

# Statement on a Syrian Policy Framework

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## Introduction

On its current trajectory, and with no military or diplomatic breakthrough on the horizon, the Syrian war will worsen. Four years into a popular uprising that gradually degenerated into civil strife and regional proxy war, the conflict's Syrian protagonists – the regime and its loyalist militias versus the broad spectrum of armed rebel factions and the external political opposition – are too fractious, fragile and heavily invested in their current courses to break with the status quo. They are also, as should be clear by now, incapable of military victory in a war rapidly fuelling the growth of a third category of protagonists: Salafi-jihadi groups. The sides' respective state backers are better positioned to change tack and so affect the course of events, but they are prisoners of their own shortcomings, fears and wishful thinking.

Whatever the parties to the conflict may think, no side is winning. Even as loyalist forces consolidate control over their core areas in western Syria (from Damascus to the coast, via Homs), the regime's broader military situation is deteriorating. Manpower constraints and a high attrition rate render it unable to replenish steadily depleting ranks with effective Syrian soldiers or militiamen; as a result, it grows increasingly dependent on foreign fighters, including Hizbollah and other non-Syrian Shiite militias allied with Iran. Yet even with such support, the regime is losing ground outside its core areas – as demonstrated by rebel gains in the south between August 2014 and April 2015; the fall of Idlib's provincial capital in March 2015; and Islamic State (IS) progress against regime forces in central Syria in March-April 2015.

The mainstream opposition's scorecard is similarly mixed. Though U.S. and Arab-backed factions in the south hold the upper hand over jihadi groups and took the lead in the aforementioned

rebel gains, their counterparts in the north lost ground to al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in late-2014 and early-2015. Al-Nusra eliminated leading U.S.-backed factions from Idlib and Aleppo provinces; though a range of Islamist factions which reject its transnational jihadi agenda and enjoy links to Turkey and Qatar remain powerful in the north, they depend on significant al-Nusra participation in battles with the regime and their efforts to hold IS at bay north of Aleppo.

U.S.-led airstrikes have helped drive IS from some Kurdish areas east of Aleppo but have not fundamentally weakened its hold in eastern Syria. Nor have they prevented it from gaining ground elsewhere, as seen in IS's April 2015 assault on the besieged Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, a Damascus neighbourhood.

If Syria and its external stakeholders are to escape more years of war, rising costs, further destruction of the nation's torn social fabric and worsening trans-border radicalisation, a serious effort must be made, first and foremost, to define the parameters of an ultimate political solution. Both sides and their state backers will need to make significant concessions to address now inescapable realities: Bashar Assad cannot rule a post-war Syria; Iran's influence in the Levant cannot be eliminated.

External actors wary of the difficult choices should bear in mind not only how terrible this war has become, but also the destabilising potential of its continuation. The Syrian conflict involves an array of destructive phenomena: the regime's use of chemical weapons, ballistic missiles and barrel bombs against its own people; mass detention, torture and execution by state security services; collective punishment through starvation and indiscriminate shelling by both sides, on different scales; sectarian cleansing; suicide-bomb attacks; foreign volunteer fighters; warlordism and gangsterism; rape as a weapon of war; and, with the break-down of public services, epidemics. A large percentage of children living through these trials have not attended school for several years. Misleadingly called the "lost generation", they have no escape and will be the ones who, for better or worse, shape Syria's future. All this is at the heart of the region and on Europe's doorstep.

## **Mistaken Assumptions**

### **The U.S. and the West: A New "War on Terror"?**

In the West, the Syrian conflict evokes primarily fatigue, discrepant rhetoric disconnected from policy and a counter-terrorism approach narrowly defined as confronting Sunni Arab radicalisation through a combination of public statements and airstrikes. Western governments have jumped from one theme to the next.

The dominant Western policy – Washington's – appears the most conflicted, to the extent that some actors in each opposing camp in Syria are unsure which side the U.S. truly favours. As White House officials see it, Washington backs the opposition; its policy, however, boils down to minimising both U.S. involvement in the conflict and the short-term political costs of that minimal involvement.

