**

The most serious strategic challenges and risks, however, occur in Iraq and Syria. Both have religious and ethnic factions that either want forms of federalism that give them near control over the regions they dominate, or these factions want independence. The fight against ISIS has already been secondary to the broader civil war in Syria, and it has never halted the growing levels of tension between Kurd and Arab and Sunni and Shi'ite in Iraq.

In the case of the Kurds, they now occupy areas in both Iraq and Syria that have never been Kurdish before and now include large areas dominated by Arabs, as well as major oil resources in the case of Iraq. The end result is Iraq and Syria now have separate Kurdish regions which have expanded significantly beyond the areas dominated by Kurds, and done largely because of U.S. aid and military support. Both Kurdish zones also have complex internal tensions that lead to intra-Kurdish conflicts, and tensions with Turkey as well as their Arab populations. Moreover, some of the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria have ties to the PKK in Turkey, a Turkish Kurdish movement that many see as "terrorist" and that is now at war with the Turkish state.

The fight against ISIS has to some extent led both Arab and Kurd to focus on ISIS instead of their own ethnic power struggles, and led Turkey to accept the fact that the United States is using both the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds as lead elements in its fight against ISIS. At the same time, the United States does not seem to have any clear policy that will shape a future role for the Kurds that will give them security in their present countries, reassure the Arabs and Turkey to the degree this is possible, and reduce the future risk of ethnic conflict.

The United States also does not seem to have any public strategy for dealing with the reality that ISIS's caliphate crosses the border, any victory in one country that does not defeat ISIS in the other makes security extremely difficult for both Syria and Iraq, and defeating ISIS in Iraq, Syria, or both countries opens up new risks of sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi'ite in Iraq and Sunni and Alawite in Syria.

These tensions cannot be isolated on national level, and will inevitably involve Iran, the other Arab states, and Turkey. In the case of Iraq, any defeat of ISIS in Iraq will raise the question of how a largely Sunni Arab rebel force in the east of Syria—in a country and region where Arab Sunnis make up the largest part of the population as well as dominate

Islamic extremist factions—will interact with an Iraq where Arab Sunnis are in a distinct minority and lost control over the state with the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Any defeat of ISIS in Iraq will also will trigger greater Sunni demands for a better solution to ensuring the protection and status of Iraqi Sunnis in Iraq's major cities and mixed areas, and for resolving the future "federal" status of the Sunni-dominated portions of Western Iraq. It will also have to deal with million of largely Sunni IDPs, finding a way to build the recovery and development of western Iraq after well over a decade of war, and offering both Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'ites security and freedom from sectarian and terrorist attacks.

Even if ISIS could be totally defeated, this would not end sectarian violence and terrorism. A considerable amount of the sectarian Sunni-Shi'ite violence in Iraq has never involved ISIS, and the Sunni's loss of political dominance after Saddam's ouster and the impact of de-Baathification and Maliki's misrule still deeply divide the country – as well as polarize outside Arab support around the Sunnis while reinforcing Iranian support of Iraq's Shi'ites.

Once again, nation building presents many challenges, but no stable peace can occur without it. A post-ISIS Iraq will have to cope with the fact the United States has built something like a Kurdish protostate in Iraq, pushed Iraq's ruling Sunni elite out of power, and opened up Iraq's Shi'ites to major amounts of Iranian influence. It will also have to deal with the fact that once ISIS is sufficiently weakened, Iraq's deeply divided Shi'ite factions will have far less need for the United States, and Iran will have far less need to avoid over tension and clashes with U.S. forces in Iraq and show restraint in exploiting its political and military influence – both in the Iraqi government and with Shi'ite political movements and militias.

