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Five Conundrums: The United States and the Conflict in Syria

by Michael A. Ratney



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Syrian Kurdish sniper looks at rubble in city of Ain al-Arab, also known as Kobani, January 30, 2015 (AP)

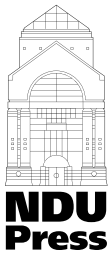
Five Conundrums

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By Michael A. Ratney

*Institute for National Strategic Studies
Strategic Perspectives, No. 32*

Series Editor: Thomas F. Lynch III



National Defense University Press
Washington, D.C.
July 2019

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First printing, July 2019

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For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Publishing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512-1800; DC area (202) 512-1800
Fax: (202) 512-2104 Mail: Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20402-0001

ISBN 978-0-16-095225-8

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Conundrum 1: The Paradoxical Consequences of Pressuring the Asad Regime	5
Conundrum 2: The Fatal Limitations of the Syrian Opposition	6
Conundrum 3: When a Partner Force Threatens an Ally	10
Conundrum 4: The Confounding Necessity of Working with Russia	12
Conundrum 5: The Inimical Effect of Foreign Intervention on Civil Wars	15
Implications for U.S. Policy: Syria as a Complex System	17
Conclusion	19
Notes	20
About the Author	31

Executive Summary

For the past 8 years, two U.S. administrations, the United Nations (UN), and numerous foreign governments have sought to end the catastrophic war in Syria and reach a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. Their efforts have repeatedly been complicated, even thwarted, by the highly contested and violent politics underlying the conflict, the sheer number of conflict actors inside and outside of Syria, and those actors' diverse and often irreconcilable objectives.

Many of the complications for U.S. policy have stemmed from the need for policymakers to focus on three separate but intertwined dimensions of the Syrian conflict, even while policy options to deal with one dimension of the conflict had significant but often unpredictable effects on the others. The first dimension has been the campaign to deal an enduring territorial defeat upon the so-called Islamic State (IS), an element of U.S. policy that enjoyed near unanimous international consensus and adequate means to accomplish the task. The second is the central conflict between the Bashar al-Asad regime and its opponents, an existential power struggle that drew in multiple foreign powers and yielded nearly unimaginable destruction of Syrian property, infrastructure, and lives. And the third is the strategic challenge of Iran and its drive to eliminate U.S. influence in the Middle East.

As the United States and other parties sought to navigate these three dimensions of the conflict, a set of paradoxical challenges—conundrums—emerged and, in some cases, made the situation in Syria even more intractable and a solution on terms favorable to U.S. national security even more elusive.

This paper discusses five such conundrums. The first is that military, political, and economic pressure on the Asad regime, a principal feature of U.S. and Western policy, in many ways exacerbated problems for Syrian civilians, the Syrian opposition, and Syria's neighbors without yielding political concessions or reforms to the nature of Syrian governance. The second involves the Syrian opposition—though highly fragmented save for most extremist elements and thus an ineffective force for driving political change in Syria, the United States nonetheless continued to accord it considerable international support and legitimacy. The third conundrum deals with the challenges of balancing the U.S. relationship with Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, while simultaneously working with a Kurdish-led militia viewed by Turkey as a national security threat. The fourth centers on Russia's involvement in Syria and, specifically, the contradictory need for the United States and Russia to work together in Syria even while the two countries hold opposing views on a continued role for Bashar al-Asad in Syria's governance. And the fifth conundrum is that foreign interventions in the Syrian conflict,

including those designed to counter the Asad regime's brutality and hasten a resolution of the conflict, may actually have made the war longer and bloodier, particularly for civilians. This is consistent with the historical experience with foreign intervention in civil wars elsewhere.

This discussion of these five conundrums is neither an appeal for greater U.S. involvement nor a recommendation to stand aside in the face of threats to our allies, partners, and national interests. The conundrums do, however, carry a number of implications as policymakers contemplate the U.S. approach in Syria and beyond, including:

- Pressure on Asad to change his regime's behavior carries unwelcome ramifications for the United States and its allies—particularly greater regime dependence on Iran—and negative consequences borne disproportionately by Syrian civilians and Syria's neighbors.
- The anti-Asad cause may be incapable of coalescing around an effective, cohesive, and truly moderate entity that could carry the weight that the United States and others in the international community had put on its shoulders.
- Partnering with nonstate actors, particularly those with political objectives that go beyond those of the United States, carries hazards and raises sometime unfulfillable expectations. The United States has rarely made a long-term commitment to nonstate partners, suggesting that the limits of what is essentially a transactional relationship should be made clear at the outset.
- U.S. involvement in Syria is difficult without some measure of cooperation or coordination with Russia. But potential common ground is extremely limited, particularly while the Russians perceive that the United States effectively seeks a Syria without Asad. The prospect of reconstruction assistance for a post-Asad Syria or sanctions on the regime are unlikely to induce Russian cooperation on U.S. aims.

At the end of the day, foreign involvement in such a complex and volatile situation as Syria yields, almost inevitably, unpredictable consequences. But many of the negative consequences of the Syrian conflict were actually predictable, particularly Asad's brutal reaction to the uprising, his refusal to yield to pressure, Iran and Russia's support for the regime, and the potential for foreign intervention to exacerbate the situation for Syrian civilians. Taken together, the consequences—both predictable and unpredictable—may ultimately prove to outweigh the benefits of getting involved in the first place.

Introduction

For 8 years, two U.S. administrations, the United Nations (UN), and numerous foreign governments have pursued the elusive goal of resolving the calamitous conflict in Syria. The highly contested and violent politics underlying the conflict, the number of conflict actors inside and outside of Syria, and their diverse and often irreconcilable objectives—in other words, the conflict’s sheer complexity—have thwarted efforts to solve it. Indeed, even the definition of *resolution* remains unresolved; while UN Security Council Resolution 2254 may be the most widely accepted template, it is vague enough to allow all parties—the United States and Iran, for example—to see and justify a desirable end state in starkly different terms.¹

Many of the complications for U.S. policy have stemmed from the need for policymakers to focus on three separate but intertwined dimensions of the Syrian conflict, and that options to deal with one dimension had significant but often unpredictable effects on the others. The three primary conflict dimensions of interest to U.S. policymakers have included:

- The “manageable problem,” which is our military effort to deal the so-called Islamic State (IS), is an enduring territorial defeat in Syria. *Manageable* may seem an odd description for what has been a long and difficult military campaign. But it has been the one problem whose dimensions we can mostly comprehend, fashion a coherent and effective military strategy to deal with, and see through to a clear and hopefully satisfying end. That is not to discount the tenacity of IS or the broader challenge of resilient Salafi jihadism in Syria and the region. In fact, the challenge of preventing the reemergence of IS may be just as difficult as destroying its current incarnation. That said, the collective campaign to destroy IS’s territorial control in Iraq and Syria has been relatively straightforward given both the unanimous international political consensus, even among adversaries, on the need to defeat the group, and the available means to accomplish the task.²
- The “meta-problem” is the original and central issue in Syria, and the one that hangs over and weaves its way through all others: the conflict between the Asad regime and its opponents. This has been, first and foremost, an existential power struggle among a great many Syrian groups and the Syrian government that manifested itself as a splintered and bloody insurgency, sent millions of refugees streaming outward, spurred radicalization, attracted thousands of foreign terrorist fighters, destroyed untold billions of dollars of infrastructure, and shattered many thousands of families and communities. The conflict has also sucked multiple foreign powers into Syria, making it an international conflict playing

out not only inside Syria, but in Geneva, Astana, and among foreign capitals around the world.

