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US Policy in Syria:
A Seven-Year Reckoning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Analytical Findings

1. America's reflexive anti-interventionism, relative disinterest in the region, and "lead from behind" approach led to crucial miscalculations in high-leverage moments during Syria's uprising. America's unwillingness and inability to coordinate foreign support to mainstream revolutionary forces deepened fractures in anti-Assad forces in Syria that ultimately benefitted better-organized extremists as the war dragged on.

2. The United States wrongly calculated that the crisis could be contained to Syria itself. Instead, it quickly spread and enabled international terrorism, displaced millions to foreign countries, and bound itself to global geopolitics, all of which harmed US interests.

3. The US decision not to strike the regime for using sarin gas against civilians in August 2013 was critical and costly. The subsequent agreement for the Syrian regime to surrender its chemical and biological weapons was a failure for three reasons:

   a. The Syrian military has used chemical weapons, including sarin gas, against civilians at least thirty times since August 2013.

   b. The inability to prevent (a) above undermined international norms against the use of these weapons, likely encouraging other regimes to employ them against their populations in the future.

   c. It weakened US credibility in Syria, undermined America's partners among Syrian rebel groups, and signaled to others that the United States' Syria policy was unreliable.

4. The campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was artificially compartmentalized from the broader Syrian war. This highlighted to allies and adversaries the lack of US interest in addressing the Syrian conflict's core drivers, helped the conflict to progress in a manner that has harmed US interests, and, ultimately, failed to address the factors that enabled ISIS.

5. In separating the anti-ISIS campaign from Syria's broader war, the United States missed a potential opportunity to apply pressure on Russia and Iran over the civil war, despite years of de-conflicting while fighting ISIS. This helped Iran and Russia without securing any tangible benefits for the United States in exchange.

6. The United States was not willing to pay the costs of intervening more forcefully in support of negotiations in 2012-13 over a broader conclusion to the Syrian conflict. With prolonged US military commitments on the Syrian-Israeli and Syrian-Iraqi borders, the United States may find that the long-term costs of military commitments outweigh the short-term costs of more decisive engagement in 2012-13.

7. Without enforcement mechanisms, cease-fires in Syria will last only as long as the Syrian regime, and, to a lesser extent, the armed opposition, want them to last. They may bring humanitarian benefits, but they are fleeting absent any enforcement mechanism and ought not be a pillar of Syria policy.

8. This conflict is mainly about the Syrian regime—the future of Assad and his inner circle. This regime will not negotiate away a political monopoly that it has killed tens of thousands to preserve. Iran and Russia cannot force the regime to do so unless they can credibly threaten to abandon it, which they will not do as it would carry unacceptable risks and uncertainty over any successor's foreign policies and viability.

9. A meaningful political transition—and therefore an enduring peace—is a stated US policy goal for Syria. Bashar al-Assad's departure is a necessary but no longer sufficient condition for this transition to occur. Yet Assad's regime sees no gain in compromise, unless perhaps to avoid a credible US-backed threat or use of military force. On the current course, this regime will defeat the insurgency and Assad will be reelected president in 2021.

"The Syrian revolution has altered the course of history for the generation coming of age in the region."

I. Introduction

This paper is a retrospective analysis of key US policy decisions in Syria and how they shaped the Syrian revolution's outcome.1 It also attempts to draw broader lessons about US policy in the region based on the United States' actions in the twenty-first century's most acute and profound geopolitical crisis. It outlines the key policy challenges ahead in Syria and concludes with five policy principles for the United States' engagement in Syria and the broader region.

The United States had abandoned its policy of aggressive democracy promotion by the time the Syrian protests erupted in 2011. Syrians were slow to understand this, which contributed to some of the mistakes they made. Syrians have much to account for in their revolution's failure, but the United States was the international actor with the greatest capacity to alter events in Syria, deliberately or not, and its actions deserve special scrutiny.

The Syrian revolution has altered the course of history for the generation coming of age in the region. It has killed, wounded, or displaced millions of Syrians, worsened regional sectarianism, raised the risk of war between Israel and Iran, generated the worst refugee crisis since World War II, and created a new and more pernicious wave of violent radicals. Its effects extend beyond the region, shaping the outcome of politics around the world.

Some argue the Pax Americana is over, at least in the Middle East.2 We believe it is more accurate to say the Middle East and global balance of power have changed

1 We use the term "revolution"—the forcible overthrow of a government or social order in favor of a new system—to describe the totality of the Syrian uprising (2011-present). More specific terms used later in the paper (e.g., "the Syrian conflict") denote certain periods of time within the revolution (e.g., 2013-present).

2 Hal Brands, "The 'American Century' Is Over, and It Died in Syria," Bloomberg, last updated March 8, 2018, http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-03-08/the-american-century-is-over-putin-and-assad-killed-it.

President Barack Obama delivers an address to the nation regarding Syria, in the East Room of the White House, Sept. 10, 2013. *Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson*

in ways that complicate but do not prevent the useful projection of US power. Syria's failed revolution could encourage introspection and a revitalization of the US role in the Middle East in pursuit of US values and interests. Alternatively, Syria could be a precursor to recurrent conflicts in a post-Pax Americana Middle East that will inhibit regional development and threaten global security.