IS's rise and the subsequent formation of a U.S.-led coalition to counter it have brought the inconsistency of this approach into sharp relief. The Obama administration says moderate Sunni Arab forces are essential to defeat IS, yet argues that it lacks such partners to work with in Syria – a notable assertion, given months of modest U.S. support to select rebel factions. In an

effort to address that disconnect, Washington is slowly laying the groundwork to vet, train and equip 5,000 rebels per year, while delaying crucial decisions such as whether it will protect them from regime air power, which rebels view as the biggest threat they face.

Meanwhile, Washington's signals to Damascus and its backers appear similarly muddled. The U.S. tolerates indiscriminate regime airstrikes in jihadi-controlled areas where it carries out its own air attacks, blurring their respective rationales. It has also praised Russia's unilateral political facilitation efforts, though nothing indicates Moscow is willing (or able) to elicit meaningful regime participation. Little wonder, then, that the regime and its allies express optimism that the U.S. will eventually accept continued Assad rule. This is almost certainly wrong. The political costs, domestically and internationally, of reversing policy toward Assad are prohibitive, and such a shift would exacerbate the jihadi problem (as illustrated below).

If Washington's policy is ambiguous, there is at least rhetorical clarity on one goal: the degrading and ultimate destruction of IS. Sunni Arab radicalisation seems to be eclipsing other priorities, reframing them in its light, and imposing itself as the most urgent item on the agenda. But this is bound to fail, for three basic reasons:

- Sunni Arab radicalisation is a product of all that has been left unaddressed in this conflict: the regime's relentless repression, the opposition's fragmentation and other debilitating shortcomings, the desperate humanitarian fallout and the cross-fertilisation of escalating Sunni, Shiite and Alawite militancy. Treating the symptoms while ignoring the causes would only further distract from the underlying destructive dynamics, provide cover to players invested in them and entrench the factors that empower radicals.
- There is currently no basis for states on opposite sides to cooperate against a shared jihadi foe. While the opposition's state backers, including the U.S., view empowerment of credible, mainstream Sunni actors as essential to defeating jihadis (and to eventual resolution of the war), Iran is working in the opposite direction. Its allies, proxies and (increasingly) ground commanders use military and political tactics that – in result if not intent – weaken, marginalise and discredit mainstream Sunni partners Washington has identified as essential to rolling back jihadi gains.
- A regime victory would not help. What passes as realpolitik – allowing the Syrian regime, as the “lesser evil” or “the devil we know” to win by crushing all dissent – is anything but. It would make matters worse. A regime “victory”, if indeed possible, would at best take years; involve forms and levels of repression to which the U.S. and others are unwilling to acquiesce; entail additional infusions of Shiite jihadis to compensate for the regime's manpower constraints; require, in order to provide more sustainable normalisation, reform and reconstruction for which the regime has shown no capacity and in which its backers display little interest; increase radicalisation and thus generate counter-productive results; and tilt the regional balance in ways that could create even more instability.

## **Regional Actors and Russia: A Zero-Sum Logic**

The principal non-Western state backers of each side are limited by different sets of blinders. Iran, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar each view the conflict as one in which the balance of forces within Syria both reflects and establishes a regional and wider international pecking order. Seen through this prism, victory flows from territorial conquest, a function of guns, fighters, resources and endurance. People at the receiving end of violence are expected to bear it

or become refugees.

Tehran and Moscow underwrite – logistically, financially and diplomatically – the regime’s attempt to win on such terms. They have used none of their considerable leverage to prevent Damascus from destroying its infrastructure and eroding its core institutions (by resorting massively to civilian proxies and foreign fighters to counter its adversaries); from alienating Syrians to the extent of turning fence-sitters into opponents through extraordinary violence; from damaging its international standing beyond repair; and from taking unilateral steps that further complicate any negotiated political solution (as in Assad’s provocative “re-election” in 2014).

Damascus and its sponsors nevertheless assert that the regime has essentially won because it has not been defeated, has retaken this or that city, enjoys support among segments of society and faces a mainstream opposition that has lost strength in some parts of the country. This “victory”, they hold, should entitle the regime to dictate a peace settlement, albeit with vague, noncommittal pledges to reform and reconcile. They deplore the other side’s refusal to acknowledge their view of reality.

This attitude is far removed from the geopolitical and military realities. Backers are unlikely to end support to the mainstream opposition while Assad re-mains president, as the price of supporting the rebels is less than the political cost of capitulation; they are also broadly viewed as essential to the war against IS. Moreover, the regime alone cannot recapture most of the territory it has lost, and its foreign backers cannot sustain the cost of winning and occupying this territory on its behalf.

