

The U.S., France, Syria, and Iran: Finding Winning Compromises

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The meeting between President Trump and President Macron can all too easily slip into one that either dodges the key issues that both countries need to address in dealing with Syria and Iran, or help cement the differences between the U.S. and European positions. President Trump has taken a strong, almost ideological, stand against the JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran, and seems committed to leaving Syria as soon as possible. President Macron has endorsed the JCPOA and argued strongly for a continuing U.S. and European effort to go beyond the defeat of ISIS and bring some broader form of order and stability to Syria.

The Iran Nuclear Agreement

The debate over the JCPOA is the more urgent issue. President Trump's deadline for extending the waiver of sanctions on Iran – which is critical to U.S. support of the JCPOA – is May 12th. If President Trump does not grant that waiver, the U.S. will effectively have ended its participation in the JCPOA while all the other members of the 5+1: – our three most critical allies in Europe: Britain, France, and Germany – as well as China and Russia – will continue to support it.

It is unclear whether Iran will react by restoring the nuclear activities it gave up in joining the JCPOA. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has, however, threatened to do so – while saying that Iran will never seek a nuclear weapon. If Iran does renew the activity it gave up on Implementation Day, this will bring it steadily closer to the ability to produce significant numbers of nuclear weapons.

The Merits and Risks of the Agreement

It is unclear that President Trump has ever been fully briefed on the full technical impact of the JCPOA, but Iran did take the following actions by the day the agreement was implemented on January 1, 2016:

- Implement ban on uranium enrichment beyond 3.67 per cent and plutonium reprocessing.
- Eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, and placing limits on Iran's holdings of low enriched uranium (for 15 years).
- Reduce stockpiles of enriched uranium to agreed levels (cut of 98% from 10,000 kg to 300 kg) for 15 years, including the shipment of 11 ton (25,000 pounds) of low-enriched uranium materials from Iran to Russia.
- Remove numerous centrifuges (roughly two-thirds) and related infrastructure from its uranium enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordow, and place them in storage for 10 years. Cut from 19,000 centrifuges (of which 10,000 were operational) to no more than 6,104 operational centrifuges, with only 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges allowed to enrich uranium.
- Limit enrichment capacity to the Natanz plant, and centrifuges to IR-1 type centrifuges, the oldest and least efficient. Give up advanced IR-2M centrifuges for 10 years. The non-operating centrifuges will be stored in Natanz and monitored by IAEA, but may be used to replace failed centrifuges.
- Agree to not build any additional heavy-water reactors for 15 years.

- Limit nuclear R&D activity to the Natanz facility and accept certain limitations for the first eight years in order to limit Iran a breakout time to one year.
- Remove the core from the Arak heavy water reactor and fill the openings into the reactor core tank or calandria with concrete in ways that make it permanently inoperable.
- Modernize and rebuild the heavy-water research reactor in Arak to become an agreed design for peaceful nuclear research and production needs and purposes. Minimize the production of plutonium and not produce weapons grade plutonium. Limit power to 20 MWth (Megawatt thermal) and send all spent fuel out of country.
- Agree to not build new Heavy Water facilities for 15 years, and move towards implementation of a 130-metric-ton cap on Heavy Water. All excess Heavy Water will be sold internationally outside of country.
- Enhance access to uranium mines and mills, and continuous surveillance of centrifuge manufacturing and storage locations.
- Provisionally implement the Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement. Along with other verification measures – including the deployment of online inspection monitors – this significantly increase some aspects of the IAEA's ability to monitor nuclear activities.

None of these steps affected Iran's other actions: its development of ballistic and cruise missiles, and particularly ICBMs; its creation of a major mix of naval-missile-air forces to threaten naval and maritime traffic, and other targets in the Gulf and nearby waters in the Indian Ocean; and the steady expansion of its military presence, training efforts, and arms transfers in other states like Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and threats to other Arab states like Bahrain.