These authors recognize the fiendishly difficult policy problem that Syria has presented. However, for constraints of space, this paper focuses exclusively on US decisions in the Syrian revolution. Although this largely leaves out decisions made by Syrians, the authors are by no means ignorant of their agency. Nor are the authors unaware of the key influence of regional states like Turkey, Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. We limit our focus to the United States because we believe its continued role in the region is vital for US interests and, properly deployed, a potential force for progress in the region itself.

II. "A New Beginning"

In June 2009, six months after his inauguration, President Barack Obama visited Cairo University to announce a reset of US relations with the Muslim world. His speech, "A New Beginning," was intended to repair the relationship between the United States and Muslim world after the George W. Bush administration. The speech made requisite mention of continued US interest in protecting individual freedoms and political liberty. But within this was also acknowledged the "controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years." President Obama stated the United States would remain committed to "governments that reflect the will of the people," but also emphasized that "no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other."[3]

These caveats are important because they made clear that the administration would avoid complex entanglements in the Middle East in pursuit of democratization.

3 "Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html , June 4, 2009.

"... Misplaced faith in the inevitability of justice in a moral universe contributed to the first of several unfortunate policy misjudgments over Syria: the expectation Bashar al-Assad would go quickly, and that the central US contribution should be calling and preparing for his departure."

The Iraq War had given rise to an anti-war sentiment that helped put Barack Obama in the White House. Those views, the president shared, inspired a policy mantra in his administration: "don't do stupid shit."[4] While admittedly glib, the motto revealed deep skepticism about the projection of US power toward ambitious ends, especially in the Middle East.

It was the Syrians' bad luck, then, that they launched their revolution just as the United States was drifting away from the core US foreign policy tenet of activist liberal internationalism, and the US role as enforcer of that order. While US power has not always served democracy abroad (and has often done the opposite), it has also mobilized opposition, deterred aggression by adversaries, and, where interests and principles overlap, helped enforce international humanitarian norms. President Obama indeed sought a "new beginning," but for America, not the region. Despite appeals to shared values, this new beginning signaled to regional governments that the US would be deeply reluctant to intervene or pressure them in pursuit of those values.

In the abstract, the Obama administration would have liked to see liberal democracies emerge in the Arab world, including in Syria. But it would not do any heavy lifting to bring them about.[5] Instead, the United States either expected or hoped that things would fall into place accordingly, and that its chief duty was to be "on the right side of history"—which presumably favored liberalism and democracy. This historical optimism—a sharp contrast with the president's own skepticism about US power—is reflected in a line attributed to Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The president was so fond of this quote that he had it woven into a rug in the Oval Office.[6]

But this belief in a moral universe, where justice would inevitably prevail against evil, was more a declaration of faith than a statement of values the United States would advance abroad. It was this misplaced faith in the inevitability of justice in a moral universe that contributed to the first of several unfortunate policy misjudgments over Syria: the hope Bashar al-Assad would go quickly, and the belief that America's central contribution should be supporting the Syrian people and allies in the region calling and preparing for Assad's departure.[7]

In August 2011, President Barack Obama delivered remarks in the Rose Garden that were filled with these misplaced notions of the inevitability of justice: "We recognize that it will take time for the Syrian people to achieve the justice they deserve," he intoned. "It is clear that President Assad believes that he can silence the voices of his people by resorting to the repressive tactics of the past. But he is wrong...sometimes the way things have been is not the way that they will be." But old atavisms would overwhelm Syria's initially

4 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, last updated April 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

5 The NATO intervention in Libya might be seen as an exception to this point, but it was largely pursued by Europe and was, by Barack Obama's admission, his presidency's "worst mistake"—see "Barack Obama Says Libya Was 'Worst Mistake' of His Presidency," *Guardian*, last updated April 11, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/12/barack-obama-says-libya-was-worst-mistake-of-his-presidency.

6 Matt Lewis, "Obama Loves Martin Luther King's Great Quote—But He Uses It Incorrectly," *Daily Beast*, last updated January 16, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/obama-loves-martin-luther-kings-great-quotebut-he-uses-it-incorrectly.

7 Helene Cooper, "Washington Begins to Plan for Collapse of Syrian Government," *New York Times*, last updated July 18, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/washington-begins-to-plan-for-collapse-of-syrian-government.html.

Two destroyed tanks in front of a mosque in the city of Azaz, north of Aleppo, during the Syrian civil war. *Photo by Christiaan Triebert, (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode)*

peaceful protest movement—no moral universe would assert itself there. The United States might have paid lip service to supporting Syrians, but did not commit to supporting the revolution's outcome, much less to forcibly removing Assad and assuming responsibility for what followed.

By 2012, the revolution was fully militarized. The so-called Free Syrian Army, or FSA, was the military incarnation of the Syrian protest movement, originally conceived to protect demonstrators. It was less a coherent ideological movement and more a network of rebel franchises, but it was not hostile to the United States as it fought Iran and Hezbollah. The FSA fought Assad, his backers Iran and Russia, and various Shia militias. They also fought extremist Sunni Islamist militants flush with foreign money from sympathetic individuals and governments.

