

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. #55

Date: December 7, 2015
From: Philip Gordon
Re: Syria: The Need for Diplomacy and De-escalation

Of all the factors currently tearing the Middle East apart, none is more consequential than the war in Syria. The war has left some 250,000 Syrians dead, seven million internally displaced, and three million forced to flee to neighboring states and Europe. The conflict is exacerbating an already large regional sectarian divide, as the Bashar al-Assad regime's violence against a primarily Sunni rebellion fuels the growing conflict between the region's Sunni-majority states and Shia-majority Iran. The violence also leads desperate, resentful Sunnis from across the world to support whatever groups are most willing to fight that regime, including the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The November 13 Paris attacks tragically demonstrated that the repercussions of the conflict are spreading well beyond the Middle East.

These developments, which are destabilizing U.S. allies and posing a direct threat to the security of Americans, put a greater premium than ever on de-escalating the war. Yet the policy the United States and its partners have been pursuing for four years is not likely to achieve that goal. The strategy has consisted of gradually increasing support for a “moderate” opposition that would compel the regime and its primary sponsors to sideline the Syrian dictator and hand power over to a transitional government. Instead of forcing the regime's capitulation, however, that approach has led to a counter-escalation by the regime and its sponsors. Further military escalation is unlikely to change this dynamic, as both Iran and Russia are committed to the regime's preservation. If taken to its logical conclusion, escalation could bring about a “catastrophic success” scenario, whereby the regime's overthrow is followed by all-out war among conflicting extremist factions and more killing, refugee flows, and regional instability.

There are no good policy options in Syria. But considering the dire consequences of the status quo or military escalation, the United States should support a new course that consists of using the new diplomatic process in Vienna to de-escalate the conflict on the basis of a cease-fire between the regime and the opposition; devolving power to local representatives in areas the regime does not currently control; intensifying the campaign against the Islamic State; and establishing an internal political process that would ultimately determine Assad's fate but would not make the outcome of that process a prerequisite to ending the war. Even achieving this set of goals could take many months, and would leave some problems unresolved, but it is a far more realistic approach than the current one.

WHY THE CURRENT APPROACH WILL NOT WORK

The current policy—gradually escalating the war in the hope of forcing a comprehensive political transition—is unlikely to succeed. As opposed to regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, where unpopular leaders quickly fell to opposition protests, Assad is backed not only by sizeable military forces and a considerable portion of his population but also—and perhaps most importantly—by major outside powers determined to prevent the collapse of his regime. Tehran sees its

position in Syria as critical to its regional leverage and has thus supplied the regime with money, weapons, and direct military assistance, particularly through its proxies in Hezbollah. Russia is also determined to keep the regime in place. Moscow vehemently opposes the principle of regime change and worries that Assad's fall could lead to even greater chaos with no one in charge or extremists taking power.

This explains why outside support for Assad's opposition, provided by the United States and others, has not accomplished its stated goals. Rather than forcing the regime to the table—essentially to negotiate its own demise—it has led only to a military stalemate that is benefiting the extreme elements of the opposition, including the Islamic State. The result has been a growing, open-ended conflict, with devastating humanitarian, strategic, and geopolitical consequences.

DIPLOMACY AND DE-ESCALATION

To end the conflict in Syria, the United States should pursue a course of action consisting of the following steps:

Institutionalize a diplomatic process with all parties involved. The October 30 and November 14 multilateral meetings in Vienna, for the first time including Iran and Saudi Arabia, were a useful first step. Participants agreed on basic principles, including preserving Syria's unity, independence, and territorial integrity, and on the need for a political process that would ultimately lead to a new constitution and elections. While influential countries remain deeply divided on the question of whether, how, or when to require Assad's departure, only by hammering out issues collectively and realizing the high costs of maximalist positions can the gaps be narrowed. When the Bosnia "Contact Group" was created as the war there raged in the early 1990s, the United States, Europe, and Russia were all far apart on key issues. They ultimately compromised, imposed a solution on recalcitrant local parties, and agreed on a settlement that has kept the peace in Bosnia for two decades.

Initiate a bilateral U.S. back-channel process with Russia. Because no agreement on the most sensitive issues can be reached with nearly twenty participants around a table, the United States should pursue back-channel discussions with Russia at the highest levels. The objective would be a quid pro quo that assures Moscow that the Assad regime will not collapse in exchange for a cease-fire between the regime and the opposition, and joint focus on the Islamic State. If Russia continues to insist on propping up the regime and indiscriminately bombing all elements of the opposition, the United States and others will maintain their support for opposition fighters, the war will go on, and Russia will alienate the Sunni world and become a growing target for terrorists. The October 31 bombing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai and the November 24 downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey underscore the risks for Russia in the absence of a settlement. But if Moscow is willing to press for policy changes from Damascus—including support for a cease-fire, recognition of opposition autonomy in parts of the country, and a process for longer-term leadership changes—a diplomatic agreement might be possible.