The steady erosion of the regime’s own military power is obvious: in the second half of 2014 it suffered notable losses in the south and east while gaining little ground elsewhere; in March 2015, it lost Idlib’s provincial capital and one of its few remaining footholds in Daraa province within a single week. Crucially, it is increasingly dependent on foreign fighters (in particular Hizbollah, but also Iranian personnel and Shiite combatants from Iraq and elsewhere) to compensate for its manpower constraints; Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers and Hizbollah fighters openly assumed key roles in the February 2015 offensive to reverse the losses south of Damascus (an effort that yielded only modest gains). Combined with the regime’s increasingly dire financial straits, the result is that Iran, as Assad’s principal backer, will bear rising costs to prop up a regime whose brutality has already done immeasurable damage to Tehran’s reputation among Sunni Arabs.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have embraced similar zero-sum logic. Having failed in their endeavour to topple the regime, they have scaled back their ambitions to spoiling the other camp’s prospects (in addition to, in Ankara’s case, seeking to contain the Syrian Kurdish faction that is linked to the Turkish PKK insurgents). Unsure of the coherence and capacity of their proxies on the battle-field, they are less consistent and brazen in supporting them than Russia and Iran have been in propping up the regime, leaving commentators to speculate about the nature of their relationships with various armed groups, notably Islamists, including jihadis. Their divergent political sensitivities have made for awkward coexistence rather than a genuine alliance, further blurring the picture and weakening the opposition. They have failed to coordinate sufficiently with each other and the U.S., UK and France to incentivise effectiveness, moderation and cohesion among the opposition’s political and armed components. Predictably, jihadi groups have exploited the disarray.

To tilt the balance and overcome their own limitations, the opposition's regional backers have tried unsuccessfully to rally the U.S. to their side, calling for a no-fly zone and advanced weaponry that would show, above all, that the world's pre-eminent military power was behind them. Pending an elusive breakthrough, their fallback posture is attrition. Thus the only intelligible goal of a hazy Saudi policy, at this stage, is to pin Iran down in a relatively distant, costly and unwinnable conflict that will exhaust its resources and popularity. That might make strategic sense were it not for a growing radicalisation that is arguably threatening Saudi Arabia more than Iran, and a regional escalation that is costly to and unwinnable for all.

## **Elements of a Resolution**

### **Framework for a Political Deal**

Tolerating the status quo in Syria would mean unending, ever-radicalising war. To avoid that, outside players need finally to identify which of their core demands they could reasonably achieve, instead of pursuing multiple, illusory goals. A virtuous dynamic could then ensue, leading to eventual negotiation of a sustainable political resolution they would guarantee. This requires difficult reciprocal concessions, but the outcome would be far more conducive to protecting the interests of all – most importantly Syrians – than the war's continuation. Here is what it could look like:

- The U.S. and its Western allies can best solve their Syria conundrum by outlining a clear strategy to strengthen the mainstream opposition in coordination with Ankara, Riyadh and Doha, while signalling to Iran willingness to negotiate a sustainable resolution that takes Tehran's core geopolitical concerns into account. The strategy would pursue two overriding objectives:
  1. Shifting the intra-rebel balance of power decisively away from IS and Jabhat al-Nusra to groups willing to pursue a sustainable political resolution.
    - This could be accomplished by strengthening non-ideological factions and incentivising constructive political engagement among Islamist elements willing to distance themselves from transnational jihadi groups. Ultimately, the strategy would aim to compel Syrian rebels to choose between significant external support and a role in their country's pluralistic political future on one hand, and continued cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra (or any transnational jihadi group) on the other. Such a wedge should be driven gradually; mainstream rebels will not forego al-Nusra's battle-field help unless they have sufficient capacity and external backing to perform effectively without it.
  2. Enabling mainstream groups to stand their ground against regime forces and move beyond it.
    - This would diminish the re-turn on Iranian and Russian investments in regime forces, while improving mainstream opposition capacity and credibility at the expense of jihadi foes and competitors. As they strengthen, mainstream rebels could begin to roll back jihadi territorial control; but Western governments should recognise that military and political realities bind the struggle against jihadis to the broader war against the regime. The mainstream opposition

cannot gain against the former while ignoring the latter.