In the crucial months in which support to the FSA could have helped them coalesce, the president revealed not only his strong bias against military intervention or serious proxy backing for the rebels, but abiding skepticism about the Syrian opposition itself. In his 2013 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg for the *Atlantic*, President Obama described one side of the Syrian conflict as Assad's "professional army," fighting for "huge stakes" and supported by "large states"—Russia and Iran. Arrayed against this army, on the other side, was "a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protestors and suddenly now see themselves amid a civil conflict."[8] Although this could be seen as contempt toward the rebels, it is perhaps better understood as indicating a deep malaise toward the Middle East and an almost nonexistent belief in the US ability to constructively shape events in Syria's conflict. Whatever its origins, the administration's insistence

8 Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

that the revolutionaries were amateurs despite their good intentions implicitly justified noninterventionism.

The move to reject decisive military intervention against the regime,[9] whether to overthrow it or force it to make necessary political compromises to ensure a political transition, raised the question of what exactly the United States should do instead. The United States claimed to have settled on a policy of containment—not of the regime or its backers, but of the war itself. If this was ever a serious policy, it was based on the faulty premise that the war would burn itself out and perhaps fragment Syria, but that regional allies could be protected from its spillover. This was not realistic, and indeed did not occur. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and its eventual expansion in Iraq and Syria is one example that shows that containment was a failed policy. Another example was the expansion of Iranian-controlled non-state militias in Syria, which now number roughly 20-30,000,[10] as well as the displacement of millions of refugees to neighboring countries and Europe, where their presence polarized local politics.

The third fateful US decision was the unwillingness to attack the regime after the Syrian military killed hundreds of civilians using sarin gas in the Damascus suburbs in August 2013. This violated President Obama's "red line" on chemical weapons use in Syria, which he had singled out as an intolerable method of regime mass murder despite the use of many others. If President Obama believed presidential statements were a sufficient deterrent, the Assad regime may have discerned the larger strategic context of US disinterest.[119] At first a US attack seemed likely, but the president clearly felt trapped and chose to seek congressional approval. This stalling created space for Russia to offer a deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program, which the United States accepted.[12]

The deal to dismantle the Syrian regime's chemical weapons arsenal was predicated on an assumption that all parties would have reason to respect it, which was clearly and predictably absent from the start. This fundamental flaw in the deal—that it was long on promises but short on reprisals for malfeasance—led to three problematic developments in Syria's war. First, the deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program did not stop the Syrian military from using chemical weapons.[13] The Syrian military has launched at least thirty chemical attacks since August 2013.[14] This means that the Obama administration bargained for a temporary reduction in Syria's chemical weapons stockpile at the price of possibly signaling to the regime that they were safe from any US reprisals. The second flaw in the deal was that it eroded international norms against using chemical weapons, setting precedent for future dictators to use them when under duress. Third and finally, it signaled the end of any prospect of victory for the mainstream, nonextremist opposition in Syria. It undermined US credibility as being serious about getting involved in Syria, and highlighted to both fighters and the local population that they were essentially on their own and at the mercy of the regime or the extremists. Many would choose the latter.

It is impossible to debate hypothetical alternatives and construct scenarios for Syria with any degree of confidence because the possible outcomes in such a complex conflict are nearly infinite. There is no certain

9 *We use the term "regime" deliberately to distinguish the group of people who control the coercive apparatus and tools of repression-President Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle - from the vast majority of general functionaries who work for the Syrian government and implement the regime's will. In other parts of the paper, we use the terms "Syrian government" or various derivatives (e.g., "Syrian military"). deliberately to denote a wider body of actors with less agency and decision-making power over their actions than "the regime."*

10 Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias," *The Washington Institute*, last updated April 12, 2018, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-is-outpacing-assad-for-control-of-syrias-shia-militias

11 James Ball, "Obama Issues Syria a 'Red Line' Warning on Chemical Weapons," *Washington Post*, last updated August 20, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-eaf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html?utm_term=.c7897eaa9016.

12 Mark Landler and Jonathan Weisman, "Obama Delays Syria Strike to Focus on a Russian Plan," *New York Times*, last updated September 10, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/middleeast/syrian-chemical-arsenal.html?pagewanted=all.

13 Michael Grunwald, "Ben Rhodes and the Tough Sell of Obama's Foreign Policy," *Politico*, last updated May 11, 2016, https://www.politico.eu/article/ben-rhodes-barack-obama-foreign-policy-tough-sell-war-middle-east-afghanistan-libya-syria; Scott Shane, "Weren't Syria's Chemical Weapons Destroyed? It's Complicated," *New York Times*, last updated April 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/world/middleeast/werent-syrias-chemical-weapons-destroyed-its-complicated.html.

14 Sara Kayyali, "Chemical Weapons Resurface in Syria," *Human Rights Watch*, last updated February 3, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/03/chemical-weapons-resurface-syria.

way to know how events in Syria would have unfolded had the administration made different decisions during this stage of the conflict. But that uncertainty ought to have informed administration thinking; instead, it began with principles adopted after the Iraq War, making the intervention appear as nothing but Iraq redux—a "slippery slope."

III. The Anti-ISIS Campaign

The rise of ISIS doomed the Syrian revolution. The emergence of ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups removed any flexibility that remained in US Syria policy. The administration decided that ISIS had to be defeated as quickly as possible and with minimum risk to US personnel. Any anti-regime efforts would only distract from and complicate the anti-ISIS fight. Rebels who refused to drop the war against the Assad regime to fight ISIS exclusively would find themselves misaligned with US priorities and deprived of support.[15] Since the Assad regime had no intention of pausing its war effort, this meant the rebels were besieged by the Syrian military and ISIS even as US attention shifted away from them.