■ The “mega-problem,” which is Iran. Iran has become the major strategic challenge in the Middle East for the United States and for our allies, and Syria is now a central venue where the multifarious challenge of Iran, including its drive to eliminate U.S. influence in the Middle East, presents itself. Even if IS is destroyed, and even if the war between the Asad regime and its opponents finds an end, we will still be left with an Iran seeking hegemony from Tehran to Beirut, re-ordering the politics in the region in destabilizing ways and, in so doing, feeding sectarian tensions and threatening the safety of U.S. personnel and the security of some of our closest allies.³

These three dimensions help explain the complexity of the conflict and hint at the difficulty of reaching a neat and satisfying resolution.⁴ But as the United States and other parties sought to navigate toward a resolution early on in the conflict, the complexity grew further, and a set of conundrums emerged that wend across and wind through these three dimensions of the conflict. The word *conundrum* does not simply suggest challenges, or even particularly thorny problems. What the word should convey is that some of the ends the United States pursued—and some of the tools deployed—led to unexpected, counterintuitive, and paradoxical results, and in so doing actually made the conflict *more* difficult to end on favorable terms.

What follows is a discussion of five such conundrums that point toward a set of policy implications for decisionmakers. The first conundrum argues that pressure on the Asad regime—long at the heart of U.S. policy—actually exacerbated the problems for United States and its partners, for Syria’s neighbors, and for ordinary Syrians. The second confronts the fatal weaknesses of the Syrian opposition and discusses why a fragmented opposition—save for the most radical and irreconcilable elements—made a political resolution of the conflict less likely. The third discusses the challenge of preserving our relationship with Turkey, an important North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, while the U.S. military partners with a Syrian militia that Turkey regards as a profound national security threat. The fourth discusses the Russians and the contradictory need for the United States and Russia to work together in Syria even while the two countries pursue largely antithetical ends. And the fifth, not so much a discrete conundrum, looks at historical research on civil wars over the past 25 years and concludes, among other things, that foreign intervention designed to hasten the war’s end may actually have made it longer and bloodier, and brought more misery on the civilian population.

These five conundrums are not necessarily exhaustive nor comprehensive—in a conflict as complex as Syria, there are undoubtedly others. But this may give a sense of the heavy challenge of resolving the Syrian conflict and the paradoxical effects of our involvement in such a complex system over which the United States has had relatively little control. The article concludes with some implications for policymakers seeking to bring the conflict to an end, and reflects on the unintended and unpredictable consequences of U.S. involvement in foreign conflicts in Syria and beyond.

Conundrum 1: The Paradoxical Consequences of Pressuring the Asad Regime

The first conundrum relates to the perverse effect of pressure on the Asad regime. From early in the conflict, the most prevalent theory among opposition supporters, particularly in the West, was that military and economic pressure would induce the Asad regime to make substantial concessions in a political process, up to and including Bashar al-Asad's departure from power and a "political transition" resulting in a fundamentally restructured Syrian government.⁵ But after 8 years of conflict, and a lot more pressure on the Syrian regime than many observers seem to realize,⁶ half the country is displaced,⁷ hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed, and the physical damage to the country may be incalculable. And yet, Asad is still there. Not even during the darkest days of the conflict did he or his regime ever make a sincere commitment to implement the fundamental reforms or devolution of executive power that the opposition and its supporters demanded. It now seems more likely that Asad and the Syrian regime would have destroyed the country before yielding, effectively making good on the chilling slogan of pro-government forces, "Asad, or we burn the country."⁸ Thus the theory that pressure could produce a political transformation in the Syrian regime was based, at least in part, on a misunderstanding of the nature of the Syrian state, its sheer kill-or-be-killed tenacity, and the commitment of Russia and Iran to maintaining that state intact with Bashar al-Asad as its president.⁹ Instead of a political transition, pressure yielded only mayhem and destitution.

It is worth recalling that the protests in Syria began during the Arab Spring, a time of considerable regional upheaval when Arab populations were demanding not just political reforms, but the overthrow of their long-entrenched leaders.¹⁰ But as the Dutch scholar and diplomat Nikolaos van Dam suggests, the Asad regime, as a minoritarian government, is highly disinclined—including out of fear of revenge—to make any significant political concessions, much less permit the actual departure of the president.¹¹ Even minor concessions could fatally shake the support of various elements of the Syrian state and society that depend on Asad. Moreover,

the Syrian regime is largely centralized; its component parts—particularly the military and the security services—derive considerable material benefits from their service and compete in their loyalty to Asad and his inner circle, making it relatively coup-proof.¹² As a result, Asad is not only unlikely to show any flexibility or willingness to devolve executive authority under pressure, he—like his father—has shown a marked willingness to respond brutally to any hint of rebellion. “Hama Rules” is what the author and journalist Thomas Friedman famously called it after the massacre deployed by Hafez al-Asad to put down a Muslim Brotherhood insurrection in the city of Hama in 1982.¹³ Observers who knew Asad’s Syria best tended to be the least optimistic that a strategy of pressure on the regime would yield even cosmetic political concessions, let alone ones that were tantamount to regime change.¹⁴

Consistent with the escalatory logic of foreign interventions,¹⁵ the pressure Asad did experience—and which badly weakened him by the summer of 2015¹⁶—triggered a counterescalation, and brought in the Russians in a big way, with sophisticated air defenses, cruise missiles, fighter jets, and a merciless military doctrine that yielded huge numbers of civilian casualties. So, short of a massive intervention to actually decapitate the regime, it is hard to imagine that military pressure would ever have had the desired effect.¹⁷ The Syrian regime simply had friends with much stronger interests in its survival than the United States did in its removal.

More problematically for the United States and its allies, not only did pressure on Asad fail to bring about political concessions, and not only did it precipitate a major Russian escalation, but it also brought something even more dangerous: more Iranians. Military, economic, and diplomatic pressure on the regime transformed Syria’s historically friendly relationship with Iran¹⁸ into an existential necessity.¹⁹ The numbers of Iranian and Iranian proxy forces have reportedly increased, and Syrian dependence on Iran has grown.²⁰ Military pressure, instead of forcing a change in leadership and the nature of Syrian governance, has only exacerbated the problem of Iranian influence in Syria, a major concern for our Israeli and Jordanian allies.