This would be challenging in any state, but Iraq is a "failed state" as well as a state at war. Decades of conflict, terrible economic policies, corruption and inept governance have combined with 40-60% cuts in oil export revenues to largely bankrupt the state and sharply limit its ability to recover from its ISIS war and buy its way out of its ethnic and sectarian differences. Its per capita income has dropped, and population growth means it faces a massive need to create real, productive jobs it cannot meet. These challenges include:

- Population 37 million (CIA)
- People of concern rose from 1.4 million in 2013 to 4.7 million in 2015. May reach over 7 million after a successful campaign in Mosul. (OCHA, UNHCR)
- 10.0 million in need in August 2016; 7.3 million targets for humanitarian assistance. (OCHA)
- Number of IDPs was at least 3.3 million in August 2016. Some 277,000 refugees outside Iraq. (OCHA)
- 72% urbanized and counting under hyperurbanized conditions with major slums, added ethnic and sectarian pressure, limited job growth, and sharply inadequate infrastructure and security. (CIA)
- Iraq's largely state-run economy is dominated by the oil sector, which provides more than 90% of government revenue and 80% of foreign exchange earnings. (CIA)
- Falling global oil prices resulted in declining export revenues: Iraq government and KRG effectively bankrupt.

- Budget deficit equal to 15.4% of GDP in 2015. (CIA)
- Declining per capita income. \$15,500 (2015 est.) (CIA)
- 25-30% of population below poverty line. (CIA)
- 16-23% direct unemployment; no estimate for indirect/disguised (CIA)

And, the time lags in these data mean they only begin to take account of the massive cuts in oil export revenues whose fully effect will emerge in 2016. The end result is that Iraq faces forces that will do much to ensure its continued instability, it is that the defeat of ISIS opens the country up to far more serious ethnic and sectarian challenges, and a major challenge from an Iraq that only has to care about Iraq's Shi'ite majority.

A study by the Crisis Group also warns that its generational problems with youth have root that began with the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 and could have more lasting effects.<sup>5</sup>

Beset by political dysfunction, endemic corruption and a jihadist threat, Iraq is squandering its greatest asset: its youth. By failing to provide a vision and concrete prospects for the future, it is pressing young men into the straitjacket of jobs-through patronage, pushing them into combat with either the Islamic State (IS) or Shiite militias or in

ducing them to emigrate. Arguably, the government faces more pressing challenges: pushing IS out, ensuring that subsequent governance does not further alienate the local population, instituting overdue reforms and tackling corruption.

Yet, it will not succeed if it does not at the same time develop a strategy for creating a meaningful place in politics and society for the young. They are the country's most important resource; abandoning them could turn them into the most important threat to national and regional security.

The leadership's inability to forge a future for "Generation 2000", which grew up after Saddam Hussein's fall, has turned it into easy quarry for predators, be they IS, Shiite militias or populists preaching Iraqi nationalism. The potential for mobilizing large numbers of young men at loose ends as pawns in violent conflicts has enabled both IS and Shiite militias to gain recruits. In the process, it has compounded sectarian polarization and widened the divide between street and elites. Fed by fresh pools of fighting-age men, local tensions and conflicts proliferate and escalate, destabilizing the country and the surrounding region. The most powerful Shiite militias receive training and advice from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, have an ideological orientation consistent with Tehran's and can be deployed as proxies outside Iraq as well.

The familiar expression "youth radicalization" distorts the reality that an entire generation is adrift, in need of a dramatically new state-led approach. Young Iraqis whose formative years were in the post-2003 turmoil have much more in common than they suspect, whatever side of local conflicts they are on, but they have been increasingly socialized within communal confines and left to the mercy of radical groups that promote dehumanized, even demonized perceptions of one another.

The end result could well be a U.S.-led military "victory" over ISIS that adds up to a serious U.S. strategic defeat. Without some effective civil-military effort to bring unity and recovery, the best outcome could be a hopelessly unstable mess. If the Obama Administration has such plans or such a strategy, it is one of the few well-kept secrets in Washington. Its absence, however, is a good way to leave office and ensure the next President gets most of the blame.