In a last-ditch effort to save its revolution—although they did not know it at the time—Syrian opposition leadership argued in 2014 at the United Nations that confronting Sunni radicalism in Syria without supporting efforts to overthrow the Assad regime would address the proximate cause of a more profound problem.[16] Sunni radicals would continue to flock to Syria to fight the Assad regime, just as, by this time, Shia militants were being recruited from Afghanistan and Iraq and flown into the Syrian theater by Iran. It is true that opposition supporters have sometimes lazily argued that the Assad regime is the "root cause" of all evil in Syria and should be removed from power. Noninterventionists would reject this root cause argument, noting it cannot be addressed at an acceptable cost. However, we believe that completely decoupling US counterterrorism strategy from Syria's broader war was ultimately harmful.[17]

> "This deliberate splitting of the anti-ISIS effort from Syria's broader war sometimes led to bizarre policy outcomes."

Launched in 2014, the anti-ISIS campaign overlapped with another key development in US foreign policy that influenced US thinking on Syria. The secret back-channel meetings between the United States and Iran, which began in July 2012 and continued in earnest in 2013, had made enough progress by the time the counter-ISIS coalition was announced that the Obama administration did not want to jeopardize a potential nuclear deal with a more aggressive Syria strategy.[18] While at least some administration officials deny any such linkage, it was clear from President Obama's letter to Ayatollah Khamenei that the US administration saw the counter-ISIS fight as an opportunity to establish common ground with Iran.[19] Moreover, there were fears that an aggressive US military posture against the regime in Syria would trigger an Iranian reprisal against American troops in Iraq. But the fear for US troop safety in Iraq and the eagerness to establish rapport with Iran tipped America's hand: it was clear they would not let Syria jeopardize the de-nuclearization talks. This handed Syria to Iran without extracting any concessions from the Iranians.

Whatever the exact reason, the United States was eager to wage the anti-ISIS war in a compartment—downplaying the link between the sectarian civil war's radicalizing

15 Rebecca Collard, "The U.S. Challenge of Turning Syria's Ragtag Rebels into a Fighting Force," *Time*, last updated September 30, 2014, http://time.com/3446604/free-syria-army-hazem-assad/.

16 National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, "Remarks of SOC President Hadi al Bahra to the UN Press Corps at the 69th UN General Assembly," last updated September 22, 2014, https://www.etilaf.us/preshadi_unstatement.

17 Hannah Allam, "It's Official: U.S. Will Build New Syrian Rebel Force to Battle Islamic State," *Olympian*, last updated October 16, 2014, http://www.theolympian.com/news/nation-world/national/article26084077.html.

18 Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "'If You Can't Do This Deal … Go Back to Tehran,'" *Politico*, last updated September 26, 2015, https://www.politico.eu/article/if-you-cant-do-this-deal-go-back-to-tehran-iran-us-nuclear-deal/.

19 Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee, "Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran's Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State," last updated November 6, 2014, https://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291

"Despite the American defeat of ISIS, the Syrian conflict will continue to drive radicalization in the Middle East. The regime's survival in western Syria will not address its dysfunctional political economy, sectarian character, or severe repression of much of the Syrian population."

effect and the rise of Sunni extremists. Higlighting links between the anti-ISIS fight and the broader Syrian war would have forced the administration to acknowledge complex conflict drivers for which it continued to lack a clear policy, not least the sectarian and socio-economic grievances, the proliferation of militias, and the multiplying proxy wars. Instead, the United States focused on the problem to which it had a ready and comfortable solution: counterterrorism operations against Sunni jihadists. That meant putting "boots on the ground," which was previously a policy taboo.[20] Yet since the September 11 attacks, the US public has largely supported such military campaigns. This kept the administration in a political comfort zone as well.

The deliberate splitting of the anti-ISIS effort from Syria's broader war might have seemed acceptable in Washington. But in Syria, it yielded bizarre results. One example was the so-called train-and-equip program for Syrian fighters. The program was a debacle. The US Department of Defense committed to training several thousand Syrian fighters against ISIS. Only a few dozen volunteers passed the vetting process, and the United States failed to commit to defending them should they come under attack by the Syrian military.[2118] Yet the insistence that US-aligned fighters ignore the threat from the regime was but one reason why the train-and-equip program fizzled. Another was the relative strength of extremist groups by the time the handful of program graduates reentered the battlefield. And in a separate instance, these train-and-equip rebels came into conflict with those backed by a covert CIA program for the purpose of fighting the regime.[22]

The Russian intervention in September 2015 cemented the boundaries delinking the ISIS war from the Syrian civil war. The introduction of Russian forces and anti-aircraft systems into the Syrian theater was a strong deterrent against serious US involvement outside the anti-ISIS fight.[2319] This strengthened the noninterventionists' argument, as they could cite the risk of a catastrophic military confrontation with Russia. Avoiding antagonizing Syrian forces—and Russian forces by extension—became not just a policy choice but a military necessity. By fall 2015, the United States could not fly through Syrian airspace without coordinating with Russia. Paradoxically, even as the administration sought to avoid such a collision, the president himself dismissed claims of Russian strength or the idea that its deployment in Syria posed a threat, insisting it was entering a "quagmire" and that its actions demonstrated weakness rather than strength.[24]

20 Robin Wright, "Trump to Let Assad Stay until 2021, as Putin Declares Victory in Syria," *New Yorker,* last updated December 11, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/sections/news/trump-to-let-assad-stay-until-2021-as-putin-declares-victory-in-syria; Since the 2014 anti-ISIS coalition announcement, the United States has deployed two thousand troops and spent roughly $13 million a day on its campaign.