Conundrum 2: The Fatal Limitations of the Syrian Opposition

The second conundrum has to do with the Syrian opposition, on which the United States and other countries long staked hopes for a political resolution of the conflict and a decent future for the Syrian people. The opposition, however, had two fatal flaws that made it an unsuitable tool for those seeking political change in Syria. The first was fragmentation, which made it impossible for the opposition to credibly commit to political agreements. Fragmentation may have also contributed to the U.S. and the West’s misunderstanding of the opposition, particularly the seriousness of its second fatal flaw: the fact that extremist armed actors were,

from early on, the dominant force on the ground and the principal factor in opposition military successes.²¹

The Syrian opposition—as it has come to be constituted since the beginning of 2011—is a diverse collection of individuals, political organizations, and armed militias that share the overarching goal of unseating Asad and replacing his regime with something else.²² Its component parts include:

- A political leadership, itself often suffering from internal competition and disorganization, made up largely of exiles, many of whom were prominent figures before the uprising, who lobbied the international community and represented anti-Asad forces in the UN-sponsored political process²³
- A large number of ideologically diverse militias operating inside the country, which had only weak, often mistrustful, links to each other and to the diaspora figures who ostensibly represented them²⁴
- A multitude of civil society organizations of various political affiliations operating inside and outside Syria²⁵
- Opposition-aligned governance bodies—such as local councils, opposition courts, and police forces—active in opposition-held areas inside Syria.²⁶

Fragmentation among opposition groups, both inside Syria and in exile, had two effects. First, it made the United States more cautious about a decisive intervention aimed at overthrowing the regime, particularly after it became clear that the regime would not fall on its own (à la Tunisia or Egypt). This sense was, by the time the Barack Obama administration had to contemplate the issue, growing more acute in light of the then-unfolding disaster in Libya.²⁷

And second, fragmentation meant that no single actor or combination of actors within it could credibly commit the opposition as a single entity in political negotiations, or even in national ceasefire discussions, making a resolution less likely.²⁸ Even if the opposition's adversaries wanted to strike a peace deal,²⁹ none could trust that the opposition could implement it. Further, the fact that the opposition was represented principally by exiles became a major weakness, not least because they were quickly viewed as detached and insulated from events on the ground in Syria and thus lacked the urgency, influence, and legitimacy necessary to negotiate credibly.³⁰



Secretary of State John Kerry speaks with Riad Hijab, leader of the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition, at French Foreign Ministry following multilateral meeting about Syria, May 9, 2016, in Paris (State Department)

The history of the conflict saw multiple efforts to resolve the problem of opposition disorganization, including the creation of the Syrian National Council in 2011;³¹ its expansion into the Syrian Opposition Coalition in 2012;³² the December 2015 formation in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, of the High Negotiations Commission (HNC);³³ and its transformation into the Syrian Negotiation Committee in 2017.³⁴ The HNC, which spanned the ideological spectrum, was the broadest opposition coalition to date and, for the first time, had the support of most major armed opposition groups (and the direct participation of some of them). But the representativeness of these umbrella groups did not equate to ideological unity, and so they failed to resolve the fundamental problem of internal fragmentation and competition that had long plagued the opposition. Indeed, the formation of such broad coalitions had the contrary effect that they could coalesce only around positions that effectively ruled out flexibility in negotiations.

The opposition's second fatal flaw was that the most potent unifiers among the armed opposition groups have been extremists, and al Qaeda in particular. Over the course of the Syrian conflict there has been significant tension between the most hardline armed groups (including irreconcilable jihadi movements) and more moderate nationalist elements, which branded

themselves as the Free Syrian Army.³⁵ The conflict has steadily seen those more moderate elements dominated by, absorbed into, or completely dismantled by more radical groups, particularly the al Qaeda–affiliated al-Nusra Front and its later incarnation³⁶, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.³⁷ On this the Asad regime was clearly complicit; having painted the opposition as gangs of terrorists, Asad helped ensure that they lived up to that characterization, including by releasing some of the most radical militants from regime prisons.³⁸ However, these same extremists also received significant money and weapons from foreign supporters,³⁹ and seemed to benefit from greater religious and ideological cohesion. So, it is not clear if regime actions, while invidious, were decisive in the extremist groups’ relative unity and effectiveness.⁴⁰

That extremist actors came to dominate the opposition and were, by mid-2013, the leading actors on the ground, had disastrous consequences for the opposition movement. Unity under extremist groups, once achieved, made a resolution even *less* likely because it empowered groups that both the international community and the regime regarded as unacceptable. The prominence of hardline and highly sectarian opposition groups also very likely firmed up the regime’s core bases of support. This included support for the regime among urban Sunnis (as well as Christians and other minorities) who, far from feeling any kind of affinity with the likes of al Qaeda or even less extreme Islamist groups, believed they would suffer just as much as an Alawite should the opposition seize Syria’s major cities. These fears likely contributed to the reluctance among Syrians in urban areas to take up arms against the state.⁴¹

Thus, the two parties to the UN-sponsored, but “Syrian-led,”⁴² negotiations on which the international community has staked so much would be a regime that—as noted earlier—is incapable of making concessions lest it risk a potentially uncontrollable slide toward its own demise, and an opposition split between a cohesive cadre of irreconcilable extremists and a fractured collection of militias and exile political figures who lack sufficient unity, legitimacy, and influence over forces and territory. For the Syrian regime and its supporters, this all made the option of using military force to eliminate the opposition relatively more attractive. The net result is that prospects for a conflict-ending political process have been bleak, and the track record of recent years bears this out.

Meanwhile, following the rise of IS in Syria in 2014, the strongest local U.S. partner in Syria has been the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the backbone of which is a Kurdish militia, the People’s Protection Units, or YPG.⁴³ The SDF has been the critical U.S. partner in the campaign to destroy the so-called Islamic State. The group is coherent and centralized and, for reasons of its secular ideology, is highly resistant to infiltration by Islamic extremists. So, besides fighting

competently, it can more reliably make and enforce deals with other parties in the war. But it also created another profound conundrum for U.S. policy.

Conundrum 3: When a Partner Force Threatens an Ally

The third conundrum relates to our alliance with Turkey and our partnership with this Syrian militia—the SDF—in the campaign to defeat IS. More generally, this is the conundrum of partnering with any local nonstate actor that has a different, or broader, set of objectives than the United States. The U.S.-led counter-IS campaign in Syria is one such case.

Since the beginning of the conflict, U.S. policy for Syria has relied on Turkey, an important NATO ally that shares a long border with Syria, and for much of the war shared many of the United States' political objectives. The U.S. Government established one of its main platforms for humanitarian and other nonlethal assistance to the Syrian opposition in Turkey, and worked extensively with Turkish counterparts on virtually all aspects of the Syrian conflict.⁴⁴ But as the war ground on, and particularly as the focus of U.S. involvement in Syria shifted from the anti-Asad opposition to the fight against IS, Turkish and U.S. interests in Syria became harder to reconcile.



