

Ambassador Frederic C. Hof
Director, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Atlantic Council
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
February 14, 2017
“Defeating Terror in Syria: A New Way Forward”

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the subcommittee: I am honored by your invitation to speak about defeating terror in Syria and pleased to submit this statement for your consideration.

As a one-time military professional I was trained to define a mission and design an accompanying strategy in ways consistent with the desired end-state. In Syria we want terror defeated. We want to kill it and keep it dead. We do not want to neutralize terrorists now only to see them reappear in a few years, as was the case in Iraq. It is the ‘keep it dead’ part of the desired end-state that makes the battle far more than military in nature. Without an end-state reflecting political legitimacy in Syria – a political system seen by virtually all citizens as satisfactory and with no superior alternative – extremists will seek again to fill a governance vacuum produced by one family’s corruption, incompetence, and brutality.

Syria today is a problem from hell. Its internal conflict approaches its sixth year. It is the humanitarian abomination of the 21st century. It has killed hundreds of thousands of people, mainly civilians. Starting with a population of 23 million it has hemorrhaged nearly 5 million refugees and displaced internally over 6 million. More than 13 million require urgent humanitarian aid. Tens of thousands of Syrians have disappeared in government prisons, suffering unspeakable acts of torture, starvation, sexual abuse, and execution. Upwards of one million Syrians have been besieged by their own government, denied the basics of nutrition and medicine. Adding to the misery of Syrian civilians already on the receiving end of state terror is the presence in Syria of two competing terrorist groups: ISIS (ISIL, Islamic State, Daesh) and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), rival descendants of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Syria is also a political catastrophe. What happens in Syria does not stay in Syria. Refugees have placed great burdens on three countries close to the United States: Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. In 2015 one million migrants – most from Syria – made their way in a modern day mass odyssey to western Europe and Scandinavia, roiling the politics of our closest allies. And an emboldened Russia allied itself with Iran’s special brand of Islamist extremism to preserve in Syria a client regime subservient to Iran, one totally in the service of Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Reacting to the military success of Moscow and Tehran, NATO ally Turkey has joined with Iran and Russia in what it hopes will be a new Syrian peace process that safeguards Turkish interests.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations have defined defeating terror in Syria largely in terms of neutralizing the two rival AQI descendants: ISIS and JFS (the former Nusra Front). Indeed, terminating their military capabilities is critically important. Yet it will not suffice. Not if the desired end-state in Syria involves keeping both groups dead and rendering potentially more lethal successors stillborn.

This is why the Russian-Iranian preservation of the Assad regime presents such a challenge to defeating terror in Syria. Assad has been a poster child for ISIS and JFS recruitment: particularly of foreign fighters. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Syrian Arab Republic, reporting to the UN Human Rights Council, has detailed the horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime, ISIS, JFS, and others: the overwhelming majority by the regime. The reports of the Commission have been substantiated and expanded upon by numerous non-governmental organizations. The United States has facilitated the removal from Syria and safe-keeping of literally tons of evidence of egregious criminal behavior by Assad and his agents.

The point here is neither to catalogue the crimes nor try the perpetrators. Rather, it is simply this: there can be no political legitimacy in Syria and therefore no permanent defeat of terror as long as the Assad extended family and entourage wield political power in any part of the country. Leave aside persuasive evidence of Assad regime complicity in promoting ISIS and other extremists as convenient enemies of choice. Too much blood has been spilled, too many lives ruined, and too few acts of mercy and human decency performed: all because a single family elected to use collective punishment to survive politically. Russia and Iran know this. Assad's apologists know it. Perhaps Assad himself knows it. But some or all of them are content for the regime to continue to rule through state terror. This is not a pathway to legitimacy. This is not a prescription for defeating terror in Syria.

