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# A Strategy for Syria:

## *Redefining Success*

*By Jon B. Alterman*

Four years ago, the United States started committing troops to Syria. Four years into operations, the troops are clear what they have to do every day. What they are unclear about is why.

At a recent gathering in Washington, a U.S. general lamented that the United States has multiple policy goals in Syria, but it has not been able either to prioritize or deconflict them. That is a problem. A collection of aspirations does not provide a path toward success. While it is encouraging that the United States has taken a more active approach to Syria in recent months, the new approach cannot succeed absent a much more serious discussion about U.S. strategy in the country. U.S. goals and U.S. means need to be adjusted.

This problem is not exclusive to the Trump administration. Late in the Obama administration, a senior Pentagon official privately complained that the military was being asked to operate in Syria without a clear desired end state. The United States was sending troops and weapons to Syria, but with broad public skepticism toward military engagement there, along with an administration wary of open-ended wars in the Middle East and unclear Congressional authorization for military action, the United States had more of a holding pattern than a plan for victory.

At various times and in various ways, the Trump administration has articulated at least four policy goals for Syria. The first is defeating the Islamic State group (ISG), relying on a 2001 authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) in response to the September 11 attacks. The second is finding a way to end Syria's seven-year civil war, operationalizing UN Security Council resolutions that were adopted unanimously. The third is protecting U.S. allies and partners. The fourth is expelling Iran from the Levant.

All of these things are desirable, but it is not clear that they are entirely achievable or compatible. The ISG is likely to persist for years, partly in the shadows in Syria, and partly through affiliates in ungoverned spaces and urban centers around the world. Despite its name it is not a state, and it will not surrender; it is an idea whose threshold for survival is low and will likely endure. At the other end of the spectrum, Iran's deep-rooted presence in the Middle East has evolved over decades and will persist for decades more. It is not merely the military champion of Shi'a communities that have long felt marginalized throughout the region. Its financial, moral, and diplomatic support of those communities have

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### COSMIC INTERVENTION

"So, in the coming year," asks Egyptian TV personality Amr Adib, "Egypt will be more orderly and more stable because Saturn is in Capricorn?"

"Exactly," says Passant Youssef, one of a number of astrologers whose predictions are delivered on pro-regime TV shows and in newspapers across Egypt. The Egyptian government seems to be using horoscopes as a new avenue for disseminating pro-regime messages, hoping that their mystical quality lends credibility to government messaging that is lacking in other outlets.

While orthodox Islam frowns on fortune telling, astrology has a long history in the Middle East's popular culture, and especially in Egypt. Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, political horoscopes have exploded. Fortune tellers appear on television and in print, expressing their confidence that President Sisi is leading Egypt to a secure and prosperous future because he is a Scorpio and "possesses a great deal of patience and fortitude." Meanwhile, his political foes are cursed with bad fortune. His jailed predecessor Mohamed Morsi's stars are not aligned, according to one astrologer, as he "operates mindlessly based on his emotions and has illusions of grandeur, since he is a Leo."

Horoscopes also toe the regime line by encouraging struggling Egyptians not to expect government handouts. Youssef predicts, "Egyptians will learn how to do things themselves, rather than ask for them… They will hold themselves accountable." In early 2018, Egyptian astrologers reached a consensus that the year would produce a flourishing economy, increased tourism, and great military, political, and diplomatic achievements. To their predictions, the astrologers were careful to include a cautious *in sha allah*—God willing. ■ HP

### NEW REPORT: SCORCHED EARTH

The CSIS Middle East Program released a new report by Margo Balboni that outlines the challenges and opportunities raised by climate change in the region, particularly in Iraq and Yemen, which both suffer from a scarcity of water and cultivable land. The broad challenge in these countries is to ensure that aid and investments in recovery and development plans align with environmental concerns. It is important for reconstruction efforts to take into consideration current and future climate risks when rebuilding systems or infrastructure, potentially turning a threat into an opportunity. Read the full report HERE. ■

## IN THE MEDIA

Jon Alterman spoke to a number of outlets including *The New York Times*, *Fox News*, and *CNN* about the international response to the disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. 10/13/18-10/16/18