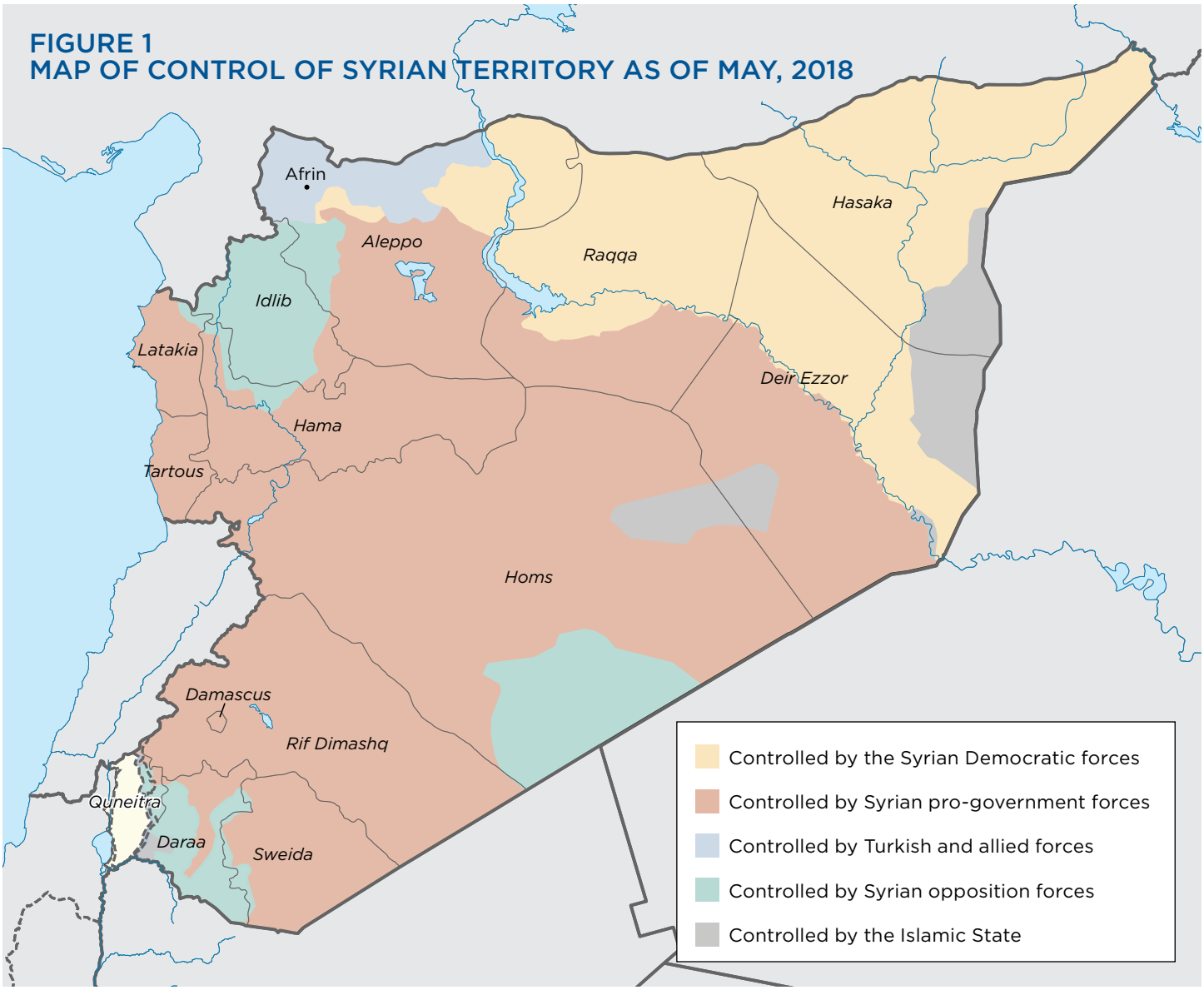
21 Paul Mcleary, "Carter: 'Awfully Small Number' of Syrian Rebels Being Trained by U.S.," *Foreign Policy*, last updated July 7, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/07/carter-awfully-small-number-of-syrian-rebels-being-trained-by-u-s/; "My understanding of that question is that we don't foresee that happening anytime soon," Carter said. "But a legal determination, I'm told by the lawyers, has not been made." See David Welna, "Syrian Rebels Will Face ISIS, but the U.S. May Not Have Their Backs," NPR, March 14, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/03/14/392945308/syrian-rebels-will-face-isis-but-the-u-s-may-not-have-their-backs.

22 Paul Mcleary, "The Pentagon Wasted $500 Million Training Syrian Rebels. It's About to Try Again," *Foreign Policy*, last updated March 18, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/18/pentagon-wasted-500-million-syrian-rebels/

23 Jonathan Marcus, "Russia S-400 Syria Missile Deployment Sends Robust Signal," BBC, last updated December 1, 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34976537.