Experts also question the time limits affecting some aspects of the JCPOA, the level of inspection, and the nature of the nuclear weapons development activities that can go on with minimal risk of detection. They disagree over the importance of all these issues, and Iran did agree to not undertake any nuclear weapons development activities without time limits.

Nevertheless, the agreement does have potential weaknesses, and some U.S. policymakers fear that any major shift in outside economic ties to Iran growing out of the waiver of sanctions could create strong incentives for Europe, Russia, and China not to react if Iran was detected as moving back towards a nuclear weapons program.¹

The Strategic Impact of the JCPOA on the U.S.

These are valid concerns, but North Korea provides all too clear an example of the dangers posed by a state that goes ahead to develop nuclear weapons when arms control efforts fail. Imperfect agreements are the real-world price of any agreement in an imperfect world, and losing the support of key European allies and other states, and openly alienating Iran, seems likely to make Iran even more of a threat in terms of its missile forces, threat to traffic in the Gulf, and actions in states like Iraq and Syria. It also is likely to make the Arab Gulf states that are seeking nuclear power reactors even more likely to see these programs as routes to matching Iran's nuclear weapons efforts.

This mix of nuclear, missile, and other military threats poses a critical mix of threats to U.S. strategic interests. The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that the "Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important chokepoint, with an oil flow of 17 million b/d in 2015, about 30% of all seaborne-traded crude oil and other liquids during the year. In 2016, total flows through the Strait of Hormuz increased to a record high of 18.5 million b/d... EIA estimates that

about 80% of the crude oil that moved through this chokepoint went to Asian markets, based on data from Lloyd's List Intelligence tanker tracking service. China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Singapore are the largest destinations for oil moving through the Strait of Hormuz." Moreover, "Qatar exported about 3.7 trillion cubic feet per year of liquefied natural gas (LNG) ...more than 30% of global LNG trade. Kuwait imports LNG volumes that travel northward through the Strait of Hormuz."²

The U.S. has sharply reduced its imports of crude oil and now increasingly exports petroleum products. However, the global flow of oil out of the Gulf to other importing states is now far more critical to the operation of the global and U.S. economy than U.S. imports of crude ever were. It is critical to the flow of imports to the U.S. for which the U.S. has no domestic substitutes, it is critical to keeping world (and U.S. domestic) oil and gas prices low, and its impact on the global and U.S. economies affects every business and job in America.

Creating an Effective Compromise

The question then is whether President Trump can reach an agreement with President Macron that would create a compromise which could unify U.S. and European action, and act as powerful leverage on Russia and China. French officials have already indicated that some elements of such a compromise may be possible, and President Trump has a real opportunity to create a longer-term approach to the JCPOA that not only can compensate for its defects, but help address the other three threats that Iran poses to the U.S. and its strategic partners in the Middle East.

Such a compromise could have the following elements:

- A firm U.S.-British-French, German agreement, without any time limits, that any major Iranian violation of the agreement, or denial of key inspection activity, would lead to the collective "snap back" of sanctions – not only on Iran but other nations trading with Iran. This would focus on Iranian compliance, and real world Iranian actions, rather than theoretical arguments over arms control. the focus would shift from U.S. unilateral action without Iranian provocation to action based on clear justification.
- Similar agreement with our key European allies to create sanction based on Iran's longer-range missile programs that apply to both Iranian actions and suppliers of missile parts and technology. This would create a separate track for missile arms control, and one the U.S. and its allies could pursue without directly affecting the JCPOA.
- Creating a dialogue on collective U.S. and allied efforts to share the burden of power projection into the Gulf and Middle East, cooperate in dealing with both the threats posed by Iran and violent extremists, and halt the erosion of the power projection forces of key allies like Britain and France. It would lay the groundwork for a collective effort to strengthen Arab strategic partners in deterring and containing Iran and the extremist threat – measures which would also improve the security of Israel.
- Help lay the groundwork for improved post-Brexit cooperation in dealing with Russia, and ensuring the unity and effectiveness of NATO. It would also strengthen confidence in President Trump's endorsement of Article 5 in the NATO treaty and in the U.S. as a leader of the free world.