"The U.S.-Saudi relationship is more important to Saudi Arabia than it is to the U.S.," Jon Alterman told the *Washington Post*, "and reinvigorating that relationship had been one of the core accomplishments of [Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman]." 10/17/18

"The story of the [Future Investment Initiative] conference isn't going to be incredible growth in Saudi Arabia," says Jon Alterman in an interview with *CBS News*. "The story of the conference will be who came and who didn't come." 10/19/18

*Politico* interviewed Jon Alterman about Nikki Haley's October 9 resignation from her post as UN ambassador. 10/9/18

Jon Alterman spoke to The Associated Press and *ABC News* about Trump's visit to the UNGA and how world leaders have adapted to interacting with him. 9/21/18

"Islamic State is one more militia among many militias competing for resources, territory and recruits. [Islamic State] is a threat to Libya, but it's not its primary challenge. Libya's main problem is multiple political divisions that are manipulated by external actors and that create a vacuum for [Islamic State] to exploit," says Haim Malka in an interview in *Energy Compass*. 9/21/18

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won loyalty over time. Its agitation against what many find an unjust status quo has won admiration outside of the Shi'a world. While Iran's regional influence can be—and should be—trimmed, vowing to push Iran back within its borders is somewhere between quixotic and Sisyphean.

That is not the only problem with these ambitions. In some cases, the pursuit of one goal inhibits the pursuit of another. Finding a political solution to the Syrian civil war will require compromise. The United States has less influence than almost any other party with interests in the conflict, not least the Iranians. Some sort of accommodation with Iran and its allies will need to be found. Expelling Iran from the region (as opposed to limiting its presence) cuts against the goal of achieving a political settlement. Similarly, some sort of Iranian presence actually contributes to fighting jihadis, whose hatred of Iran may exceed their hatred of the United States.

Currently, the Trump administration is caught between a series of statements and plans that do not mesh easily and are sometimes contradictory. On April 4, 2018, President Trump told his military commanders he wanted U.S. troops home "in a few months," and on September 24, National Security Adviser John Bolton vowed that U.S. troops would remain in Syria "as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders, and that includes Iranian proxies and militias." It has withheld appropriated funds to make areas recently liberated from the ISG more habitable and is relying on others to supply funds for Syrian reconstruction. The administration seems to be pursuing maximalist goals with minimalist means.

The first step to fixing this is getting the priorities right. The principal goal of U.S. policy needs to be forging a settlement in Syria that serves U.S. interests. It might seem overly modest to elevate flailing political processes embraced by the UN Security Council as pre-eminent over others that involve U.S. military might. Why negotiate instead of fight for victory? The answer is that a settlement in Syria advances many U.S. goals, while the absence of a settlement undermines them. A war-torn Syria embeds a whole range of actors hostile to the United States, its allies, and its interests; a settlement indifferent to U.S. interests does the same.

If the focus of U.S. efforts shifts to the terms of a settlement, this would require a shift in several other aspects of U.S. policy. Most importantly, it means U.S. actions must be judged by whether they enhance U.S. leverage in negotiations or weaken that leverage. Many U.S. administrations have approached conflicts with the assumption that the United States by its very presence will be the dominant party in any negotiations. That is a mistake. The ineffectiveness of the political negotiations in Geneva, and the progress made in Russian-brokered talks in Sochi, Astana, and elsewhere is a sign that no one sees the United States as a vital partner. It needs to be.

One way to secure U.S. status as a vital partner is through a serious diplomatic push. The United States touted the assembly of a more-than 60-country alliance to fight the ISG in Syria, but regrettably no similar alliance is pushing for a Syria settlement. The U.S. military presence in eastern Syria also needs to be used as a point of influence and leverage, and U.S. willingness to participate in Syria's economic reconstruction must be on the table.

All of this will not produce a clean victory in Syria. There will be no clean victory in Syria. But the accomplishment of one goal will allow the pursuit of others. And not only that: it will also give the U.S. military and other U.S. officials a strategic framework for their actions. We owe them at least that much. ■ 10/22/18