

# **Taking All the Wrong Steps in Syria, Iraq, and the Fight Against Terrorism**

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The President has made the right decision in delaying withdrawal from Syria, but he needs to go further. There is a case for limiting the U.S. role in Syria. The U.S. has no reason to provide aid to Assad in rebuilding his power in Syria, and no reason not to place the full burden on funding the Assad regime on Iran and Russia. That kind of pressure could be a key part of actually forming some kind of U.S. strategy for dealing with the large portions of Syria that now are back under the control of a failed dictator.

Leaving Syria too soon is a very different story – as General Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. forces in the Central Region has made clear. A withdrawal deprives the U.S. of diplomatic leverage, abandons the last vestiges of moderate Arab forces in Syria, and exposes the Kurdish forces that did much to defeat ISIS to defeat by Assad and Turkey. It will fundamentally undermine the already fading trust of our other Arab strategic partners, be seen as a major defeat of the U.S. by Russia and Iran, and as a further opening to intervention by an increasingly authoritarian Turkey in the Arab world.

## **ISIS and Terrorism Are Not Defeated**

It is a dangerous mistake to assume that withdrawal from Syria can come soon, and to act before ISIS is fully defeated, at a time when other extremist movements are gathering power, and when the real-world nature of the future terrorist threat is still unknown. The defeat of ISIS as a "caliphate" or protostate will leave thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria. Many – if not a majority of the other fighters left in Syria are part of extremist groups – several of which have ties to Al Qaeda.

ISIS has posed the most important single organized threat of terrorism, but it was only part of the problem even in 2016 – when it was far more powerful than it is today. The START database on terrorism – which is as close to an official unclassified data base as we have – records 472 incidents of terrorism in Syria in 2016. Only 168, or 36%, of those incidences were caused by ISIS.

It is equally dangerous to assume that Syria only poses a threat to U.S. interests in the form of terrorism when continuing Sunni anger and violence is likely to pose an enduring threat to Assad, Iran and the Hezbollah pose a different kind of threat to Israel and our Arab security partners, and turkey's problems with the Kurds can turn into broader tensions or violence involving both Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.

U.S. advisors and airpower in eastern Syria also play a critical role in securing Iraq – a major Gulf oil exporter that is a critical U.S. strategy interest and counterbalance to Iran. The defeat of ISIS is still very much a work in program there as well. The levels of terrorism in Iraq in 2016 – the last year that START reports on – make it all too clear that the threat from other movements and perpetrators was critical. The highest START estimate of ISIS-caused incidents in Iraq was 1,202 out of 3,356 – again only 36%. No one has more than begun to win the fight against terrorism, and virtually every military, intelligence, and counterterrorism expert feels that such threats will continue to be critical in some parts of the Middle East for at least the next decade.

Our civil efforts are as important as our military ones – even if we could ignore the human dimension of the tragedy in Syria. The fight against terrorism has so far concentrated on dealing with the symptoms and not the causes, and largely on fighting ISIS alone. As a result, suspending \$200 million in humanitarian aid does far more than deprive U.S. moral and ethical influence, it again deprives us of diplomatic leverage and feeds terrorism.

Nothing has happened to reduce the longer-term pressures in Syria and the region – the problems in governance, economics, and internal unity – that led to the rise of extremism and terrorism in the first place. Surrendering U.S. influence and leverage in Syria means letting these causes fester in a country where the UNHCR – the UN Refugee Agency – estimated in December 2017 that 13.1 million people – half of Syria's population – are in need. A total of 5.6 million are refugees and 6.1 million more are internally displaced – often without homes, schools, medical treatment or income – and 2.98 million are in besieged or hard to reach areas. More than half are children and young adults. Putting Syria under a failed Assad regime makes this a potential explosion of lasting anger and extremism.

### **Putting Benefits – and Costs – in Perspective**

There is a clear need for strategic patience and to shape our policies and action according to what actually takes place in the region and on the ground. We should have learned the cost of rushing out of Iraq, and trying to rush out of Afghanistan. Doing so before host country forces are ready either means incurring far great costs in having to return, or losing the country to a revival of terrorism and authoritarian repression.