A prerequisite for killing terror in Syria and keeping it dead is for the Assad regime – family, enablers, and entourage – to be replaced by what the June 30, 2012 Geneva Final Communique referred to as a “transitional governing body,” one exercising full executive power and reflecting broad national consensus. But Russia and Iran – for separate, though compatible reasons - have purchased for their joint client something that looks like military victory. This leaves the United States stuck with a situation crying out for the rapid military defeat of ISIS and JFS, but no clear way forward to sealing that victory, because a polarizing war criminal remains politically ensconced in Damascus. The best we can do near-term under the circumstances is to defeat militarily these AQI descendants – particularly ISIS – in a way that does not strengthen a regime whose behavior pumps oxygen into the lungs of ISIS and JFS.

There are significant differences between these rival AQI descendants beyond the fact that they despise each other. ISIS has defied Al Qaeda leadership and has declared a ‘caliphate’ in the territory it seized in Syria and Iraq: territory initially equivalent in size to the United Kingdom. In Syria ISIS has, for the most part, observed a live-and-let live relationship with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Much of ISIS’ military effort in Syria has been focused on nationalist rebels opposing Assad, on JFS, and on Kurds.

JFS, on the other hand, has fought Assad even as it tries to marginalize nationalist rebels and bring the armed anti-Assad uprising under its control. Although it claims to have broken with Al Qaeda, its leaders have demonstrated fealty to Ayman Al-Zawahiri over the years. Whereas ISIS has conducted and inspired acts of terrorism abroad, JFS seems to have restricted its terror activities to Syria, although it stands accused of having hosted Al Qaeda foreigners with transnational terror ambitions.

Notwithstanding important differences between them, both AQI descendants merit early neutralization. And both may require new approaches in order to be beaten thoroughly.

Since September 2014 the United States, with several coalition partners, has been pursuing ISIS in central and eastern Syria with aircraft. After the battle for Kobani later that year, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units – the YPG – became the main ground combat component for the anti-ISIS coalition in

Syria. Two-and-one-half years later ISIS remains headquartered in its Syrian 'capital,' Raqqa, after having mounted major terror operations in Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, and Ankara.

The YPG's objective is establish a Syrian Kurdish autonomous zone along the border with Turkey. Given the close relationship between the YPG and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) – an organization designated as terrorist by the United States – Ankara has objected strenuously to the YPG serving as the ground force for the American-led coalition. American special operators advising the YPG in its counter-ISIS operations have attempted to mitigate this objection by training eastern Syrian non-Kurdish forces to work with the YPG under the umbrella of an organization called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Although the YPG has fought well, neither its interests nor its capabilities make it the ideal force for a block-to-block fight in Arab cities like Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. As I understand it, Arab elements of the SDF would take the lead in entering Raqqa while mainly Kurdish elements would surround the city. One wonders about the level of urban combat expertise resident in the SDF.

The American-led bombing campaign and the work of the SDF on the ground deserve some credit for the gradual shrinkage of ISIS-controlled territory in Syria. Many ISIS leaders and fighters have been killed. Towns and villages important to the logistical link between ISIS in Syria and ISIS in Iraq have been liberated. The nature of ISIS itself – the fact that in Syria it is an imposed entity with significant Iraqi presence in the leadership ranks, the fact that it spends more time fighting opponents of a hated regime than the regime itself, and the fact that its sectarian brutality has inspired widespread resentment – has also contributed to its decline. But this despicable organization has had the time not only to enslave Syrians and perhaps influence young Syrian minds, but to plan in Raqqa significant terrorist operations inflicted on Turkey and western Europe. How much longer will it be permitted to breathe in Syria?

As it reviews anti-ISIS strategy in Syria, the new administration should take a hard look at how and when ISIS will be finished off militarily. Since the ISIS atrocity in Paris in November 2015 I have been advocating that a professional, American-led ground force coalition-of-the-willing replace Kurdish and Arab militiamen to close with and kill ISIS rapidly and with minimal collateral damage. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain have long since volunteered to put forces in Syria to fight ISIS: an offer that drew a strong objection not from the ISIS so-called 'caliph,' but from Assad's foreign minister. Other candidates for the coalition would include Turkey (which already has combat forces in Syria), Jordan, and France.

