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02/14/2017 Defeating Terrorism in Syria: A New Way Forward

Stability in Syria is an important national security interest for the United States. Much of Syria is a geographic space controlled or dominated by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The country borders key regional partners. The persistent refugee crisis threatens the stability of Europe. The two-pronged threat of international terrorism, emanating from both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, is fuelled by the continuing conflict.

Despite the grim situation in the country, the US government has an opportunity to stem the challenges presented by the two international terrorist organisations and their enablers.

In fact, Washington has options it did not necessarily have two years ago, including a way to prevent not only the Islamic State but also Al Qaeda and other radical groups from operating in at least 50% to 60% of Syria. These include the territories that the Islamic State controls or once controlled since 2014. Once the Islamic State controls an area, it typically eradicates any Islamist and jihadist cells or support system and disarm the population to prevent local rivalry, which leaves groups like Al Qaeda having to revive dormant cells or rebuilding influence almost from scratch.

So the expulsion of the Islamic State offers a rare opportunity to implement a strategy to build an alternative to jihadist organizations, more so than in 2014 when dozens of different armed groups operated in those areas. The liberation of these areas by the US-led coalition also creates a de facto American sphere of influence, which both Russia and the regime have accepted – at least for the time being.

This counterterrorism strategy involves a more farsighted policy of establishing de facto safe zones in parts of Syria where inhabitants can be protected from the jihadists and the regime, and where the international community can ensure that Al Qaeda does not roll back into the areas from

which the Islamic State is expelled. Those safe zones can be established in the areas where the US and its allies fought, or will fight ISIS.

The strategy I am proposing is a baseline. It requires minimal American commitment, building on what the US is already doing in Syria against the Islamic State, without which any fight against jihadism is doomed to fail. Pre-existing resources and hard power should be supplemented with a policy that deliberately immunizes the liberated areas from falling back to extremist forces. This strategy is not an invitation for American occupation or long-term “nation-building” that President Donald Trump has explicitly criticized. Instead, it is both realistic and essential, expanding on battlefield victories already scored over the last two-and-a-half years of Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State in northern, eastern and southern Syria.

The strategy should begin by recognition of the fractured nature of the Syrian conflict today. To get a sense of the situation on the ground, it is important to view it through four quadrants.

The first quadrant is the caliphate terrain. This expanse stretches, albeit not coherently, from As Sukhnah near Palmyra to Albukamal near Iraq, and from there to the Kurdish-controlled Qamashli in the northeastern corner near the Turkish border to Azaz in northwestern Syria. Although the regime still holds pockets in the city of Deir Ezzor, the international coalition has the leverage to dictate how this region should be tackled to prevent the return of ISIS. In this quadrant, three political or military blocs currently focus on fighting ISIS: the Assad regime in Deir Ezzor; the American-led coalition and the Kurds in Raqqa; and Turkey and its rebel allies in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. If these different forces turn against each other, the consequences could reverse the gains against the Islamic State.

The second quadrant is rebel-held areas in the south, adjacent to the Israeli and Jordanian borders and near Damascus. In stark contrast to northern Syria, relatively quiet fronts exist between the regime and the rebels. Syria’s neighbors there, namely Israel and Jordan, have interest in a sustained calm in that region. Regional backers of the opposition that work

closely with Jordan, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, share a similar interest and are committed to preventing extremists from holding sway in that particular region. Both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have considerable presence in southern Syria, but they are largely contained. The primacy of the rebels and the regime against the jihadists needs to be sustained with a more robust approach to southern Syrian, including by enabling local forces to govern their areas more effectively, building on the existing calm.

The third quadrant is the more fragmented northwest: Idlib, and pockets in rural Aleppo, Hama and Homs. The international community has fewer options in this region because of Al Qaeda's dominance here; unlike the Islamic State, it has integrated into and taken the lead in the mainstream insurgency. Throughout the conflict, Al Qaeda has focused on fighting the Assad regime and rarely sought to impose its own ideology on the local communities in which it operates. As in Yemen and elsewhere, the approach means the fight against Al Qaeda will have to be more sensitive to the local dynamics. This quadrant makes up approximately 2% of Syrian territory, and is the only area where Al Qaeda has relatively dominant presence.

The fourth quadrant is the regime-held areas, roughly 40% of Syria stretching from Deraa in the south to Aleppo in the north.

The US government should approach the Syrian conflict from this compartmentalized outlook. Different areas require different solutions. What works for eastern Syria does not necessarily work for the northwestern corner of Aleppo and Idlib. Similarly, what works for southern Syria does not work for the north. The country is currently fragmented along different conflict dynamics, and therein might exist some solutions.

An approach that recognizes the fragmented nature of the conflict is not the same as division of Syria. Quite the contrary, salvaging different areas in Syria as much as possible helps provide realistic solutions to particular challenges. The US administration can achieve minimally defined

objectives of defeating the Islamic State and ensure that the jihadist insurgency cannot physically reconstitute itself again.

In much of Syria, the US has more leverage and presence on the ground than it is publicly recognized. What is lacking is a policy to utilize this leverage to ensure the removal of jihadists, protect local communities from indiscriminate bombardments, and minimize conflict between various allies in northern Syria, namely the Kurds on one hand and the rebels and Turkey on the other.

The US must view southern and eastern Syria, for example, as part of its strategy of fighting extremism in Iraq as well as protecting Jordan and Israel. The focus in these two regions should involve locally accepted governance. The alternative is to hand over these areas to the Assad regime that currently does not have the resources and legitimacy to conquer or hold new areas – such policy will only ensure that the Islamic State will come back, as it did in Palmyra in December despite Russian and Iranian support. Eastern Syria has the added value of its relevance to the stability of Iraq. Even if the US government does not see Syria as important, eastern Syria is inescapably vital for Iraq's border security.

Stabilizing Syria should be a priority for the United States. Reliance on Russia to do the job is a fantasy, and will only perpetuate the conflict and enable jihadists to entrench themselves on the doorsteps of Europe. The areas where the US already has leverage -- from eastern Aleppo along the Turkish border to eastern Syria near the Iraqi border and from there to the Jordanian and Israeli borders – present Washington with a historic opportunity to stabilize the country and ensure an enduring defeat of jihadists.