In this case, premature withdrawal means ceding Syria to Assad, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Hezbollah and all the popular anger and terrorism that will follow. It means further undermining our credibility with every Arab security partner, making massive gift to Iran in expanding its influence, and critically undermining our efforts to unite Iraq and make it a strong counterweight to extremism and Iran.

As for costs, the U.S. military has vastly reduced the cost of our presence in Syrian and Iraq by relying on airpower and limited numbers of train and assist forces to support host country ground forces. This eliminates the need to deploy U.S. ground combat units, and massively reduces our costs as well as casualties. It is also fundamentally wrong to talk about costs of \$7 trillion dollars. Anything like these costs must include the total cost of the Afghan and Iraq conflicts, massive guesstimates about additional opportunity costs, and including large amounts of regular defense spending that were concealed in the wartime overseas contingency accounts.

If one looks at the President's own FY2019 budget request, the cost of training and equipping Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) eligible for support under current law dropped from \$500 million to \$300 million. No estimates are provided of the cost of airpower, or the impact of Turkey's attacks on the forces the U.S. was supporting, but these are likely to be far smaller.

The text shows that these VSO forces are projected to total approximately 60,000 to 65,000 by the end of FY 2018; "30,000 to conduct ongoing combat missions against ISIS, and 35,000 Internal Security Forces in liberated areas (to provide approximately 20 police/security forces for every 1,000 civilians). Transitioning offensive forces to Internal Security Forces, together with minimal recruitment of new Internal Security Forces, was planned to result in an overall decline in the total personnel under arms as the security environment improved."

Leaving Iraq once was a disaster. Leaving Syria will abandon a key part of its security in the West, and potentially trigger a premature second withdrawal from Iraq as well. This will truly undermine vital U.S. security interests. In contrast, trying to blackmail Congress into funding a wall to divide the U.S. from Mexico by deploying U.S. troops will be a divisive and pointless waste that can do little more than anger one of our two closest neighbors.

Premature withdrawal could also waste the money we plan to spend on making Iraq secure, on truly defeating ISIS, and giving Iraq the strength to deal with Iran. Once again, these costs are dropping. The budget request calls for a cut from \$1.27 billion in FY2018 to \$850 million in FY2019.

"They will reduce our future costs in the process by building the Iraqi partner forces that can "degrade, dismantle, and ultimately defeat ISIS...These funds go to providing the additional capabilities to secure key terrain of the five liberated provinces and their people, the western border with Syria, and critical infrastructure. They will support: five border guard battalions, twenty provincial emergency response units, and six energy police battalions.

For counterterrorism operations, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense's ranger brigades will relieve the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) from its current role as an elite-level infantry force, allowing the CTS to return to its primary role in warrant-based targeting. Critical capabilities to reset a counterterrorism force consist of three battalions of a ranger brigade, specialty training courses, and equipment for the CTS. Additionally, fiscal challenges may require Coalition assistance with sustainment and stipend support to ensure the integrity of the ISF and their ability to maintain operational capabilities."

## **Who Bears the Real Burden?**

We also need to be far more careful about calling for more burden sharing, and focusing on U.S. arms sales and job creation rather than the security and stability of Arab security partners whose petroleum exports fuel the stability of the global economy and the chief Asian sources of our imports. One has to wonder who is briefing the President and saying that our Arab partners are pending too little on security.

The International Institute of Strategic Studies makes annual comparisons of the percentage each country spends on military forces in its annual *Military Balance*. In 2017, the U.S. spent 3.11% of its GDP by the IISS definition, and NATO averaged well under 2%. In contrast, Iraq spent 10.0% of its GDP – more than three times the U.S. level of effort – although it was nearly bankrupt. Saudi Arabia spent 11.3%, Oman spent 12.1%, Kuwait spent 4.8%, Israel spent 5.5%, Jordan spent 4.0%, Bahrain spent 4.3%. Qatar and the UAE does not report, but Qatar probably spent over 5%, and the UAE spent over 10%.

With the possible exception of Qatar and Kuwait, all of our Arab partners suffer from problems in economic development, population growth, job creation, and the need to improve governance and reduce corruption that led to the political upheavals in 2010, and which are key forces that encourage terrorism and extremism. America's priorities should be on persuading our Arab partners to end the pointless divisions between them that give Iran so many opportunities to play a spoiler function. It should be to help them achieve stability and remove the causes of terrorism, not over spend on arms and military forces.