Syrian Democratic Forces formation marches during victory ceremony over defeat of Daesh's so-called physical caliphate, March 23, 2019, at Omar Academy, Deir ez-Zor, Syria (U.S. Army/Ray Boyington)

A turning point in U.S.-Turkey relations came between September 2014 and early 2015 when the U.S. military began conducting airstrikes in Syria. The strikes were partly in support of the YPG, then fighting to break the IS siege of Kobani.⁴⁵ As it became clear that the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition's relationship with the YPG would extend beyond the battle for Kobani, tension in the U.S.-Turkey relationship grew sharply. With a paucity of good options, it quickly became clear that the YPG—which by October 2015 was being broadened with the support of the U.S. military into the multiethnic SDF—was the only ready force in Syria capable of eliminating IS on the ground and operating effectively with the United States. The YPG is highly organized, making it capable of both holding and securing territory. In addition, the YPG and its various political wings are secular and hostile to Islamists, particularly IS and other Salafi jihadi extremists, and the group's aims, which include a high degree of autonomy in historically Kurdish territories⁴⁶ and other SDF-controlled areas, effectively necessitate the elimination of jihadis.

The U.S. partnership with the SDF, however, was an affront to Turkey and fed a souring of the relationship more broadly.⁴⁷ Turkey, having fought a decades-long campaign against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), perceived the group as a threat to its territorial integrity and regarded the YPG, at least in Turkish public rhetoric, as terrorists on a par with al Qaeda or IS.⁴⁸ More importantly, Turkey feared a U.S. political relationship with the YPG could have negative implications for its fight against the PKK in Turkey, a fight that had for decades enjoyed U.S. support.

On multiple occasions, the United States explored other possibilities, including constitution of a totally new anti-IS force made up of Turkish-supported opposition groups to be trained and equipped by the U.S. military.⁴⁹ But no other option proved viable and capable of supporting the U.S.-led coalition's urgency and maintaining its momentum in the campaign to defeat IS, particularly as it turned south along the Middle Euphrates River Valley in the fall of 2016 and 2017.⁵⁰ That urgency grew still further with the Donald Trump administration, which set the rapid final destruction of IS's territorial control and the withdrawal of U.S. forces as an important foreign policy priority.⁵¹

This created a major, and still unresolved, conundrum: given the irreplaceable role played by the SDF, how could the United States resolve this fundamental tension between quickly destroying IS in Syria—a major U.S. national security objective spanning two administrations—and preserving its strategic relationship with Turkey? For much of the counter-IS campaign, the United States was able to balance the two competing priorities, though not without considerable tension in the bilateral relationship. Even some European allies that initially were uncomfortable working with the SDF because of both legal considerations and their own complicated relationships with Turkey⁵² eventually came to prioritize the defeat of IS, and so were willing to

work in various ways with the SDF. The United Kingdom and France deployed combat forces,⁵³ and other countries provided stabilization and other forms of assistance in SDF-controlled areas. By the spring of 2019, IS territorial control that once spanned thousands of square miles in Iraq and Syria was reduced to a few villages in Syria's far southeast, and those were ultimately liberated by March 2019.

The U.S.-Turkey relationship, however, remained fraught. Based on U.S. reassurances that its partnership with the YPG and the SDF would not translate into political support for the organization, Turkey seemed to tolerate (sometimes just barely) the U.S. presence in eastern Syria between 2014 and late 2018.⁵⁴ Throughout the U.S. partnership with the SDF, U.S. public statements have characterized the relationship as “tactical” and “transactional,”⁵⁵ implying no long-term commitment to protect the SDF and no support for the SDF's political goals. However, the SDF has been widely regarded, including by the U.S. Congress, as a stalwart partner.⁵⁶ Further, U.S. policy aimed at effecting significant reform in Damascus—and dissuading the SDF from attempting to strike a deal with the Syrian regime—made it necessary to somehow account for the SDF's goals in the context of a broader political process.

By late 2018, U.S. officials had announced that a residual military presence would remain in Syria in support of far-reaching goals, including the removal of all Iranian forces from Syria and a political solution that would fundamentally change the nature of the Syrian regime. To the Turks, this policy amounted to indefinite U.S. protection and military support for a political entity linked to the PKK—an intolerable situation.⁵⁷ In late December, Turkey threatened to invade northern Syria, at which point a new conundrum immediately presented itself. What, if any, is the U.S. relationship with, and responsibility toward, the SDF once the campaign to defeat IS is completed? Is there scope to repurpose the group for larger objectives than counter-IS? Can this be done while avoiding an outright confrontation with Turkey? Menacing statements from Turkey⁵⁸ lent urgency to the need to find a way to ensure that the SDF would not be destroyed by Turkey in the wake of a U.S. withdrawal. But absent a Russian-facilitated relationship between the SDF and the existing state, or a U.S. commitment to a long-term presence in northeastern Syria, the SDF faces an unenviable quandary.

Conundrum 4: The Confounding Necessity of Working with Russia

The fourth conundrum relates to the Russians—their aims in Syria, their capabilities and limitations, and the scope for U.S.-Russia cooperation. Russia, of course, regards its competition with the United States in strategic terms, and many observers believe Russia seeks to fundamentally degrade U.S. influence. In Syria, Russia has had particular aims that run contrary



Bashar al-Asad meets with Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin (President of Russia Web site)

to U.S. goals throughout much of the conflict. Most obviously, Russia has sought to stabilize and strengthen Bashar al-Asad, while the United States, from the early days of the conflict, has sought a political transition that would ultimately lead to Asad's departure from power⁵⁹—something Russia regards as part of a pattern of misguided U.S. policies aimed at regime change in the Arab world and elsewhere.⁶⁰ In pursuing these aims, Russia has partnered with Iran,⁶¹ even as the United States has sought to isolate the Iranians,⁶² stymie Iranian ambitions in the region, and ultimately see the removal of Iranian military and political influence from Syria—a policy Russia has regarded as unrealistic even if they hint at times that it might be desirable.⁶³

Despite these contradictions, there was a sense in the international community—and among many Syrians—that a resolution of the Syria conflict would ultimately *require* some meeting of the minds between the United States and Russia.⁶⁴ Their shared interests in combating IS meant we would, at a minimum, have to deconflict military operations to prevent dangerous confrontations and mid-air mishaps.⁶⁵ But some saw even more potential—that Syria could be a pragmatic starting point for a U.S.-Russia relationship that could help resolve the conflict and might pay broader geopolitical dividends. Could the United States and Russia work together to end the war in Syria even as we pursue fundamentally opposing objectives there?

The last 2 years of the Obama administration and the first year of the Trump administration saw concerted U.S. efforts to explore this question.