- Leave open the option of quietly making Iran's access to world markets conditional on its behavior not only in terms of the JCPOA, but a focus on its development and economy rather than expanding its strategic influence.

Dealing with a Post "Caliphate" Syria and the Broader Challenge of Terrorism and Extremism in the MENA Region

The second key issue that President Trump and President Macron need to address is what kind of continuing presence the U.S. and its European allies must maintain in the Syria – and more importantly, in the region. In the case of Syria, the options are both uncertain and far from attractive. There is also a history of differences between France and the U.S.

France has long supported a more active level of military intervention in Syria than the U.S., but there is now little point in debating "might have beens." A mix of Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah support has given Assad near victory over most of Syria, while Iran has steadily increased its security presence and influence in Iraq and the Hezbollah has become even more powerful in Lebanon. The majority of the Arab forces now opposing Assad in central and western Syria – by far the most populated and economically important parts of the country – have an uncertain or extremist set of political alignments and little remaining military strength.

The limited area where the U.S. retains influence in Syria is largely through its support of Kurdish forces that are seen as threat by Turkey, have an uncertain political structure and ideology, and uncertain links to the moderate remnants of the largely Arab Free Syrian Army. At the same time, this enclave is critical to fully defeating the organized remnants of ISIS, and securing the border of Iraq.

Here, President Trump has a point in suggesting that a sustained U.S. presence in Syria would by itself be of uncertain value, and that the U.S. should not become involved in any effort to help rebuild an Assad-dominated Syria and aid Russia, Iran, and the Hezbollah in the process.

Meeting the Broader Challenges

Both ISIS and Syria, however, are only part of the threats that U.S., France, Britain, and other European allies, Israel, and Arab strategic partners must deal with in determining their future presence and role in the region, and the need to maintain some form of presence in Syria. Syria and ISIS are only part of the broader regional strategic problems that they must deal with. What the U.S., France, and other allies need to focus on is something approaching a grand strategy that pay serious attention to the region and the future, rather than focus on a largely defeated single enemy in a narrow part of Eastern Syria and Western Iraq. Yes, defeating ISIS is important. But, the U.S., France, and other European allies need a regional strategy that addresses the following broader realities:

- *All the underlying causes of instability and extremism that built up in region from the late 1990s onwards, and helped trigger both the broad upheavals in 2011 and the rise of ISIS, have grown worse since 2011.* Often far worse. Ethnic, sectarian, and tribal tensions, unemployment, corruption, and weak or failed development. Population pressure and migration. Weak or failed politics and governance. Weak rule of law and high levels of internal violence. In many cases, these problems build on deep structural failures in development and governance, and the massive impact of social change, documented in UNDP, Arab Development, World Bank, and IMF reports that go back for well over three decades.