24 James S. Robbins, "A Strategic Muddle in Syria," *U.S. News & World Report*, last updated October 12, 2016, https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-10-12/obama-wont-admit-were-fighting-a-proxy-war-with-russia-in-syria.

FIGURE 1
MAP OF CONTROL OF SYRIAN TERRITORY AS OF MAY, 2018



Sources: NordNordWest (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode) and liveuamap.com

Coordinating US and Russian forces in Syria evolved into the "de-confliction" program, which resulted in several years of carefully coordinated air strikes—sometimes through as many as twenty phone calls a day.[25] But since it further isolated its anti-ISIS fight from the wider Syrian conflict, the United States lost all meaningful leverage. As a result, years of high-level military communications with Russia, and by extension Iran and Syria, brought no military or political progress on Syria's broader conflict, which depended on adversaries' willingness to make at least some concessions. In the absence of coordination between these powers, other diplomatic efforts, such as futile attempts by then-Secretary of State John Kerry to protect civilians

25 Guy Taylor, "U.S. Military Uses Russian 'Deconfliction' Line 20 Times a Day to Separate Jets over Syria," *Washington Times*, last updated October 5, 2017, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/oct/5/us-russia-use-military-deconfliction-phone-20-time/.

> "The Syrian regime's consolidation process is unlikely to prioritize resettling the estimated eleven million Syrians displaced by fighting … Their return would likely place an unbearable burden on state capacity and finances."

during the siege of east Aleppo in August 2016,[26] went nowhere.

The United States spent about $13 million per day since 2014 to fight ISIS.[27] Yet, the Syrian conflict will continue to drive radicalization in the Middle East. The regime's survival in western Syria will not address its dysfunctional political economy, sectarian character, or severe repression of much of the Syrian population. ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and their successor organizations will recruit victims from Syria's war, not least the large and disenfranchised population of several million Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons. Additionally, the consuming US focus on the ISIS fight and its artificial separation from the broader Syrian conflict left the latter to take its own unimpeded course. The ultimate implications of the rise of Iranian-backed Shia militias and extremist recruitment will become known only after this phase of the Syrian war subsides.

IV. Post-ISIS Syria

The anti-ISIS campaign did not address any of the key areas of contention of the Syrian war. In the wake of ISIS' defeat, four fronts have reemerged alongside one crucial new one.

1. Ongoing disputes between Kurdish, Turkish, and Arab forces

The United States' closest ally in Syria is a Kurdish militia with de facto separatist goals. Its political aims not only undermine US policy for a united Syria but also threaten to unravel US-Turkish relations. This ally is the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), derived from and influenced by the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). For the first year of the counter-ISIS coalition, from 2014 to 2015, Syrian YPG and Iraqi Kurds were on the front lines resisting ISIS' territorial expansion.[28] By late 2015, the counter-ISIS coalition had formed the Syrian Democratic Forces as a local partner to continue fighting ISIS—an umbrella organization to include an Arab component, but nonetheless dominated by the Kurdish YPG militia.[29] These Arabs were mainly from former ISIS territory and interested in garnering US support for recapturing their hometowns from ISIS.[30]

In addition to being a US-designated terrorist group, the PKK is a historic enemy of Turkey, which itself is a NATO ally of the United States. This is an inherently unstable situation that neither Turkey nor the United States has found a way around. To further complicate matters, the United States wants to keep Syria territorially unified, as explained in January 2018 by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Meanwhile, the YPG, and its political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), claim an anarcho-syndicalist ideology calling for extreme decentralization, which is grafted onto Kurdish ethno-nationalism. The United States seeks to stabilize Kurdish-held Arab areas captured from ISIS, but it is wading into latent conflict: Arab-Kurdish suspicion runs high and there is a history of tit-for-tat violence,

26 "Syria war: John Kerry urges planes to be grounded" *BBC News*, last updated September 21, 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-37432797

27 Wright, 2017.

28 Dexter Filkins, "The Fight of Their Lives," *New Yorker*, last updated September 29, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/fight-lives.

29 "Global Powers Seek to Revive Diplomatic Process," *Economist*, last updated February 12, 2016, http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1363937520&Country=Syria&topic=Politics.

30 Kheder Khaddour, "A Shattered Relationship," Carnegie Middle East Center, last updated September 27, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/73212.

which the Syrian government and neighboring states continue to foster and exploit.[31]

To make matters worse, there is a high probability that the regime and Turkey will seek to sabotage US stabilization efforts in Kurdish-held areas taken from ISIS, despite (or because of) the presence of hundreds of US soldiers there. One direct result of Turkish anxiety over the emerging PYD state is its campaign against Kurds in Afrin.[32] In January 2018, the Turkish military launched an operation into this largely Kurdish region of northern Syria. The basic goal of this operation is to defang Kurdish militants in the area and continue ongoing efforts to prevent them from connecting territory under their control with a much larger Kurdish territory to the east [see figure 1, page 9].[33] It is also, to an extent, an expression of Turkish frustration at being unable to pursue the more ambitious goal of going after the YPG in the US-controlled northeast. In the absence of a clear policy that deals with its conflicting alliances, the United States is stoking a decades-old conflict that will result in either A) the United States frustrating both parties by seemingly abandoning them, or B) maintaining an expensive, open-ended military commitment to preserve a tense status quo.