Pursue a cease-fire between the regime and the opposition. The goals of an agreement would include an end to both sides' offensive operations, including regime aerial attacks; devolution of power so that regions currently held by the opposition can govern themselves; the uninhibited provision of humanitarian assistance to both sides; and the adoption of a political process to determine political leaders and structures to govern an ultimately unified Syria. Given the extremely fragmented nature of the opposition, with no single authority in control and even moderate groups now fighting alongside extremists, it will be nearly impossible to prevent some violations of a cease-fire even if an agreement is reached. But if Russia and Iran were able to guarantee an end to the regime's attacks on the opposition and the provision of humanitarian aid, supporters of the opposition would be well placed to press their clients to accept a cease-fire by threatening to cut off assistance for those who refuse. The Islamic State would not be party to the cease-fire and would continue to be targeted. International

peacekeepers might be required to police the agreement, but the risks of deploying them would be significantly reduced if all the external powers were committed to the deal.

Defer the question of Assad. There is no doubt that Assad is a brutal dictator who deserves to face justice. The question, however, is whether the pursuit of that elusive goal is worth the costs of an unending war or the consequences of the military escalation that would be necessary to end the war. The United States and others do not have to abandon their position that Assad has lost legitimacy and that Syria will not be fully stable—or accepted by the international community—as long as he is in place. And they could condition support for a cease-fire on a political process that would determine the country’s eventual political structure and leadership. But they should not allow disagreement over Assad’s fate to be the obstacle to reducing the violence, if other elements of an agreement could be reached. Those countries most determined to see Assad’s departure—such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey—will resist such an outcome, but a clear U.S. position and clarity that the United States will not support military escalation could help bring about their acquiescence. Many weary Syrians, and a growing number of countries, even in the Arab world, would welcome an end to the fighting even if it was not accompanied by immediate regime change in Damascus.

Continue the fight against the Islamic State. Even as they pursue a diplomatic agreement to de-escalate the conflict between the opposition and the regime, the United States and its partners should intensify the war on the Islamic State. This should include efforts to empower the Sunnis of Iraq, maintenance of the coalition’s bombing campaign, greater intelligence sharing in Europe, the deployment of U.S. and other special forces, and the provision of military assistance to groups willing to target the Islamic State. If the regime and the opposition forces accepted cease-fires vis-à-vis each other on the basis of the current lines of control, they and their outside backers could focus their efforts on the common enemy—the Islamic State.

BETTER THAN THE ALTERNATIVES

Critics will be quick to point out the difficulty in making such an approach work, especially given the deep divisions among the outside actors, the inability of anyone to speak for or control an extraordinarily fractured opposition, and the determination of many in the opposition and the region to keep up the fight as long as Assad is in place. The difficulties are indeed considerable, but the primary alternative—military escalation in the form of the provision of more sophisticated weapons to the opposition, less strict vetting procedures for the recipients of U.S. and other allied military assistance to the opposition, or even direct U.S. strikes against the forces of the Assad regime—is even less likely to work and would in many ways make things worse. Escalation would not likely lead to Assad’s replacement by “moderates” but only to more killing and destruction as Russia and Iran respond with more support for the regime. It could foment the growth of the Islamic State, which would take advantage of the intensified fighting to attract new recruits. Reducing the violence on almost any terms would be better than that.

Ultimately, were the United States prepared to confront Russia militarily and apply enough military power, it could eventually depose Assad, just as it was ultimately able to oust the Soviets and the Taliban in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya. The result, however, is not likely the establishment of a moderate, inclusive Syrian regime but a political vacuum, an even greater refugee crisis as fearful Assad supporters flee the country, a struggle for power in Damascus that extremists might win, a further breakdown of order across the country, and other unwelcome or unintended consequences that would be the responsibility of the United States. Changing the regime in Damascus is a worthy objective given the crimes Assad has committed against his own people and the widespread opposition to his rule. The costs of pursuing that goal by escalating the war in Syria, however, far outweigh the benefits, especially given the low prospects for success and the growing humanitarian, strategic, and political consequences of the conflict. A diplomatic effort to de-escalate does not guarantee peace or decent governance in Syria, but it is a far better approach than the alternatives.

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