- *Iraq and Syria are only part of the critical threat of extremism and vulnerability to Iranian influence. The fighting in at least four nations has crippled their entire economies and structures of governance and security.* Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen face massive national challenges that affect every part of their deeply divided societies and their entire population. Egypt and Tunisia are marginal, and almost all MENA countries are under serious threat. The threat of political violence, ethnic and sectarian conflict, revenge seeking, and clashes between dislocated elements of the population is equally great and goes far beyond religious extremism.
- *Repairing wartime damage and humanitarian aid to Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen is only a tiny part of the challenge of creating lasting national stability even in these war-torn states.* In each case, the real problem is trying to compensate for a lost decade of national development in failed, violent states – roughly the equivalent of trying to rebuild an aircraft in midflight. The current focus on direct damage from the fighting against ISIS does meet a real humanitarian need – as does the less common effort to include that damage done by pro-Assad forces – but the mix of bipartisan and media concern that only focuses on wartime damage ignores the far more serious nationwide effects that war has had on the economy, employment, housing, and every aspect of civilian life.
- *None of the sources of violence have eased, and "defeating" ISIS in Iraq and Syria cannot defeat terrorism even in Syria and Iraq.* The START database indicates that ISIS was only responsible for some 1,370 significant acts of terrorism out of a total of 3,828 acts (36%) in 2016 – the last year reported. If one looks at the entire MENA region, ISIS and all of its affiliates were only responsible for 1,452 acts of terrorism out of 6,088 acts (24%) in 2016. Given all of the tensions in the region, and the other terrorist movements already active in the region, it is absurd to assume that defeating the ISIS "caliphate" will defeat terrorism, or end what is certain to be high levels of continuing extremist terrorism and ethnic, sectarian, and tribal violence.
- *State terrorism, repression, and authoritarian violence from governments like the Assad regime are as much or more of a threat than ISIS in nations like Syria.* There is no easy way to quantify the fact that some of the worse terrorism and repression in the region comes from states, including secular regimes like Assad in Syria. Iran, and its support of the Hezbollah, is one such example, but Syria is clearly the worst case. Sources such as the World Bank estimate that there have been 460,000 killed, and some 1.5 million injured, in the fighting in Syria since 2011. Ruthless as ISIS and some elements of the Syrian resistance have been, most of these civilian casualties has been caused by attacks by pro-Assad forces in Western Syria (probably around two-thirds).

Syria as a Case Example

Syria is not the worst case in the region. Yemen and Somalia are both cases of worse failed states. Syria is, however, a key case in point, and a warning that the U.S. cannot simply withdraw without considering the impact on the Syrian people, its Arab strategic partners, and Israel. It is also a key warning that – as is the case in Iraq and every other conflict state in the region – the challenge is not to simply negotiate an end to the immediate fighting or deal with the reconstruction of direct wartime damage. The problem is to deal with all the major causes of internal violence, and with what is the equivalent to of a lost decade in development. Even a top line summary of Syria's most

critical statistics based on UN, World Bank, and CIA data illustrates the sheer scale of Syria's problems:

- Population: Dropped to 18.0 million by 08/2017 (CIA).
- Casualties (and sources of future anger and revenge) now equal 400,000-460,000+ dead and 1.2 million+ injured (World Bank).
- 5.2 million Syrians refugees (UNHCR).
- 13.1 million Syrians in need, 5.6M in acute need (UNHCR).
- 8.2 million Syrians living in areas with hostilities (UNHCR).
- 5.3 million Syrians in shelters, 1.2 million without shelter (UNHCR).
- 6.1 million internally displaced persons in Syria. 1.8 million of these IDPs were added in 2017. These IDPs also impact on a total of 12.3 million Syrians (UNHCR).
- GDP declined 70%+ from 2011 to 2017 (CIA).
- GDP per capita dropped to \$2,900 by 2015 – 193rd in world (CIA).
- 82.5% of the population had fallen below the poverty line by 2014 (CIA).
- CIA estimates 50% unemployment in total work force in 2017, 215th in world. World Bank estimates was 15.2% of those still seeking work versus 6.8% in 1991 (ILO criteria estimate).
- Fifty-eight percent of the population in Syria is constituted by people below the age of 24 years of age. The World Bank estimates that an extremely young population had 34% youth unemployment among those seeking work in 2017, compared to only 12.6% in 1991. A different source using different criteria estimates that the youth unemployment rate is 48 per cent. This is six times higher than the rate of unemployment among adults. Seventy-five per cent of these unemployed young people (15-24 years old) have been without employment for more than a year (International Fund for Agricultural Development).
- Critical trade imbalance: Imports \$5.6 billion in 2017, exports \$1.8 billion (CIA).
- Extremely poor World Bank governance ratings. The World Bank ratings for 2016 approached zero (worst possible rating) in voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence and terrorism, government effectiveness, rule of law, and control of corruption in 2016 – the most recent year rated.
- Transparency International ranks Syria as the 3rd most corrupt of 200 countries in the world.
- No meaningful current estimate of wartime damage to economy. As of 2016, cost was \$226 billion, 4 X GDP in 2010 (World Bank).