## **The Future Mess in Syria**

Syria may not be the worst case in finding a stable outcome of all of America's wars, but it certainly appears to be so at the present. Its Kurdish "problem" is one even greater and less stable than the one in Syria because it is relatively new, and Syria's Kurds lack even

the uncertain history of political development that occurred in Iraq. A new U.S.-backed Kurdish enclave in Syria and on Turkey's border is also creating more tension with both Turkey and Syria's Arab neighbors, and the United States does not have counterbalancing ties to other major political and military forces in Syria, or the limited history of success it has had in dealing with Iraq Sunni forces and militias.

The all too real weaknesses of the Iraqi government are limited compared to the total lack of any clear power structure and capability to govern that now exists in Syria, where there are some 40 constantly mutating and divided factions of Syrian Arab rebels. These factions sometimes fight each other, and have strong Islamist extremist elements that are marginally better—at best—than ISIS. The fact that an Islamist extremist group like the Al-Nusra Front has formally broken its ties to Al Qaida, and changed its name from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (the Front for the Conquest of the Levant), is roughly equivalent to putting lipstick on a pig. An Islamist extremist *is* an Islamist extremist by any other name.

Syria's broader sectarian tensions between Alawite and Sunni now run far deeper than the Sunni-Shi'ite tensions in Iraq. Many Sunnis do still support and work with the Assad regime, but half a decade of bitter civil war that has included the use of barrel bombs, mass arrests, starvation sieges, and the use of poison gas have created divisions, anger, and hatred that cannot be bridged by negotiations at the top. Syria's Shi'ites are also now seen as tied to Assad and the Alawites -- as are with many of its other religious minorities. The largely Sunni and heavily religious Arab rebels in Syria's East are not likely to live easily with the other sects in the more mixed population in Syria's West.

Once again, these may become generational in the sense that large numbers of young men have known little else than war from childhood, lack education and work experience, are tied to extremist causes or armed factions, and have good reasons to have and seek revenge.

The end result is that Syria will be an even more massive exercise in nation building than is needed in Libya, Yemen or Iraq. Some aspects of the resulting challenges are similar, but the effects of the war are much worse:

- Population down from 22-24 million to 17.1 million, median age 23.8
- Estimates of dead range from some 270,000 to 470,000
- UNHCR estimates in July 2016 that Syria had 4.8 million refugees out the country -- roughly 22% of its prewar population -- and 6.5 million people -- over one-third of its present population -- displaced away from their homes and jobs inside Syria.
- 13.5 million need protection. 12.1 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, including 5.7 million children. 11.5 million lack of access to health care and scarcity of medicine have led to a catastrophic health situation. Poor food availability and quality and successive cuts in subsidies on bread have exacerbated nutritional deprivation. An estimated 25 percent of schools were not operational by 2014.
- No reliable summary of how badly the economy has suffered since 2011, but the CIA estimates that Syria's GDP shrank from an already very low \$97.5 billion in 2012 to \$55.8 billion in 2014, and per capita income was only \$5,100 in 2010 -- before the fighting began. This drop, instead of growth, ranked Syria as 219th of the world's nations. Unemployment reached 57.7% in 2014, and 82.5% of the population lived below the poverty line by then -- putting Syria at a rank of 202<sup>nd</sup>, and at the near bottom of the world's nations.

- OCHA estimates that Syria's development situation has regressed almost by four decades. Four out of five Syrians now live in poverty. Since the crisis began in 2011, life expectancy among Syrians has dropped by more than 20 years, while school attendance has dropped over 50 per cent, with more than 2 million children now out of school. Syria has also seen reversals in all 12 Millennium Development Goal indicators. The Syrian economy has contracted by an estimated 40 per cent since 2011, leading to the majority of Syrians losing their livelihoods.
- Turkey hosts over 2.7 million [registered](#) Syrians. In Lebanon, more than a million registered Syrians live in over 1,700 communities and locations across the country, often sharing small basic lodgings with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions. In Jordan, over 600,000 men, women and children are currently trapped in exile. Iraq has also seen a growing number of Syrians arriving, hosting nearly 25,000.

