

Congressional Testimony

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A Crisis Mismanaged
Obama's Failed Syria Policy

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Madame Chairwoman, Ranking Member Deutch, and distinguished Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing.

As the Syrian uprising enters its third year, the terrible cost of the Assad's regime war against the people of Syria is by now well known. Over 80,000 Syrians are dead, more than 1.5 million are refugees outside Syria, with an even higher number internally displaced. As the United States has struggled to define its Syria policy over the past two years, the Syrian war has metastasized, regrettably along predictable lines.

For two years, the debate in Washington about US policy toward Syria has been largely framed in terms of either staying out of the conflict or an Iraq-style intervention. Before we discuss specific tactics – be it a No-Fly Zone or arming the rebels – I suggest that we should start by asking: what are our strategic goals? The question we need to ask is: are we reading the strategic map correctly? The primary problem with Washington's current policy is not that it has been too reluctant to get involved in Syria; it is that it has been reading the strategic map incorrectly.

Where We Are Today

As it stands today, Syria is effectively divided into several parts. The countryside in the north on the Turkish border and the east along the border with Iraq are in rebel hands, with important persisting pockets of regime presence in and near the major urban centers of those regions. A similar situation exists in the south, on the border with Jordan. A Kurdish majority area effectively controlled by the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has also emerged in the northeast.

The regime, meanwhile, controls the coastal mountains in the northwest, much of the central city of Homs and most of the capital Damascus. Recently, the regime, with direct support from Iran and Hezbollah, has launched a campaign to secure the corridor from Homs to Damascus and to recapture the town of al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside near the border with Lebanon. It has also used its paramilitary forces to launch sectarian attacks on Sunni villages in and on the edges of the Alawite coastal mountains.

The regime is further pursuing the objective of securing the highway leading from Daraa in the south to Aleppo in the north, allowing freedom of movement for reinforcements and resupplies between the major cities in western Syria, and protecting against rebel assaults on Damascus from the north and south.

As for the other parts of the country, which have fallen outside its grip, the regime continues to rely on its air power and on ballistic missiles to deny the emergence of safe areas controlled by an alternative, opposition government.

This plan of consolidating the regime in a reduced but clearly defined canton represents Assad's Plan B in Syria. His Plan B is, of course, also Iran's. Tehran has signaled very clearly that it considers the toppling of the Assad regime to be a red line. It is an outcome for which it would spare no expense to prevent from happening. However, Assad's limited manpower constrains his ability to recapture and hold all the lost terrain in the north and east.

Therefore, to safeguard its core interest, Iran seeks to ensure the regime's continuity in a reinforced canton, bolstered by Russian weapons systems and stockpiles of chemical weapons, with access to the Mediterranean and territorial contiguity with Tehran's subsidiary in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

This explains the ongoing battle for al-Qusayr, across the border from Hezbollah's stronghold in Hermel, in northeastern Lebanon. Securing al-Qusayr aims to protect the corridor, along Lebanon's eastern border, down to Damascus. It also secures the land bridge from the Syrian ports on the coast and the Damascus airport into Hezbollah-controlled territory in the Bekaa.

Securing this canton is of strategic importance to the Iranians. It ensures the preservation of a vital island of influence for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on the Mediterranean adjoined to, and flanked by, Hezbollah's fortress in Lebanon.



In effect, that is what the Assad regime already is today: an IRGC protectorate. Assad is reliant on the Iranians for funds, arms, hardware (particularly surveillance drones) and personnel, including IRGC cadres and advisors.

Moreover, Hezbollah is spearheading operations on behalf of the regime on various critical fronts, from Aleppo to Hama, Homs and Damascus, all the way to Daraa. In April, before the assault to recapture al-Qusayr began, Hezbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, traveled to Iran and met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani. It is believed that during this trip, Nasrallah received the go ahead from Khamenei to throw Hezbollah's full military weight in Syria, "no matter the cost."¹

In addition, the Iranians have been training a large sectarian paramilitary force in Syria. Aside from perpetrating acts of ethnic cleansing, these paramilitaries supplement the limited manpower of the regime's regular forces. Similarly, Iran has created a militia led by Hezbollah cadres and manned by Shiites, mainly from pro-Iranian Iraqi groups like Kataeb Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. This militia operates in Damascus and its surroundings, especially in the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood, the location of a famous Shiite shrine.