2. The Regime's Attempts to Consolidate Victory

Since it turned the trajectory of the war in its favor in 2015, the Syrian government has planned to consolidate its gains with an eye to preventing any future opposition through punitive military action and forced displacement. Using a "starve or surrender" campaign, it recaptured opposition holdouts in densely populated urban areas.[34] Roughly half a million Syrians—nearly 2.5 percent of the country's pre-war population—were subjected to this tactic in neighborhoods like Zabadani and Darayya (Damascus), al-Waer (Homs), and Eastern Aleppo (Aleppo). After surrendering, many areas are depopulated based on regime reconstruction plans that intend to reassert control over strategically important areas. This plan will push out mainly Sunni lower-class communities—the parts of Syria's cities most likely to participate in the revolution—from strategic areas. Syria's Decree 66/2012 provided the legal authorization for city planners to rezone "unauthorized or illegal housing areas" in Damascus. This blueprint was approved by the Syrian parliament in January 2018 to be applied throughout the provinces of the country and will likely be part of future efforts to entice foreign investors and change the character of once-hostile areas.[35]

The Syrian regime's consolidation process is unlikely to prioritize resettling the estimated eleven million Syrians displaced by fighting, both internally and as refugees. Their return would likely place an unbearable burden on state capacity and finances. Additionally, because they are largely Sunni from areas hostile to Assad, their permanent displacement represents a net gain for the regime. The war's destruction and disruption have therefore had paradoxical effects on the Syrian government's fortunes: they have undoubtedly shrunk the regime's geographic reach and weakened its capabilities. However, they have also spared it the financial, political, and security strain of controlling millions of dependent and resentful Syrians. As Assad himself has put it: "We lost many of our youth and infrastructure [in the war] but we gained a healthier and more homogenous society."[36] This so-called "healthier society" will foster extremist recruitment among dispossessed communities, further marginalizing and ostracizing them in a cycle of violence that will resemble the Palestinian diaspora community in the second half of the twentieth century.

31 "Mistrust Mars Deal between Syrian Arab Rebels, Kurds," *EKurd Daily*, last updated April 8, 2013, http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/4/syriakurd772.htm; Aris Roussinos, "After Raqqa: The Challenges Posed by Syria's Tribal Networks," The Jamestown Foundation, last updated June 16, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/raqqa-challenges-posed-syrias-tribal-networks/.

32 Aaron Stein, "What Turkey's Afrin Operation Says about Options for the United States," Atlantic Council, February 14, 2018, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/what-turkey-s-afrin-operation-says-about-options-for-the-united-states-2.

33 Aaron Stein and Michael Stephens, "The PYD's Dream of Unifying the Cantons Comes to an End," Atlantic Council, August 25, 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-pyd-s-dream-of-unifying-the-cantons-comes-to-an-end.

34 Nour Alakraa, "Syria's Cycle: Siege, Starve, Surrender, Repeat," *Wall Street Journal*, last updated March 23, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-cycle-siege-starve-surrender-repeat-1521817360.

35 Joseph Daher, "Decree 66 and the Impact of Its National Expansion," Atlantic Council, last updated March 7, 2018, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/decree-66-and-the-impact-of-its-national-expansion.

36 Mariam Elba, "Why White Nationalists Love Bashar Al-Assad," *Intercept*, last updated September 8, 2017, https://theintercept.com/2017/09/08/syria-why-white-nationalists-love-bashar-al-assad-charlottesville/.

"There are no certain answers, but if the United States is to draw lessons from the Syrian revolution, it cannot be content with saying there were no better options than the very few it exercised."

3. Idlib: A Final Battleground for the Armed Opposition

Anti-Assad rebel forces in Idlib benefit from the northwestern province's rugged terrain and largely Sunni, anti-regime demography. As a result, the rebels there may not be easily defeated. But they are not unified. Infighting mainly involves al-Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on the one side (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), and Nourredine al-Zinki and Ahrar al-Sham on the other. Neither the extremists of HTS and Ahrar al-Sham nor the guns for hire in Nourredine al-Zinki are worth international support despite some coming under Turkish domination. Many are merely an indication of the extent to which non-ISIS anti-Assad forces have become radicalized over the course of the conflict. Communities in Idlib clearly chafe under the rule of these radicals, but while the United States fought its battles against ISIS, these are the only ones left with guns in the remaining areas of "opposition-held Syria."[37]

4. The Fate of Syria's South?

Some would argue that Syria's south had been an example of the success of the cease-fire agreement brokered by the United States and Russia in 2017. But recent events have made clear the truth about Syrian cease-fires: they only hold as long as the Syrian regime wants them to. This is because the Assad regime refuses to acknowledge that the counterparties with whom they would sign such a cease-fire have a legitimate claim to the territory they hold in the first place.