During the latter part of the Obama administration, then-Secretary of State John Kerry had expansive ambitions and worked extensively with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, to find common ground in Syria. Beginning in the fall of 2015, Kerry and Lavrov created and co-chaired what became known as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG),⁶⁶ which brought together the major international actors involved in the Syrian conflict, including supporters of both the opposition and the regime. (Despite the presence of 17 other countries and the UN Special Envoy, the ISSG was essentially a vehicle for U.S.-Russia cooperation). In December 2015, Kerry and Lavrov negotiated—and the UN Security Council passed unanimously—UNSC Resolution 2254, which remains to this day the most widely accepted reference for a political resolution to the conflict⁶⁷ Kerry sought a nationwide ceasefire and a reenergized political process that would produce a genuine transition in the nature of Syria's political system.⁶⁸ Kerry simultaneously explored ways to coordinate with Russia on counterterrorism, including through establishment of a "Joint Implementation Center" that would coordinate kinetic efforts against terrorists.⁶⁹ But these efforts effectively came to naught; by the end of the Obama administration, the nationwide ceasefire had long since broken down;⁷⁰ a UN political process centered in Geneva existed only in theory;⁷¹ Kerry's efforts to work with Russia on counterterrorism in Syria proved fruitless; and the U.S.-Russia relationship was at an acrimonious nadir.⁷² It appeared that Russia's ability to thwart U.S. expectations for Syrian political reform was an equally effective way to demonstrate Russia's peer status—more or less the dark side of Russia's desire to be regarded as an equal in a cooperative relationship.

In the first year of the Trump administration, the United States and Russia sought to work on a narrower set of issues in Syria, focusing on establishing a ceasefire in the southwest and maintaining a military deconfliction channel to facilitate an accelerated campaign to defeat IS.⁷³ The southwest ceasefire lasted for approximately a year—remarkably durable by the standards of the Syrian conflict. And the military deconfliction proved a useful, if imperfect,⁷⁴ means to facilitate the U.S. air campaign and support for the SDF, particularly in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.⁷⁵ Russia, which constantly reminded the world that U.S. forces were in Syria without the government's permission and, therefore, illegally,⁷⁶ was nonetheless willing to enter into deconfliction understandings that implicitly legitimized the U.S. presence. Russia presumably agreed to this because these arrangements satisfied the Russian desire for U.S.-Russia military contacts that approached (but never met the definition of) cooperation,⁷⁷ and helped hasten the

defeat of the IS terrorists who threatened, among others, the Syrian regime and potentially the Russian homeland. It clearly served U.S. interests as well.

But beyond that, there was no progress in two other areas where the United States sought to leverage a relationship with Russia: an agreed path for a political resolution of the conflict and expulsion of Iran and its proxy forces from Syria.⁷⁸ Russia eventually became fully invested in its own political initiative—the so-called Astana process,⁷⁹ built around cooperation with Iran and Turkey—and U.S. influence over the trajectory of the Syrian conflict ebbed.

Conundrum 5: The Inimical Effect of Foreign Intervention on Civil Wars

The fifth conundrum relates to the nature of civil wars and the effect of foreign intervention. The Syrian conflict motivated many foreign parties, including the United States, to get involved, whether to support the cause of the Syrian opposition, protect civilians, mitigate the war's humanitarian fallout, defeat jihadi terrorists, or deter Iran. Other parties became involved for their own reasons—notably Russia and Iran, which sought to bolster the Asad regime and guarantee the stability of the Syrian state. Still others became involved, at least in part, to pursue the various agendas—Iran vs. Israel, Saudi Arabia vs. Iran, Turkey vs. PKK-affiliated Kurds—that have plagued this conflict. But far from hastening a resolution of the conflict, the scholarly research (and hard experience) of the last 25 years suggests that these interventions made the war longer and bloodier. Among the conclusions of studies on civil war termination is the following:⁸⁰

- Civil wars last 10 years on average. According to James Fearon of Stanford University, who has studied internal conflicts extensively, civil wars since 1945 have lasted an average of 10 years.⁸¹ He and other scholars have offered numerous reasons why civil wars last so long, including the uniquely intractable nature of internal conflicts, which tend to revolve around irreconcilable ethno-sectarian and other identity issues and attract interventions from foreign powers who fuel ongoing hostilities by supporting proxy factions.
- Fragmented civil wars last even longer. Studies have shown that the greater the number of factions in a civil war—and the Syrian civil war is highly fragmented—the longer it tends to last. Conflicts with a high degree of fragmentation—about 8 percent of them since 1945—lasted more than two decades. In a 2006 paper, David E. Cunningham of the University of Maryland argued that the more warring parties you have, the fewer mutually acceptable solutions there are.⁸² Because a durable agreement requires buy-in from

all parties, a fragmented civil war means there are more “veto-players” who can reject a settlement. External intervention makes it even worse—support from multiple foreign parties to multiple internal parties increases fragmentation, which ultimately makes it more difficult for one party to win.

- External intervention makes civil wars bloodier, and longer still. Intervention is usually not enough to decide the war because external powers have limited tolerance for risk and involvement. Intervening powers also have a tendency to convince themselves that the level of intervention needed to bring about a favorable outcome is less than what is actually required. They also tend to underestimate the capacity and will for counterescalation on the other side. Escalations increase the lethal power of the incumbent government and the rebels, but the process usually delays a resolution of the conflict.⁸³

- External intervention increases civilian casualties. A 2012 paper by Reed Wood, Jacob Kathman, and Stephen Gent found that military intervention on the part of rebels increases government killings of civilians by approximately 40 percent.⁸⁴ They argue that incumbent governments decide to victimize civilians when rebel capacities increase because they think it deters civilians from supporting the rebels. In that sense, the military purpose of indiscriminately bombing rebel-held towns is to send a message to civilians still living in government-held territory.

- Most civil wars do not end with negotiated settlements. Research by Barbara F. Walter, a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego, and one of the leading scholars on civil war termination, suggested that 75 percent of civil wars since 1945 ended in decisive victories, not political settlements. Civil war combatants often choose to fight until the very end, which usually means the “extermination, expulsion, or capitulation” of the losing side.⁸⁵ Other studies, notably by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program at Uppsala University in Sweden, have shown that after the end of the Cold War, the percentage of civil conflicts ending with a political agreement grew, though were never close to a majority. A still larger share end ambiguously or just burn out, with neither a political settlement nor a victory.⁸⁶ After 2001, as rebels in civil wars were increasingly considered terrorists with which no negotiations were possible, the percentage of conflict-ending political settlements dipped again.⁸⁷

This historical track record bodes ill for Syria. If other civil wars are any guide, the Syrian war would be exceptional if it ended today and unusual if it ever ended via a negotiated political settlement. Intervening powers may have overestimated the extent to which they could decisively affect the course of events in Syria, and no party escalated enough to give one side the strength and firepower to eliminate the others completely. Interventions in support of Syrian rebels have likely pushed the regime to use more violence against civilians than it would have if the rebels never received any support. This has exacerbated flows of refugees and internally displaced persons, and yielded staggering levels of casualties and physical destruction. Asad's actions have certainly been barbaric, but external support for rebels—provided in large part to counter Asad's barbarity—seems to have had the effect of increasing civilian deaths, prolonging the conflict, and exacerbating the many ills with which the Syrian conflict is now identified.

