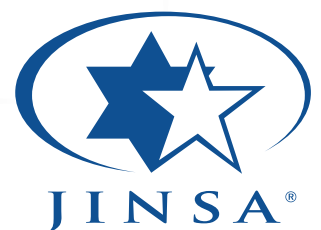


# Countering Iranian Expansion in Syria

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*JINSA's Gemunder Center Iran Task Force*

Co-Chairs Ambassador Eric Edelman and General Charles Wald, USAF (ret.)  
November 2017



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# Executive Summary

President Trump’s address last month on Iran policy asserted correctly that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is “unacceptable,” and that a comprehensive strategy is needed to counter Iran’s growing regional aggression. Yet rather than deciding whether or not to abandon the nuclear deal, American policymakers must focus first on rebuilding positions of strength by contesting Iran’s rising influence across the Middle East.

Most urgently, and consistent with the Administration’s stated intention of pushing back against Iran’s malign behavior throughout the region, the United States must impose real obstacles to Tehran’s pursuit of total victory by the Assad regime in Syria. Time is of the essence, as Iranian-backed forces recently have retaken nearly all the country, save lands liberated from Islamic State (IS) by the U.S.-led coalition. These, and any further, strategic gains threaten to entrench Tehran as the arbiter of postwar Syria and consolidate its control of a “land bridge” connecting Iran directly to Lebanon and Hezbollah.

The United States needs a coherent strategy and force presence that looks beyond the impending downfall of IS to deny Iran’s destabilizing objectives in Syria and restore leverage against Tehran. Despite recent successes, Iran has overextended itself in Syria. In reconquering the country for Assad, Iranian and Iranian-backed forces have become attrited and dependent on Russian airpower to achieve even tactical gains against the remaining rebel forces. Tehran also contrasts its support for Assad with apparent U.S. abandonment of its regional allies in recent years, in the process staking itself to Assad remaining in power and reconquering the entire country.

The costs of continued inaction are high. U.S.-backed forces are completing the hard work of retaking IS’s last Syrian strongholds, leaving Iran and its proxies to steal a march by pushing through Deir ez Zour on the Euphrates toward the Iraq border. This offensive is seizing valuable territory in the contest for postwar Syria, and closing the gap with Iranian-backed forces pushing against IS and Kurdish positions from northern Iraq. Earlier this month Iranian officials said Raqqa and other areas taken from IS by U.S.-backed forces “will be liberated” as well.<sup>1</sup>

A complete Assad victory facilitated by Russia and Iran would further undermine the credibility of U.S. commitments to the region and consolidate Tehran’s position as the predominant power in the strategic crossroads of the Middle East. Increasingly, the consequences of Iran’s rising influence are evident across the region, from Lebanon, where the prime minister cited Iranian interference as a reason for his recent resignation, to Yemen, where Iranian-supported Houthis launched their most brazen missile attack on Saudi Arabia to date. Yet American policymakers have not articulated objectives in Syria beyond destroying IS, and give little indication they are prepared to undertake an enduring U.S. role in-country.<sup>2</sup>

To avoid this outcome, which would upend regional geopolitics, the United States must lay out a strategy to prevent Iran and Russia becoming the uncontested arbiter of Syria’s political future and establishing a permanent military presence along the corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean – an unacceptable threat to key U.S. allies, especially Israel and Jordan.

This will require the United States and its partners in the region to:

- Adopt a clear declaratory policy for Syria:
  - The United States and coalition partners will maintain a military presence on the ground and in the skies of Syria, to provide security for reconstruction, and to prevent both the re-emergence of IS and Assad recapturing the entire country;
  - The United States, its allies and its Syrian surrogates will vigorously defend themselves if attacked.
- Continue developing counter-regime surrogates' capabilities and assist them in holding strategic territory liberated from Islamic State.
  - Potentially this will require more extensive, persistent U.S. train, advise, assist and equip and fire-support efforts in Syria.
- Work with regional allies against Iranian weapons proliferation in Syria.

# Strategic Background

A coherent post-IS strategy for Syria must acknowledge and reflect three salient factors shaping the current course of the six-year-old conflict.