In other words, Iran is leading the fight in Syria. The Iranians, therefore, view Syria in strategic terms, and are going "all in" to safeguard their power base there. Mehdi Taeb, the head of Khamenei's think tank, expressed the centrality of the battle for Syria in Iranian strategic thinking, describing it as territory under Iranian sovereignty. "Syria is the 35th district of Iran and it has greater strategic importance for Iran than Khuzestan" he said, referring to one of Iran's provinces. "[I]f we lose Syria we will not even be able to keep Tehran," he said.

Whereas Iran views the battle for Syria in strategic terms, current US policy, unfortunately, does not. Herein lies the problem. More than two years after the Syrian uprising, US policy remains unclear. What is our primary interest in Syria? Do we want to see the Assad regime toppled or not? Washington's position is ambiguous on these questions.

If the regime in Tehran is indeed our principal foe in the Middle East, and I would submit that it is, then US policy needs to proceed from this basic starting point. We should begin by clearly and credibly defining the goal of US policy to be the removal of not just Assad personally, but also his security regime, which has served as Iran's strategic partner for more than 30 years. Furthermore, since today the Assad regime is effectively an Iranian satrapy, US policy should explicitly state that the maintenance of the structures of Iranian influence in Syria is antithetical to US interests. Currently, the policy seems more focused on the fate of Assad himself, which misses this larger strategic context.

Worse still, the perception in Damascus today is that, in contrast with Iran's commitment to the survival of the regime, the US lacks both strategic clarity as well as the necessary resolve. In a meeting with a delegation of Lebanese supporters in April, Assad reportedly

told his guests “The Americans have been pragmatic since the beginning of the crisis. They will not go all the way. In the end, they will go with the winner. And we have no other choice but to win.”²

Assad believes the US is edging closer to the position of Russia, which is pushing for a negotiated settlement that leaves open the possibility of a political role for him or some of his government.

This initiative came just as the Iranians made their push to recapture al-Qusayr and consolidate the regime’s enclave in the coastal mountains, Homs, and Damascus. In other words, with its insistence on a negotiated settlement and aversion to altering the military balance against Assad, the inadvertent impact of US policy is to allow the Iranians to consolidate their gains and preserve their core interests in Syria.

A Way Forward

Where do we go from here? Washington's decision to stay on the sidelines for two years while pushing for negotiations with the regime, under Russian auspices, is itself a form of intervention that has, unfortunately, benefited the regime and its patrons and undercut our allies. In other words, the current US posture is not cost-free, both on the moral and strategic levels.

Aside from the horrific toll in human life and the massive flow of refugees, our policy, as it stands, is on course to preside over the division of Syria into an IRGC island in possession of chemical weapons and advanced Russian weapons systems in one part, and a patchwork of militias, some aligned with al-Qaeda, in the rest of the country, that continue to remain vulnerable to regime terror.

This means that the US must now devise a two-fold strategy based on sound threat prioritization. The top priority for the US in Syria should be to break the Iranian archipelago of influence in the eastern Mediterranean.

Seeing Iran emerge with its interests unharmed in Syria will be nothing short of a humiliating defeat for the US, with major geopolitical consequences on our position, and that of our allies, in the region. As one former senior US official recently put it, “They have decided to win, and we have not.”³ Our allies and our enemies are both watching and drawing conclusions about our strategic posture and willpower vis-à-vis Iran. If Iran secures its interests in Syria, it will affect the regional balance of power against the US-led bloc in the region. This is to say nothing about the conclusions Iran will draw about our seriousness to stop its nuclear drive, having witnessed the US President draw a red line in Syria only to later back down. Our regional allies have expressed concern about precisely this issue.

A lesson can be drawn from our Israeli allies’ prioritization of threats in Syria. The Israelis have made three major incursions in Syria, all three of them targeting Iranian strategic weapons. While keeping a weary eye on Sunni Islamist militias, the number one

strategic priority in Jerusalem remains to deny the Iranians the positioning of strategic weapons on Israel's borders.

To deny Iran a victory, the US must target its avenues of support to the Syrian regime and Assad's strong points. Currently, much of the military aid to the regime arrives via Damascus airport. Targeting that airfield and other runways in western Syria still under regime control would go a long way toward degrading Assad's military power. It would effectively ground his air force and deny him a critical logistical port. Targeting ballistic missile sites, as Israel recently did, will also limit Assad's ability to strike at areas outside his control.