Implications for U.S. Policy: Syria as a Complex System

Laying out these five conundrums should be read neither as an appeal for more muscular U.S. involvement in Syria nor as advice to stand aside in the face of aggression against allies, partners, or innocent civilians. There are, however, some implications for U.S. policy in Syria and beyond:

- While it is probably too simplistic to conclude that easing pressure on Asad would somehow wean him away from the Iranians (that relationship is long-standing, and Asad correctly perceives that he has few reliable friends), those contemplating greater pressure on Asad to change his regime's behavior should be cognizant of the potential ramifications for the United States and its allies—particularly greater regime dependence on Iran and, thus, Iranian entrenchment in Syria—and the grim consequences for Syrian civilians and Syria's neighbors. This includes sanctions pressure, which may make Syria even less able to assert itself against Iran even in cases where it might otherwise do so, making it even more likely that Iran will be able to transform Syria into a platform for power projection.
- If the United States seeks to isolate the Syrian regime, policymakers should be cognizant that some countries in the region, including U.S. partners that once supported the opposition, seem to be concluding that further emboldening Iran is too high a price to pay for weakening Asad and are gradually reestablishing ties that were broken after 2011. The United Arab Emirates recently reopened its embassy in Damascus, and Bahrain quickly followed

suit.⁸⁸ Jordan is reestablishing trade links through its land border crossing.⁸⁹ Sudan's former president visited Syria in December 2018.⁹⁰ While it may never be the case that Asad fully returns to "the Arab fold" (Arab states have tried and failed in this gambit multiple times over the last several decades⁹¹), many leaders in the region likely see the trajectory of the conflict and have concluded that their efforts are better spent trying to convince the regime to at least not cede so much to Iran in order to survive.

■ A fractured opposition without a true center of gravity, save for the most radical elements, is a challenge for U.S. policy in large part because the Syrian opposition has been a political cause that the United States and its partners championed. U.S. officials meet with Syrian oppositionists at senior levels, provided financial and other forms of support, and accorded them in official statements the status of one of the two sides to the conflict. And yet to see an end to this war on terms favorable to U.S. national security, the United States has to recognize that this cause may never have had a cohesive and truly moderate entity behind it that was capable of carrying the weight that the United States and others in the international community had once put on its shoulders.

■ Partnering with nonstate actors carries hazards and sometimes raises unfulfillable expectations. Partnering with the SDF permitted the territorial defeat of IS without a major commitment of U.S. ground forces. But in addition to intensifying the U.S.-Turkey rift, it created an expectation that the United States would somehow look after the SDF once the campaign against IS was over, or at least protect it from Turkish attacks. The United States, however, has rarely made a long-term commitment to nonstate partners, suggesting that the limits of what is essentially a transactional relationship should be made brutally clear at the outset. Besides the sense of moral obligation toward the SDF that many U.S. officials and members of Congress expressed, some observers also worried about the effect of a U.S. abandonment of the SDF on future U.S. efforts to work with local partner forces. As Morgan Kaplan, a scholar at Northwestern University, writes, "the long-term issue is not that the United States may now struggle to find local actors willing to sign up for a [by, with, and through] relationship—the United States will always need transactional partners and there will always be local actors eager for U.S. help. The problem is that the *quality* of prospective partners will diminish, and the value of these transactional partnerships may be further cheapened."⁹²

■ Russia, like the United States, seems to have found the limit to potential cooperation. As long as Russians perceive that the United States seeks a Syria without Asad, Moscow will find little common ground with Washington. This suggests hard limits to U.S. efforts aimed at effecting changes to Syria's political system that amount to regime change, and particularly the scope for cooperation with Russia as long as that remains a U.S. goal. To the extent that Russia considers keeping Asad in power and his regime unreformed as vital strategic interests, no amount of reconstruction assistance for a post-Asad Syria or sanctions on the regime will be enough to induce Russian cooperation on U.S. aims. Giving in to the United States, in this case, is a red line.⁹³

Conclusion

Many of the conundrums the United States now grapples with in Syria and with its neighbors were predictable. History and experience suggested that Asad would react brutally to an uprising and refuse to yield to pressure, that Iran and Russia would unapologetically defend his regime, that multiple foreign interventions would prolong the war and increase the bloodshed, and that civilians would overwhelmingly bear the brunt of the conflict.

But once the United States ventures into any situation as volatile, complex, and ambiguous as Syria, unpredictable consequences are virtually inevitable.⁹⁴ For example, in the 8 years since the conflict began—and unpredicted at the time—refugee flows toward Europe inflamed European politics, where many observers believe it drove the rise of populism and even fed support for Brexit.⁹⁵ The establishment of a tiny garrison in the Syrian south to support the counter-IS campaign afforded protection to—and thus perpetuated—what became the largest and most vulnerable agglomeration of internally displaced persons in Syria. And perhaps of greatest concern, Iran and its proxies exploited Asad's weakness and chaos in southern Syria to broaden their front against Israel, drawing Israel into a conflict that it had long avoided.

In the end, involvement in a civil conflict like Syria can create profoundly difficult dilemmas, both political and moral, and carry often unpredictable consequences that may ultimately prove to outweigh the benefit of getting involved in the first place.

Notes

¹ The United Nations (UN) press release following adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 specifically notes the continued disagreement over the role of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in any political “transition.” See “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks,” United Nations, December 18, 2015, available at <www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>. The text of UNSCR 2254 is available at <[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2254\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2254(2015))>.

² “Press Briefing by Secretary Mattis, General Dunford, and Special Envoy McGurk on the Campaign to Defeat ISIS,” Department of Defense, May 19, 2017, available at <<https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1188225/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-mattis-general-dunford-and-sp/>>.

³ In his January 10, 2019, speech at the American University in Cairo, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated, “In Syria, the United States will use diplomacy and work with our partners to expel every last Iranian boot.” See Michael R. Pompeo, “A Force for Good: America Reinvigorated in the Middle East,” video, 25:17, American University in Cairo, January 10, 2019, available at <www.state.gov/a-force-for-good-america-reinvigorated-in-the-middle-east/>; and Nisan Ahmado, “Iran’s Growing Influence in Syria Sparks Concern,” VOA, October 15, 2018, available at <www.voanews.com/a/iran-growing-influence-in-syria-has-many-concerned/4615242.html>.

⁴ Stephen Stedman of Stanford University and the late George Downs of New York University examined factors that make resolution of a civil war more or less difficult. They assigned a “difficulty score” based on eight variables: number of warring parties, lack of a peace agreement before intervention or a coerced peace agreement, likelihood of spoilers, a collapsed state, the number of soldiers, the presence of disposable natural resources, the presence of hostile neighboring states or networks, and demands for secession. Although the rubric was developed principally to gauge the likelihood of success for a peacekeeping mission, it applies well to the more general question of tractability of a particular conflict. Measured against this rubric, the Syria conflict should prove to be a particularly thorny one to resolve. See Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, eds., *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

⁵ See, for example, this testimony by then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta from March 7, 2012. Leon Panetta, “Secretary of Defense Testimony: Statement on Syria Before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” March 7, 2012, available at <<http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1660>>.