The estimates of dead range from some 270,000 to 470,000, but most serious problem lies in helping the living that have been affected by the war. The UNHCR estimates in July 2016 that Syria had 4.8 million refugees out the country—roughly 22% of its prewar population—and 8.7 million people—over half of its present population—displaced away from their homes and jobs inside Syria. The UNHCR described Syria's situation as follows:

Turkey hosts over 2.7 million [registered](#) Syrians. The majority of them live in urban areas, with around 260,000 accommodated in the 23 refugee camps in the provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis and Sanliurfa. In Lebanon, life is a daily struggle for many Syrian refugees, who have little or no financial resources. Around 70 per cent live below the poverty line on less than USD 3.84 per person per day. There are no formal refugee camps and, as a result, more than a million registered Syrians live in over 1,700 communities and locations across the country, often sharing small basic lodgings with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions.

In Jordan, over 600,000 men, women and children are currently trapped in exile. Approximately 80 per cent of them live in [urban areas](#), while more than 100,000 have found sanctuary at the camps of Za'atari and Azraq. Many have arrived with limited means to cover even basic needs, and those who could at first rely on savings or support from host families are now increasingly in need of help. Iraq has also seen a growing number of Syrians arriving, hosting nearly 25,000, while in Egypt UNHCR

...But although life in exile can be difficult, for Syrians still at home it is even harder. (<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.)

The World Bank summary of Syria's situation has not been update since September 2015, but makes Syria's future internal challenges all too clear:

More than 12.2 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian aid, including 5.6 million children (UNOCHA, Syrian Center for Policy Research-SCPR). Lack of access to health care and scarcity of medicine have led to a catastrophic health situation. Poor food availability and quality and successive cuts in subsidies on bread have exacerbated nutritional deprivation. An estimated 25 percent of schools were not operational by 2014.

A World Bank remote in-conflict assessment on damages in Aleppo, Dar'a, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Latakia as of December 2014 estimated that the conflict has significantly damaged public and private assets including health, education, energy, water and sanitation, agriculture, transportation, housing and infrastructure. Aleppo is the most affected city accounting for roughly 40 percent of the estimated damages. Latakia is the least affected city; however, the conflict's impact on the city is manifested in the increased pressure on infrastructure and services from the population increase from Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs). Among sectors, housing was assessed to be by far the most affected sector accounting for 65% of the estimated structural damages.

The economic impact of the conflict is difficult to estimate precisely given limited data but is large and growing. Syria's GDP is estimated to have contracted by an average of 15.4 percent for the

period (2011-14) and is expected to decline further by nearly 16 percent in 2015. The decline in GDP growth was in part attributed to a sharp decline in oil production, down from 368,000 barrels per day in 2010 to an estimated 40,000 barrels per day in 2015. After increasing by nearly 90 percent in 2013, average inflation increased by 29 percent in 2014. CPI inflation is estimated to increase by 30 percent in 2015 because of continued trade disruption, shortages and a sharp depreciation of the Syrian pound.

Public finances have materially worsened since the start of the conflict. The overall fiscal deficit increased sharply, by an average of 14 percent of GDP during the period 2011-14, and is estimated to reach 22 percent of GDP in 2015. Underlying fiscal developments were, however, much more adverse than suggested by changes in the deficit. Total revenue fell to an all-time low of below 6 percent of GDP in 2014 and 2015 due to the collapse of oil revenues and tax revenues. In response, government spending was cut back, but not by enough to offset the fall in revenues. Reduction in outlays on wages and salaries were not high enough, while military spending increased.