All of this would entail much deeper and broader coordination with and among the opposition's regional state backers. They should join in conditioning their support so that rebel factions face a coherent set of carrots and sticks incentivising pragmatic political engagement and respect for local civil society, while punishing indiscriminate tactics, criminal behaviour and sectarian rhetoric. It would also require a serious U.S. policy to deter the regime and its allies from continuing their efforts to eliminate the very forces Washington is now committed to training and equipping. This could be accomplished by clearly signalling to the regime and its backers that attacks targeting rebels trained by the U.S., or civilian areas in their vicinity, will be met with proportional response by the U.S. or its allies.

Demonstrating such resolve would disabuse the regime's sponsors of the notion that the status quo is leading toward resolution on their terms. The risks of inciting Iranian counter-escalation, or fuelling renewed hope within the opposition of an outright military victory, should be mitigated by clear messaging on Washington's willingness to negotiate a peace ending Bashar Assad's rule but including: preservation and reform of state institutions; hard security guarantees for all communities; de-centralised security arrangements that would empower locals to play a lead role in their own protection; and delineation of responsibilities through constitutional provisions defining a newly pluralistic Syrian state.

- Iran may secure its assets in Lebanon via an alternative power structure in Syria neither aligned with any particular regional axis nor threatening to Tehran. It cannot impose itself through sheer force as an accepted regional power, nor can it easily absorb the long-term costs of propping up Assad, financially and militarily. If it wishes to avoid being dragged ever-deeper into an unending war in which it and its proxies are increasingly viewed as occupiers, it should accept something less than what it has had – unrivalled influence over a Syrian state within its "resistance axis" – and negotiate to secure what its foreign policy agenda requires: a link to Hizbollah in Lebanon and a Syria not allied exclusively with its regional competitors. Such a solution could remain consistent with elements of a proposal Iran floated beginning in 2013 which, in addition to repackaging components of the regime's diplomatic platform, called for the transfer of presidential authorities to a government and the eventual holding of free, fair and internationally monitored elections.
- Similarly, the opposition's principal regional backers – Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar – can attain their main shared objective in Syria by offering concessions on lower priorities that they lack the capacity to achieve. By agreeing to back decentralised security arrangements and accepting that Syria will be non-aligned rather than join a Saudi, Turkish or broader Sunni axis, the opposition's regional backers can eventually obtain the departure of Assad as part of a transition process.

Turkey's role is particularly important. A regional power sharing a long border with northern Syria and possessing significant leverage over armed factions operating there, it is central to shifting the intra-rebel balance (as described above) and, ultimately, guaranteeing a political resolution. Its core interests must also be taken into account: a state able and willing to help contain groups currently operating in Turkey and protect the borders; return of the nearly two million Syrian refugees it hosts; and opening Kurdish-majority areas in the north, currently dominated by the PKK's Syrian affiliate, to equitable, pluralistic participation by all social and political forces so as to secure them as

an inextricable part of Syria.

- Russia would gain more from facilitating and co-sponsoring a genuine resolution in Syria than it does from standing up to Western designs without offering tangible alternatives. It would not only enhance its international standing, but also better address the jihadi threat. The regime's increasing dependence on Iran-backed militias means that Moscow's influence over Damascus will diminish, relative to Tehran's, as the war continues, not least because militia growth accelerates the erosion of those parts of the state in which Russia is invested, notably the armed forces. If Moscow wishes to maximise its role in re-solving the conflict – and thus its influence over the terms of a negotiated solution – it should move forward quickly on the peace front. Playing second fiddle in a doomed attempt to re-legitimise the Assad presidency could prove costly and a boon to the jihadis.
- European governments could dampen the dual threat of home-grown jihadism and desperate immigration by more effectively applying the one foreign policy lever that does not stir divisions: humanitarian aid. This requires, first and foremost, more money for programs serving the 12.2 million people in need of assistance inside Syria and the 3.9 million Syrians who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Better coordination is also needed, among both donors and their implementing partners. Priorities include pressuring Damascus to allow humanitarian access to besieged areas and remove administrative hurdles obstructing aid delivery elsewhere; creative approaches to a massive education crisis, with more than two million Syrian children out of school; increased funding to address shortfalls in UN refugee-support programs; and increased development aid to neighbouring countries bearing the burdens of the refugee crisis.