⁶ There was a sense early in the conflict that Asad was vulnerable as the security services experienced some significant defections. See, for example, Marc Pierini, “Assad’s Regime Under Dire Pressure,” Carnegie Europe, July 19, 2012, available at <<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/48889?lang=en>>. The summer of 2015 was a high point for the armed opposition, which was making significant gains against regime-controlled areas and showed even Damascus to be vulnerable. See, for example, Sylvia Westall, “Syrian Insurgent Advances Put Assad Under Pressure,” Reuters, June 2, 2015, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-military/syrian-insurgent-advances-put-Asad-under-pressure-idUSKBN0OI1W720150602>.

⁷ Noor Al Hussein, “Foreword: Syria in 2018—In Search of Solutions,” *Forced Migration Review* 57 (February 22, 2018), 4, available at <<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/forced-migration-review-issue-57-syrians-displacement>>.

⁸ This brief 2014 interview with an opposition supporter on the pro-opposition Web site Syria Direct gives a flavor of negotiating with a government whose supporters use this slogan. See “Al-Telawi: Regime’s Geneva II Position ‘Assad or we Burn the Country,’” *Syria Direct*, January 21, 2014, available at <<https://syriadirect.org/news/al-telawi-regime%E2%80%99s-geneva-ii-position-%E2%80%98assad-or-we-burn-the-country%E2%80%99/>>.

⁹ This analysis by Iran scholar Karim Sadjadpour looks at the Iranian perspective and includes this quotation from former Iranian Supreme National Security Adviser Saeed Jalili during a 2012 visit to Syria: “Iran will absolutely not allow the axis of resistance, of which it considers Syria to be a main pillar, to be broken in any way.” See Karim Sadjadpour, “Iran’s Unwavering Support to Assad’s Syria,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (August, 2013), 11–13, available at <<https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/>>. This U.S. television interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin gives a sense of Russia’s commitment to Assad, highlighting a frequent Russian theme—concerns about collapse of the Syrian state: “Vladimir Putin Addresses Russia’s Intentions in Syria,” CBS Evening News, video, 2:09, September 24, 2015, available at <www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-addresses-russias-intentions-in-syria/>.

¹⁰ From the earliest days of the uprisings in the Arab world, the slogan *الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام* (“The people want to bring down the regime”) became a rallying cry, including in Syria. See, for example, Edward Cody, “Friday Protests Flare Again Across Middle East,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2011, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/friday-protests-flare-again-across-middle-east/2011/04/01/AF-5e5WJC_story.html?utm_term=.8f28b00dc257>.

¹¹ Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1979).

¹² Kheder Khaddour, “Assad’s Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal,” Carnegie Middle East Center, November 4, 2015, available at <<https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/04/Asad-s-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal-pub-61449>>; and Kheder Khaddour, “The Assad Regime’s Hold on the Syrian State,” Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2015, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_state1.pdf>.

¹³ Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Picador, 1989).

¹⁴ Nikolaos van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

¹⁵ Patrick M. Regan, “Interventions into Civil Wars: A Retrospective Survey with Prospective Ideas,” *Civil Wars* 12, no. 4 (December 2010), available at <www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13698249.2010.534632>.

¹⁶ In 2015, Assad himself acknowledged the military setbacks his regime suffered. See, for example, Hugh Naylor, “Bashar al-Assad Acknowledges Setbacks on the Battlefield,” *Washington Post*, May 6, 2015, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/Assad-acknowledges-setbacks-on-the-battlefield/2015/05/06/ac4bdccc-f410-11e4-bca5-21b51bbdf93e_story.html?utm_term=.c61920d46e03>.

¹⁷ Even if Assad were removed, there is little consensus on what would happen next. In this article in the *Guardian*, four former leaders of the Syrian Opposition Coalition argue that “Syria’s only hope

for peace is if Asad is removed.” See Mouaz al-Khatib et al., “Syria’s Only Hope of Peace Is if Assad Is Removed,” *The Guardian*, November 20, 2015, available at <www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/20/syria-peace-assad-removed-russia-isis>. On the other hand, Thomas Friedman had a more pessimistic take as early as 2012 despite expressing considerable admiration for the cause of the Syrian opposition. See Thomas L. Friedman, “Syria Is Iraq,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2012, available at <www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/opinion/friedman-syria-is-iraq.html?_r=1&ref=thomasfriedman%20%20>.

¹⁸ Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

¹⁹ David W. Lesch, “Iran Is Taking Over Syria. Can Anyone Stop It?” *New York Times*, August 29, 2017, available at <www.nytimes.com/2017/08/29/opinion/iran-syria.html>.

²⁰ Estimates for the number of Iranian troops in Syria range from the “high hundreds to the low thousands,” while estimates for the number of proxy forces are as high as 20,000, including 6,000 to 7,000 Hizballah fighters. Publicly available estimates of Iranian financial outlays for Syria vary considerably. According to this *New York Times* account, Iran has reportedly spent \$6 billion per year since 2012 to support the Asad regime and proxy forces in Syria. See Ben Hubbard, Isabel Kershner, and Anne Barnard, “Iran, Deeply Embedded in Syria, Expands ‘Axis of Resistance,’” *New York Times*, October 12, 2018, available at <www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/world/middleeast/iran-syria-israel.html>; and *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2018), chap. 5, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” available at <www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2017/>. Some estimates put the figure much higher, including in this analysis by David Adesnik, a scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. See David Adesnik, “Iran Spends \$16 Billion Annually to Support Terrorists and Rogue Regimes,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 10, 2018, available at <www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/01/10/iran-spends-16-billion-annually-to-support-terrorists-and-rogue-regimes/>.

²¹ During early 2012, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper stated that “Another disturbing phenomenon that we have seen recently apparently is the presence of extremists who have infiltrated the opposition groups. The opposition groups, in many cases, may not be aware they are there.” See SASC, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Current and Future Worldwide Threats to the National Security of the United States*, February 16, 2012, available at <www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/12-03%20-%202-16-12.pdf>. Also see Liz Sly, “Foreign Extremists Dominate Syria Fight,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2013, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/foreign-extremists-dominate-syria-fight/2013/10/01/5871685e-2ae7-11e3-b141-298f46539716_story.html?utm_term=.b78f79e94092>.

²² Some segments of the opposition were less focused on Asad’s departure. This included the National Coordinating Body and other elements of the so-called tolerated opposition, which, for at least part of the past 8 years, were based in regime-controlled areas of Syria. Even in these cases, *tolerated* was a relative term, and many of their members faced harassment or worse at the hands of regime security services, and many fled Syria over the course of the conflict. See “National Coordination Body for Democratic Change,” Carnegie Middle East Center, January 15, 2012, available at <<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48369?lang=en>>.