As an Army veteran who served in Vietnam and Lebanon I am not searching for new opportunities to employ in combat American uniformed personnel already over-committed and over-deployed. On the other hand, two successive Presidents have defined ISIS as a serious threat to American security. We may get lucky and watch the Syrian segment of this organization either preemptively vanish from Raqqa and other populated places or collapse militarily in the face of militiamen barely schooled in the complexities and techniques of fighting in built-up areas. But we cannot count on luck.

Ideally the Pentagon is examining several issues beyond ground force composition. How can ISIS be neutralized in populated areas without adding to the humanitarian catastrophe? What kinds of local administrations will be established in the wake of liberation? How can United Nations relief convoys be expedited? How can civilians in liberated central and eastern Syria be protected from an Assad regime – ISIS' principal enabler in Syria – that has pledged to restore its rule over all of Syria? Perhaps an opportunity will arise in liberating central and eastern Syria from ISIS for the United States and its partners to facilitate the creation of a decent, inclusive government it can recognize and support as an alternative to a regime whose existence is catnip for terrorists.

The near-term military neutralization of Al Qaeda's JFS has challenges distinct from those associated with ISIS. Much of the JFS combat power is centered in the Idlib area of northwestern Syria. Unlike ISIS, JFS has made fighting the Assad regime a high priority. In places like eastern Aleppo it fought alongside nationalist, anti-Assad rebels against the regime and pro-regime Shiite militiamen assembled by Iran: foreign fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. JFS also worked hard – as it has for years – to dominate the armed Syrian opposition and to draw recruits from the ranks of other organizations. Many of those groups have concluded that JFS – like ISIS – must be neutralized.

For nationalist rebel forces to confront JFS militarily and resist any temptation to collaborate with it against a common foe, attacks on them by the Assad regime and its Shiite militia supporters must cease. Russia, according to some opposition sources, has shown interest in promoting and monitoring a ceasefire that would facilitate the anti-JFS operations of nationalist rebel forces.

JFS would not be a party to a ceasefire. Indeed, JFS targets have been recently engaged by American combat aviation. But for the nationalist Syrian opposition to confront JFS militarily, Moscow will have to keep a tight leash on Assad and Iran. Even if Moscow truly wants to do so, it will not be easy. In any event, American support for armed, nationalist Syrian opposition units with which Washington has developed relationships over the years should be maintained and enhanced. These units – not undisciplined, looting Iranian-led militias or a depleted Syrian army – will be the ground combat component of any serious effort to neutralize JFS.

In the end, however, defeating terror in Syria will require legitimate governance for Syria. Russia has supported a regime it knows to be illegitimate for two reasons: military operations in Syria have enabled President Putin to tell his domestic audience that Russia has defeated an alleged regime change campaign by the United States and is therefore back as a great power; and he has been able to tell Arab leaders that he stands by his friends, no matter how regrettable their habits. Iran has supported Assad because it knows that he will do whatever Tehran asks of him to support Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah is Iran's long arm of penetration into the Arab World; it threatens Israel as it holds Lebanon captive. Iran realizes that no other President of Syria would accept a relationship of subordination to it and to Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

Thanks to Russian and Iranian military intervention Assad seems secure in at least part of Syria for as far as the eye can see. Assad's political well-being means the indefinite continuation of state terror in Syria. As the United States and its partners move – ideally with dispatch – against ISIS and JFS, any temptation to make common cause with or improve the political prospects of Syria's premier practitioner of terror – Bashar al-Assad – must be resisted. Rumors of Russian disaffection with Assad and Iranian-led militias should be explored, though without any expectation of a positive result.

ISIS and JFS can and should be defeated militarily. Terror, however, will be killed in Syria only when legitimate governance, reflecting inclusivity and rule of law, replaces family rule based on collective punishment and mass homicide. So long as the latter prevails responses to it will inevitably include appeals to sectarianism, extremism, and terror. Moscow and Tehran know this quite well. Regrettably they are in charge and they seem not to care. Defeating the descendants of Al Qaeda may produce, in liberated areas, a decent alternative to Assad rule. Still, it is likely that transitioning all of Syria from that rule to terrorist-killing legitimacy will be a long-term national security endeavor for the United States and its partners.