The quagmire would become more tractable were all to focus on their bottom-lines. The regime and the opposition would continue to want to win and dominate the other – through both military efforts and imposing parameters for political engagement. Those with leverage over them, however, could at least start a conversation about what ultimately will have to be imposed.

### **A UN-Led Political Process**

Once an endgame's outlines are clear, the hard work of identifying elements of a roadmap can begin. This has been absent until now, which explains the failure of three successive UN envoys to make headway. The "Geneva II" talks between regime and opposition delegations in early 2014 yielded little; poorly attended discussions in Moscow a year later produced even less. The document that was to serve as the basis for "Geneva II", the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, is important as far as it goes; its call for creation of a mutually agreed transitional body with full executive authority was endorsed by the UN Security Council, so embodies a precious consensus between Moscow and Washington. Yet, that narrow consensus alone is an insufficient foundation for a political process. Russia elicited regime attendance at Geneva II but was unwilling or unable to convince it to engage – even perfunctorily – with the substance of the Geneva Communiqué. The U.S. and other state backers cajoled opposition representatives into a slightly more impressive performance, but that brief success amounted to little compared with their broader failure, at all other times, to effectively encourage the opposition's productive political engagement.

With Geneva II having failed and none of the relevant military or political dynamics any easier, the current UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, initially narrowed his focus to achieving a "freeze" in

the fighting in Aleppo, as a stepping stone for similar freezes elsewhere. The term “freeze” is intended to distinguish his objective from “ceasefires” reached earlier elsewhere in the country. The regime has made the latter a pillar of its military strategy, with collective punishment designed to compel civilians to press local rebel factions to accept truces on terms favourable to Damascus. Due to the brutal means used to achieve them, and because they have tended to enable the regime (and in some cases rebel factions) to shift military resources to other fronts, these ceasefires have neither led to an overall decline in bloodshed nor improved conditions for a broader political process. Moreover, it is unclear how local de-escalations could coalesce into a political process, given the lack of a common understanding about an overall deal.

Yet in negotiating an end to the conflict, equitable ceasefires will eventually be indispensable. While isolated ceasefires could benefit local populations, the following conditions would have to obtain for a ceasefire or freeze to contribute toward a political process ending the conflict:

1. Freeze means freeze, not surrender. Both sides should retain authority in areas under their control. This means no return of regime security services to areas currently held by the opposition, or vice versa, though mixed security arrangements and service provision could be subject to negotiation.
2. A freeze should discourage reallocation of military resources by either side in support of offensives elsewhere against the other. If this can-not be prevented by rule, zones should be drawn that make such real-location impractical. This could be accomplished by delineating zones that contain a balance of power (or leverage) between regime and opposition, thus discouraging either from reallocation lest the other exploit the shift.
3. Freezes cannot be a substitute for resolving the conflict’s core issues and should not aim to redeem political legitimacy lost by either side.

Moving forward, and building on the mutual goodwill generated by the nuclear understandings being negotiated between Iran and the P5+1, the UN envoy’s primary focus should be on identifying the geopolitical components of a sustainable resolution and facilitating the difficult diplomacy necessary to attain them. Ultimately, a successful political process will require Iranian buy-in – Tehran’s influence in Damascus dwarfs Moscow’s – and strategic, rather than ad hoc tactical, cooperation among the opposition’s backers. Obtaining these, and addressing the bottom lines noted above, will demand quiet diplomacy, mostly bilateral, between the UN and the conflict’s main external actors, and among those actors themselves. Serious discussion of the fundamentals of a geopolitical resolution is most likely to emerge in that environment; once that discussion progresses, an effort to build a more comprehensive, public UN-led political track would enjoy better prospects. At that point, talks between regime representatives and opposition, and efforts to “freeze” or “de-escalate” the conflict locally, will be essential to bringing the deal to fruition.

## **Conclusion**

A genuine geopolitical deal such as outlined above can proceed only from extensive, cautious negotiations, not tentative gestures of goodwill. It could both build on momentum generated by a potential nuclear agreement between Iran and the six world powers and help avert negative repercussions that might otherwise result from a nuclear deal achieved amid regional polarisation, arms races and proxy warfare. Above all, a geopolitical deal offers the best chance to rescue Syria, the region and world from a conflict whose human cost and transborder



radicalising capacity – already staggering – are increasing at a devastating rate.