## *Growing U.S.-Iran Friction*

The Euphrates River serves decreasingly as an effective seam separating U.S.- and Iranian-backed forces in Syria. The river divides the relatively sparse, mixed Kurdish-Arab northeastern third of the country, where U.S.-backed forces operate, from the densely-populated western spine. The latter encompasses the regime's coastal Alawite motherland, Syria's borders with Jordan, Lebanon and the Golan, and major cities Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo. The war's most costly fighting – for the regime, rebels and civilians alike – has occurred west of the river. This area also forms the centers of gravity for military interventions by Iran, Hezbollah, Russia and Turkey.

Roughly a year after the Syrian civil war began in 2011, most regime forces east of the Euphrates redeployed against the main rebel concentrations in Syria's western heartland. Kurdish militias and IS immediately began vying to fill the ensuing security vacuum. The subsequent rapid expansion of IS drew the United States and its coalition allies directly into the fighting, and encouraged the creation in 2015 of the Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that has borne the brunt of the fight against IS in Syria.

Until very recently these two conflicts – SDF and U.S. support units combatting IS in the east, Iran and its proxies levelling cities in the west – occurred in isolation from one another. This afforded the United States significant freedom of maneuver to encircle IS along the river's left bank, but prevented any attempt to block or outflank Hezbollah and Iran on Syria's borders with Israel and Jordan.

Today, the Euphrates is still the main dividing line. However, the Assad regime's offensive into Deir ez Zour means his soldiers and allies now brush the river's right bank with their sleeves. Should their momentum continue unimpeded, Tehran and its proxies would cut off any further SDF advance into the resource-rich Deir ez Zour province that straddles the river. In the same stroke, they would gain control of the most important land routes from Iran through Iraq to the heart of Syria, Lebanon and the Golan. Allowing Tehran to cement this goal would also raise appreciably the already-real risks of U.S. and Iranian forces or their proxies exchanging hostile fire.

## *Insufficient U.S. Leverage*

A second salient factor that must inform U.S. strategy is its credibility deficit in the eyes of friends and foes alike. The rapid U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, after which the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad systematically purged Sunnis from the country's leadership, echoes in our allies' current suspicions the United States will retreat precipitously from Syria after the downfall of IS – in essence, handing the keys to the country over to Iran

and leaving the SDF to a fate no better than that of Iraq's Sunnis. In Iraq itself, the lack of U.S. leverage was on display in Baghdad's Iranian-backed offensive to retake Kirkuk from Kurdish forces that defended that strategic city for years against IS.<sup>3</sup>

The Obama Administration's failure to uphold its redline on chemical weapons usage by the Assad regime in 2013 – after Iran told American diplomats it would pull out of nascent nuclear talks if the United States tried to enforce it – undercut further the United States' reliability to uphold regional order and impose costs on aggression by Iran and its proxies. Those nuclear talks and their end result in 2015 – the JCPOA – further enfeebled U.S. credibility by giving upfront sanctions relief to Iran and offering no resistance to its destabilizing behaviors beyond the nuclear realm.<sup>4</sup>

Iran, Russia and Turkey rushed to exploit this vacuum. All three developed or expanded military footprints in Syria in the wake of the unfulfilled 2013 U.S. redline and the JCPOA. Iran inserted more of its own troops and Shiite proxies into Syria, and increasingly assumed command and control of ground forces fighting on behalf of the regime. Russia began combat operations in 2015, and now leases military bases intended to endure beyond the current conflict. Beginning 2016, Turkey flouted the prospect of confrontation with its NATO allies by intervening directly against the SDF.

To underscore their new leverage, these same three initiated negotiations separate from the United Nations on postwar Syria – a process blatantly sidelining the United States and regime opponents. The message is clear: Washington currently cannot be expected to stay in Syria, so it will have no say in the country's future.