The severe decline in oil receipts since the second half of 2012 and disruptions of trade due to the conflict put pressure on the balance of payments and exchange rate. Revenues from oil exports decreased from \$4.7 billion in 2011 to an estimated \$0.22 billion in 2014, and are estimated to decline further to \$0.14 billion in 2015. Therefore, the current account balance is estimated to continue its trend and reach a deficit of 13 percent of GDP in 2015. As a result of the civil war, total international reserves have declined from \$20 billion at end-2010 to an estimated \$2.6 billion at end-2014, and are estimated to fall further to \$0.7 billion by the end of 2015. Depressed export revenue caused by the impact of the conflict and declining international reserves have caused a significant depreciation of the Syrian pound from 47 pounds per USD in 2010 to an estimated 177 pounds per USD at end-2014 and have depreciated further to 305 pounds per USD at end-August 2015.

Once the situation stabilizes, Syria will have to grapple with immediate economic challenges. It will also need to support the return of internally displaced people and refugees in neighboring countries, rebuild the country's infrastructure, enhance the provision of public services including health and education, and rebuild the social fabric of the country. (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview>)

Syria's development has longed lagged badly behind its population's growth and needs under both Assads before the civil war began. There is no reliable summary of how badly it has suffered since 2011, but the CIA estimates that Syria's GDP shrank from an already very low \$97.5 billion in 2012 to \$55.8 billion in 2014, and that its per capita income was only \$5,100 in 2010 – before the fighting began. This drop, instead of growth, ranked Syria as 219th of the world's nations. It also estimates that unemployment reached 57.7% in 2014, and that 82.5% of the population lived below the poverty line by then – putting Syria at a rank of 202<sup>nd</sup>, and again at the near bottom of the world's nations.

Even if Syria can acquire some degree of political unity and effective governance, it is hard to see how it can rebuild in less than half a decade, impossible to predict how much of the massive refugee burden it places on its neighbors will ease, and equally impossible to know how much of it brain drain of wealthier and better educated Syrians will return.

The end result is not simply a massive and lasting humanitarian nightmare, it is a strategic nightmare as well. Syria's ethnic and sectarian divisions already cross all of its borders, and are now complicated by the presence of Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as by the fact these outside presences seem likely to enable Assad to survive and keep well over half of its population under his control—leaving divided rebel movements in the east to try to cope with a shattered desert economy and the remnants of ISIS.

The Arab Gulf states and the United States will have to cope with a major continuing level of Iranian and Russian influence in Syria, which inevitably will influence the situation in Iraq, Lebanon, and the rest of the region. Such a division may do much to breed further extremism and terrorism, and link the growing confrontation between Iran and the Arab Gulf states to other states in the Middle East.

So far, the United States seems to have done little to address these issues. Secretary Kerry's negotiations with Russia seem to have done little more than give Russia freedom of action in backing Assad while the United States focuses on ISIS – choices that also empower Iran and raise critical question about who will really win in Syria if the United States does defeat ISIS. As in Iraq, the narrow focus of U.S. strategy—and the lack of any clear grand strategy—may turn any element of military victory over ISIS into an open-ended need for U.S. engagement, post-conflict defeat, or both.

Further, as may be the case in Iraq, the failure to plan for some coherent international recovery effort that goes beyond humanitarian aid means Syria's faction lack of material incentive to cooperate and that any new government or governments may become hopelessly unstable in the fact of the sheer scale of the challenges that recovery will pose.

Both candidates may choose to continue to address these issues in silence, but there is even less doubt than in the case of Iraq as to what the real legacy of the Obama Administration is likely to be by the spring of 2017. The transition plan seems to consist of a poison chalice.

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<sup>1</sup> (Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: “Annex of Statistical Information,” *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, U.S. State Department, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257526.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> (Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: “Annex of Statistical Information,” *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, U.S. State Department, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257526.htm>)

<sup>3</sup> (Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: “Annex of Statistical Information,” *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, U.S. State Department, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257526.htm>)

<sup>4</sup> (Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: “Annex of Statistical Information,” *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, U.S. State Department, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257526.htm>)

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<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group, *Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"*, Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016