²³ Yezid Sayigh, “The Syrian Opposition’s Leadership Problem,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2013, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_leadership_problem.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Syrian Civil Society Organizations Reality and Challenges,” *Citizens for Syria, 2017*, available at <https://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/Syrian_CSOs_Reality_and_challenges_2017-CfS_EN.pdf>.

²⁶ “Seeking the Rule of Law in the Absence of the State: Transitional Justice and Policing in Opposition-Controlled Syria Pt. III,” Integrity Research and Consultancy, September 2014, available at <www.integrityglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/Integrity-Report-Transitional-Justice-and-Policing-in-Opposition-Controlled-Syria-Pt-3-English1.pdf>.

²⁷ Following a 7-month military campaign in Libya in 2011 by the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, local rebel groups killed Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi and took control of the country. Efforts to establish a stable coalition government were short-lived, rapidly deteriorating into a competition for control among numerous disorganized militias. See Alan J. Kuperman, “Obama’s Libya Debacle,” *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2015, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-02-18/obamas-libya-debacle>.

²⁸ Karen Zraick, “Syria Talks Are Complicated by Competing Opposition Groups,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2016, available at <www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/world/middleeast/syria-talks-geneva-opposition.html>; and Aron Lund, “The Road to Geneva: The Who, When, and How of Syria’s Peace Talks,” Carnegie Middle East Center, January 29, 2016, available at <<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62631>>.

²⁹ See “Those Who Support Terrorism Have No Right to Talk about Peace: President Assad,” President Bashar Al-Assad Web site, available at <www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1628:those-who-support-terrorism-have-no-right-to-talk-about-peace-president-assad&catid=325&Itemid=468>.

³⁰ Criticisms abounded dismissing the opposition as “hotel brigades,” so called because of time spent attending conferences in European hotels while their fellow citizens suffered inside Syria. This sentiment was captured by journalist Rania Abouzeid in a 2013 article in the *New Yorker*: “The fighting men within Syria have long despised their political and military leaders-in-exile. It’s common to hear them say, ‘We are in the khanadik (trenches) and they are in the fanadik (hotels).’” In late August, four of the leaders of the Free Syrian Army’s (FSA’s) five fronts stated that the National Coalition—their own political counterparts—had no legitimacy. See Rania Abouzeid, “Syrian Opposition Groups Stop Pretending,” *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2013, available at <www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/syrian-opposition-groups-stop-pretending>.

³¹ Yezid Sayigh, “The Syrian Opposition’s Leadership Problem,” Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013, available at <<https://carnegie-mec.org/2013/04/03/syrian-opposition-s-leadership-problem-pub-51373>>.

³² The coalition’s full name is the Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. See the coalition’s Web site, available at <<http://en.etilaf.org/>>.

³³ Aron Lund, “Syria’s Opposition Conferences: Results and Expectations,” Carnegie Middle East Center, December 11, 2015, available at <<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62263>>.

³⁴ Heather Nauert, “On Riyadh Opposition Conference,” press statement, Department of State, November 26, 2017, available at <www.state.gov/on-riyadh-opposition-conference/>.

³⁵ Obaida Al Nabwani, “FSA: HTS Is Terrorists and We Cannot Work Together,” SMART News Agency (Syria), January 14, 2019, available at <<https://smartnews-agency.com/en/wires/358044/fsa-hts-is-terrorists-and-we-cannot-work-together>>.

³⁶ The precise relationship between Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and al Qaeda remains a topic of considerable debate. See, for example, Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda: Affiliates or Foes,” *Fanack.com*, February 14, 2019, available at <<https://fanack.com/extremism/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-al-qaeda/>>.

³⁷ Dominique Soguel, “In Northern Syria, Is the U.S. Running Out of Rebel Allies?” *News Deeply* (New York), March 4, 2015, available at www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2015/03/04/in-northern-syria-is-the-us-running-out-of-rebel-allies; and Sam Heller, “A Deadly Delusion: Were Syria’s Rebels Ever Going to Defeat the Jihadists?” *War on the Rocks*, August 10, 2017, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/a-deadly-delusion-were-syrias-rebels-ever-going-to-defeat-the-jihadists/>>.

³⁸ See, for example, Phil Sands, Justin Vela, and Suha Maayeh, “Assad Regime Abetted Extremists to Subvert Peaceful Uprising, Says Former Intelligence Official,” *The National* (Abu Dhabi), January 21, 2014, available at <www.thenational.ae/world/Assad-regime-abetted-extremists-to-subvert-peaceful-uprising-says-former-intelligence-official-1.319620>.

³⁹ Joost Hiltermann, “The Syrian Conflict and International Support for Rebel Groups,” International Crisis Group, September 28, 2018, available at <www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syrian-conflict-and-international-support-rebel-groups>.

⁴⁰ Heller, “A Deadly Delusion”; and Max Abrahms, “Syria’s Extremist Opposition,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 30, 2017, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-10-30/syrias-extremist-opposition>.

⁴¹ Cyrus Malik, “Washington’s Sunni Myth and the Civil Wars in Syria and Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, August 16, 2016, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/washingtons-sunni-myth-and-the-civil-wars-in-syria-and-iraq/>>; and Flavius Mihaies, “Syrian Christian Perspectives on the War,” Atlantic Council, January 7, 2016, available at <www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/syrian-christian-perspectives-on-the-war>.

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NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; and Tim Hains, “President Trump: ‘It’s Time for Our Troops to Come Back Home,’” video, 1:19, December 19, 2018, available at <www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/12/19/president_trump_its_time_for_our_troops_to_come_back_home.html>.

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⁵⁹ “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” The White House, August 18, 2011, available at <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>>.

⁶⁰ After Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, as well as perceived U.S. support for various “color revolutions” in Russia’s periphery, Russians often point to the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi as the last straw—an example of when the U.S. obsession with overthrowing governments resulted in a disaster. See, for example, this article by a scholar at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (which is affiliated with the Russian Foreign Ministry): Yulia Nikitina, “The ‘Color Revolutions’ and ‘Arab Spring’ in Russian Official Discourse,” *Connections* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2014), available at <www.jstor.org/stable/26326387>.

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⁶⁷ Ambassador James Jeffrey, U.S. Special Representative for Syria, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria," U.S. Mission to the United Nations, September 18, 2018, available at <<https://usun.state.gov/remarks/8617>>.

⁶⁸ The Action Group for Syria's "Final Communiqué" refers to "a transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enables them independently and democratically to determine their own future." Available at <www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

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About the Author

Mr. Michael Ratney is a Senior Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State. He wrote this paper while serving as the State Department Fellow in the Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. Since joining the Foreign Service in 1990, Mr. Ratney has served in multiple positions with the Department of State, both in Washington, DC, and overseas, including tours in Jerusalem, Doha, Baghdad, Mexico City, Beirut, Tunis, and Casablanca.

The author would like to express great appreciation to NDU Research Assistant Alia Awadallah, currently a graduate student at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, for her invaluable support in producing this paper.

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ISBN 978-0-16-095225-8



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