No one can estimate the cost of a recovery path for a nation still at war, divided, and with little chance of moving towards a lasting peace. An earlier World Bank estimate indicated that if the conflict ended in its 6th year, a stable Syria consistently pursuing economic reform and development could recoup recoups about 41% of the gap with its pre-conflict level of GDP within 4 years, and with cumulated GDP losses equal to 7.6 times 2010 GDP by the 20th year. It estimated that Syria could recoup only 28% of the gap in its GDP in 4 years if the war ended in 10th year, with cumulated GDP losses 13.2 times 2010 GDP by the 20th year.

There is no clear U.S., French, or any other, answer to this level of loss and suffering, but every outside state needs to look far beyond what are likely to be ephemeral peace negotiations. One of the great tragedies of the current crisis is that Assad failed to move toward reform and effective leadership and governance in 2011, has failed to make any progress ever since, and cannot be trusted to make progress in the future.

No negotiation that simply puts a temporary end to the fighting is likely to reconcile Syria's largely Sunni population with Assad and his mix of Alawites, his foreign and domestic Shi'ite-led forces. Also, both the remnants of ISIS and the U.S.-supported Kurdish enclave in the Northeast are only part of a far broader challenges that not only affects Syria, but every state in the region.

Moving Towards as Post-ISIS Strategy

If the U.S. and its European allies are to secure their strategic interests in the Middle East and North Africa, they need to accept the fact that there is no near-term point at which they can somehow withdraw from the region, and that the struggle against terrorism, extremism, and internal conflict can be won on any lasting basis. They need to understand that any defeat of ISIS is only the prelude to a long series of efforts to limit terrorist and extremist threats that include Iran and Hezbollah as well as Sunni groups, and ethnic, sectarian, and tribal tensions and conflicts as well as religious extremists.

Accordingly, any Trump-Macron dialogue on Syria should be the beginning of a common effort to set strategic goals to go beyond ISIS, the current fighting, and the direct effects of this fighting. It should reflect the need to develop a common civil-military strategy that addresses all of the most critical causes of violence and instability, and that focuses on longer-term results that can actually be achieved.

It should also address the reality that any lasting defeat of extremism, and effort to create enduring stability, does require common efforts and some form of ongoing support in "nation building." There is no military answer to either the broad level of instability in the region or the extremist and Iranian threats. At the same time, it is clear there will be no massive flood of outside aid, and it is time that Syria and other regional states fully understand that they will need to create stability largely at their own expense; that all outside aid will be conditional on how well and honestly, they use it, and that they work with international agencies like UNDP, the World Bank, and IMF to both help themselves and set realistic goals for reform.

As best, reliance on internal resources and self-financing through reform and more effective planning, policies, and reform will often mean slow and uncertain progress, and triage by the U.S., France, and other donors that only extended any aid beyond urgent humanitarian need to those states whose government clearly merit it and use it effectively.

At the same time, some outside aid will be critical, and the U.S., France, and their allies cannot shift this burden to Arab strategic partners. Even the wealthiest Gulf states are still developing states, and almost all already are already paying a far larger percentage of their economy on defense than the U.S: and an average of well over twice the percentage that the U.S. is paying and three time that of NATO, and some key partners like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq are paying 10% or more of their GDP. Saudi Arabia has to fund a major economic development plan and Iraq is bankrupt.

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¹ These issues are explored in depth in a separate Burke Chair analysis: *U.S. Strategy, the JCPOA Iranian Nuclear Arms Agreement, and the Gulf: Playing the Long Game*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-strategy-jcpoa-iranian-nuclear-arms-agreement-and-gulf-playing-long-game>.

² EIA, *World Transit Chokepoints*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/regions-topics.cfm?Regiontopicid=WOTC>.