There has been an arduous debate in Washington about whether the US should impose a No-Fly Zone (NFZ) in Syria. This is a label that covers a wide range of options, and it's important not to get stuck in a narrow debate or with false dichotomies, presenting our options as an Iraq-style war or doing nothing.

For instance, strikes on the regime's major airfields and strategic installations in western Syria using stand off weapons could achieve desired results. The important thing is for such measures to have clear objectives integrated in a broader strategy. In this case, the tactical objective is to seriously degrade critical capabilities and a major resupply line of the regime, thereby altering the balance of forces on the ground. This will not deny all of the regime's firepower. However, it would deplete it significantly while also obstructing its replenishment.

In tandem with this measure, the US should exercise leadership and bring together a group of allies – Britain, France, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – that have been pressing us for a more robust policy and who want to see the Iranians defeated in Syria. Pooling their resources, as well as their intelligence channels to various rebel groups, we should build a rebel force following a two-pronged approach on the ground.

In cooperation with Turkey, we should help organize, train and equip local forces in northern Syria to better execute specific tactical missions, such as storming the remaining pockets of regime bases and airfields, cutting logistical supply routes between Homs and Aleppo, and pushing back any counteroffensives by Hezbollah in places like Idlib and Aleppo. A similar approach would be adapted with Jordan on the southern border in and around Daraa, preparing the way for the rebels to close in on Damascus.

Once the US has signaled its intent to exercise leadership on the ground, the prospects for a proper rebel command will improve dramatically. Turkish and Jordanian intelligence, for example, have built good relations with many of the rebel formations, and the Saudis and Qataris have their own channels as well, including, in Riyadh's case, with the tribes of eastern Syria. These channels can go a long way to properly vetting and communicating with these fighters. Many of Syria's rebels have made it clear that their migration to more extremist groups was, in large part, due to these groups' better organization, commitment and access to ammunition. The appeal of a strong sectarian

identity is also a factor, but that will only increase the more we leave Iran's explicitly Shiite offensive unanswered.

To be sure, many of the fighting forces with whom the administration today is dealing embrace an Islamist identity of one shade or another. That has to be acknowledged. However, not all Islamists can be grouped under the Al-Qaeda label. Proof is that some of these same Islamist formations – and in other cases, tribal-based formation – have clashed with Jabhat al-Nusra in northern and eastern Syria.

The idea that “there are no good guys in Syria” is not only unhelpful, but also runs counter to how the US has made policy choices in the past. In World War II, for instance, no one applied that logic to allying with Stalin's Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. There was a strategic prioritization. We first tackled the first threat, and then proceeded to devise policy to counter the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

Al-Qaeda will fight hard to safeguard its gains in Syria, but leaving the field open to them, or pushing the opposition to negotiate with Assad as his forces led by Iranian assets slaughter Sunnis, will only play into Al-Qaeda's hands and enhance its appeal. The creation of a credible, US-backed rebel force, taking full advantage of regional allies' intelligence channels and drawing on the local fighters in the various districts, will at the very least offer a powerful alternative. The inherent regionalism and fissures in Syria's Sunni community will play to our advantage in that case, denying Al-Qaeda the ability to present itself as the vanguard of the country's Sunnis.

In the end, it's important to recognize that there is no solution to the Syrian problem without getting rid of Assad and his regime. Our current policy assumes that the regime, if not Assad himself, can be a valid interlocutor. This is a mistake. There can be no “managed political transition” in Syria.

As Ambassador Frederic Hof recently put it, “This is a war Iran and Hezbollah, and arguably Russia, have decided not to lose; they are committed to a regime victory, while the administration has shown no such resolve or commitment to a rebel military victory.”⁴

Openly stating that handing Iran a strategic defeat in Syria is the priority for the US is where it all must start. Exercising credible US leadership to rally already eager allies around that stated objective should follow. The rest flows from there.

¹ Tony Badran, "Hezbollah slips in Qusayr," NOW, May 23, 2013.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/hezbollah-slips-in-qusayr>

² Tony Badran, "Assad reading the signs", NOW, April 25, 2013.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/assad-reading-the-signs>

³ Elliott Abrams, "The Brezhnev Doctrine, Iran-Style," The Weekly Standard, June 3, 2013. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/brezhnev-doctrine-iran-style-728993.html?nopager=1>

⁴ Frederic Hof, "Syria: Is a No-Fly Zone on the Table?" The Atlantic Council, May 30, 2013. <http://www.acus.org/viewpoint/syria-no-fly-zone-table>