## *Iranian Vulnerabilities*

Perhaps underappreciated, Iran's overextension in Syria is the conflict's third salient feature that must inform any U.S. strategy. If the loss of U.S. credibility made overt intervention by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia possible, severe attrition to Syria's armed forces made it necessary. While still top-heavy with Alawites, the regime's largely Sunni ground forces suffered high casualties and mass defections from early on, placing Assad on the ropes by 2015.<sup>5</sup>

To keep Syria in their orbit, Iran and Hezbollah had to replace, not merely supplement, Assad's ground forces. Russia has done likewise for his air forces by providing close air support. Iran has deployed thousands of Shiite militiamen from across the Middle East as substitute cannon fodder, commanded on the frontlines by the IRGC and Hezbollah. They have been sapped by their brutal reconquest of the country's heartland, encapsulated in the costly block-by-block fighting and utter destruction of Aleppo late last year. Tehran has acknowledged more than 2,100 of these forces, including hundreds of IRGC, killed in Syria and Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Combined with heavy casualties among Syrian regime forces, this renders them increasingly dependent on Russian airpower to sustain new campaigns, especially as they are stretched thinner with every square mile retaken.

Assad's allies have made few friends in the process. The minority Alawite regime seeks to erase Sunni majorities from Syria's major cities and other cradles of rebellion. With Russian air support, this has been accomplished by intentionally disproportional and indiscriminate use of firepower that blurs any conceivable line between civilians and rebels.



Yet Tehran actively promotes its role in Syria. IRGC-Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani makes high-profile visits to cities recently reduced to rubble by Iran-led forces, often with refugees still streaming in the opposite direction, and Iranian officials publicize their country's role in Aleppo and similar battles.<sup>7</sup> By effectively creating a desert and celebrating themselves for calling it peace, the Syrian regime and its patrons are only exacerbating the underlying causes of the rebellion.

The consequences of Iran's costly intervention for postwar Syria are clear. For years, the IRGC has taken advantage of heavy regime casualties to backfill the country's security forces and ministries with its own personnel. Since the fall of Aleppo – symbolic of Iran's ascendance as the preeminent force on the ground in Syria – the IRGC and its shell companies have been busy trying to cash in on Tehran's significant investments in Assad. This includes major concessions essentially guaranteeing Tehran's control over much of Syrian reconstruction, including near-monopolies over the lucrative energy, finance, construction, mining and telecommunications sectors. Tehran is also trying to extract permanent basing rights for its ground, sea and air forces.<sup>8</sup>

The United States and its Syrian partners confront less intractable dilemmas on the ground. U.S. forces operate with a small footprint, concentrated in the lighter-populated Kurdish and Sunni Arab expanses of Raqqa and Deir ez Zour provinces. SDF rank and file largely reflect the local ethnic breakdown, and – in direct contrast to Iran – American officers have made clear their intention not to alter these demographics after the SDF pacifies IS-held territory.<sup>9</sup>

# The United States Needs a Syria Strategy

President Trump, like his predecessor, has prioritized destroying IS in its self-proclaimed caliphate. Until very recently, the other major actors in Syria were perfectly content to let the United States and SDF shoulder this burden. With the Assad regime and its backers regaining the initiative in the country's west, and with IS no longer posing an offensive threat, the United States and SDF suddenly confront Iran-aligned forces sweeping in to steal the fruits of victory and grab territory they abandoned so precipitously years ago.

This shifts the strategic paradigm in Syria for American policymakers and planners. The occasional points of friction over the vast no man's land of IS-occupied desert is being replaced by a congested battlespace astride the Euphrates – one that threatens to constrain U.S.-backed forces' freedom of maneuver appreciably.

On the strategic level, Assad's gambit to reconquer the country would be inconceivable if Iran, Russia and the Syrian regime believed the United States would not pull up stakes after defeating IS; on the operational level, they would think twice about barging into a U.S. combat zone if they perceived any credible deterrent to doing so. This is even more glaring because the regime and its patrons have stretched their supply lines and further attrited their forces in their eastward lunge toward the Euphrates.

The United States must develop a coherent strategy for Syria to reflect these realities, guided by the new priority of preventing Iranian hegemony in the country. While the Trump Administration inherited no viable plans from its predecessor, it has done little to adapt to the evolving strategic situation. Notably, its cruise missile strike in retaliation for Assad's chemical weapons use in April was not tied to any statement of policy for the future of Syria.

To create the predicates for an acceptable outcome to a conflict with few appealing options, the United States must:

***Adopt a clear declaratory policy for Syria.***

Perhaps the greatest constraint on U.S. policy is simply the belief on all sides that the United States will adhere to past practice and remove itself, and any leverage, from the equation after declaring IS defeated.

President Trump said recently he would “work with our allies to counter the regime's destabilizing activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region,” but offered no plan other than more sanctions, and made no mention of Iran or Assad in his statement on post-IS operations in Syria.<sup>10</sup> In August, Secretary of State Tillerson laid down two parameters for an acceptable postwar Syria – Assad removed from power, and all Iran-affiliated military forces withdrawn from the country – but left unanswered how the United States intends to achieve these outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

To ensure these, and possibly other, conditions for postwar Syria, American policymakers should make clear:

- The United States and coalition partners will maintain a military presence on the ground and in the skies of Syria, to provide security for reconstruction, and to prevent both the re-emergence of IS and Assad recapturing the entire country;

- The United States, its allies and its Syrian surrogates will vigorously defend themselves if attacked.

***Assist Syrian surrogates in holding strategic territory liberated from IS.***

The United States and SDF – not Assad, Iran, Russia, Hezbollah or Turkey – have borne the battle against IS in Syria. Completing this mission, while vital, is more than an end unto itself. It should provide vital leverage in determining Syria’s postwar fate to the U.S.-led coalition and its Syrian surrogates, primarily SDF, who have already stated their opposition to Iranian-backed militias entering their territory. It will also interpose unmistakable physical hindrances to Iran’s land bridge.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the Assad regime’s backers, the United States is in a strong position to help its allies on the ground take the last IS redoubts along the Euphrates and Iraq border. Kurdish-Arab tensions exist within the SDF, which the United States and coalition partners must acknowledge and address. Nevertheless, the United States and SDF have engendered less ill-will among Syrians than has Assad’s ethnic cleansing campaign, especially as the largely Sunni Arab and Kurdish populations still living under IS in these areas – coveted by Assad and his Iranian patrons for the oilfields and links to Iraq – have little reason to trust the Alawite-dominated Syrian regime. A declaration that the United States intends to protect these areas from the regime and any IS resurgence would help cement SDF authority.

Simultaneously, U.S. forces would likely need to bolster their own presence and their train, advise, assist and equip efforts in Syria. These steps would be necessary to avoid diluting SDF capabilities as they retake ground, and to underpin U.S. declaratory policy against Assad-aligned forces.

***Work with regional allies against Iranian weapons proliferation in Syria.***

Iran has already shipped significant weaponry to and through Syria, including illicitly by sea. It also intends to produce missiles and other military items in Syria, to bolster Hezbollah’s significant offensive capabilities and entrench its own foothold.

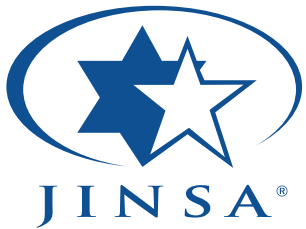
The United States needs to cooperate closely with regional allies Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and potentially others to intercept shipborne weapons transfers from Iran to Syria. This will require greater maritime monitoring and interdiction efforts and coordination from the Persian Gulf through the Red and Mediterranean Seas, as well as efforts to hinder Iran’s use of civilian aircraft for transporting military personnel and supplies to Syria. In tandem with a more concerted policy of cutting off land routes via Iraq and Syria, these measures will constrain Iran’s ability to maintain significant force presence in Syria and resupply its proxies.

At the same time, the United States must work with these same allies to integrate missile defense capabilities against Tehran’s aggressive proliferation drive across the region, most worryingly its continued efforts to transfer advanced missiles to Hezbollah and establish its own production capabilities in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

All these recommendations for U.S. policy in Syria are designed to rebuild leverage against Iran where the strategic stakes currently are the highest, and where it is most vulnerable to counterpressure. Yet alone they will likely be insufficient to reverse completely the ongoing decline in U.S. power and regional leadership relative to Iran. As reflected in President Trump’s October 13 speech, the United States can only correct course with a comprehensive strategy against the full spectrum of threats posed by Iran.

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