More important is the simmering Israeli-Iranian confrontation in Syria's south. The tit-for-tat exchanges between an Iranian drone, Israeli jets, and Syrian anti-aircraft weapons in February 2018 are precisely the kind of seemingly minor, confusing series of incidents that can spark a wider war between Israel and Iran and its proxies.[38]

The existence of a powerful and fully mobilized Hezbollah as the Syrian conflict winds down poses enough of a threat to Israel; however, it is also being furnished with new Iranian weapons that can easily reach Tel Aviv. On the one hand, Iran's weapons transfer to Hezbollah is inevitable as long as a pro-Iranian regime controls the Syrian-Lebanese border: Iran can and will arm Hezbollah with weapons that allow it to secure its gains in Lebanon and Syria.[39] On the other hand, for Israel, the transfer of new weapons capabilities and newfound Iranian strategic depth in Syria are likely unacceptable.[40] By securing the Syrian regime at little direct cost, Iran is arguably the biggest winner in the Syrian war. This new balance of power in the region has made war with Israel more likely.

Reflections—The US Role in Syria Since 2011

It is easy to criticize US diplomats and decision makers for their mistakes on Syria in hindsight. But the problem with their choices on Syria is that they were predicated on the assumption that the United States could not and should not shape conflicts abroad in any ambitious way, especially in the Middle East. This was a departure from prevalent beliefs that it was self-evidently

37 Haid Haid, "The Regime Push against HTS in Idlib Could Backfire," Chatham House, January 2018, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-regime-push-against-hts-in-idlib-could-backfire.

38 Anshel Pfeffer, "Two Days on, Israel Still Puzzled Why Iran Sent Drone into Its Airspace," *Haaretz*, February 12, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-still-puzzled-why-iran-sent-drone-into-israeli-airspace-1.5809571.

39 Sam Dagher, "What Iran Is Really Up to in Syria," *Atlantic*, last updated February 14, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/iran-hezbollah-united-front-syria/553274/.

40 "Israeli Minister: 'We Will Prevent Iranian Activity in Lebanon as We Did in Syria,'" *Middle East Monitor*, last updated January 31, 2018, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180131-israeli-minister-we-will-prevent-iranian-activity-in-lebanon-as-we-did-in-syria/.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters ride atop military vehicles as they celebrate victory in Raqqa, Syria, October 17, 2017. *REUTERS/Erik De Castro*

beneficial to project power to protect allies and reduce the gains of historic rivals such as Iran and Russia.

In the first two years of Syria's revolution, the instinct to avoid regional entanglements led to, or encouraged, faulty assumptions about the capabilities and intent of the Syrian regime. Those assumptions led to an underestimation about the extent to which the war in Syria would affect the region and the world. Those early assumptions undermined a chance to support the Syrian revolution in a way that might have constructively shaped its outcome. They were compounded by unsubstantiated beliefs in an inevitable moral universe: that the Syrian people would ultimately prevail in a struggle against their despotic government, or that rivals such as Russia would either get bogged down in Syria or prove willing and able to deliver concessions from the Syrian regime in a negotiation over a political transition.

To a very large extent, this attitude emerged from a combination of faith in a rules-based international order and an aversion to military intervention. But the rules-based international order offered no answer to the regional and international obscenities of the Syrian war, and single-minded noninterventionism ruled out a US shift to the language of power and coercion that could alter regime behavior or extract political concessions from it.

In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics,* Robert Jervis describes how "a dramatic and important experience often hinders later decision-making by providing an analogy that will be applied too quickly, easily, and widely."[41] It was the administration's processing of the Iraq War that arguably decided US policy before the insurgency's radicalization, the emergence of ISIS, the Russian intervention, and other complications. President Obama could not imagine an intervention in

41 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 220.

Syria being anything other than a slippery slope to a large-scale, open-ended, quixotic US military deployment. This was the burden the Iraq War imposed on US decision-making over Syria, although it should be noted that avoiding the civil war and focusing solely on ISIS led to an open-ended US military presence in northeast Syria anyway.

There will always be unanswered and unanswerable hypothetical questions about Syria: Should the United States have armed the rebels in 2012? Should the United States have bombed Syrian government military targets after they used sarin gas in August 2013? What would have happened had the United States intervened on purely normative or humanitarian grounds through no-fly zones or airdrops, after it became clear that entire cities were being leveled and starved into submission? There are no certain answers, but if the United States is to draw lessons from its decisions during the Syrian revolution, it cannot be content with saying there were no better options than the very few it exercised.

Complex conflicts like Syria's have multiple possible trajectories. Options emerge if there is a commitment to developing them. For example, if the United States had been interested in supporting the Syrian revolution early on, it might have found the opposition willing to cohere around a limited set of ideas and goals. If the United States had offered resources, planning, and pressure on foreign backers of the armed opposition instead of leaving a geopolitical vacuum, that might have curbed the latter's fragmentation and radicalization. The United States also did not need to stage a ground invasion and occupation of Syria to turn the tide of the war, as President Obama has implied, especially before Iran and Russia committed their own forces at a large scale. By taking one or two concrete steps to support imperfect Syrian revolutionary forces, the United States may have created more options than it first thought possible.

Reflections—The US Role in the Middle East

The most important debate about the US role in Syria has little to do with the conflict and everything to do with the role the United States envisions for itself in the region. Despite their different sentiments toward Iran, the Obama and Trump administrations share a deep and abiding skepticism about the United States' ability to shape the Middle East. They agree that American power is of limited use in the region beyond protecting narrow, core US strategic interests: counterterrorism; ensuring the flow of hydrocarbons; and guaranteeing the security of Israel.

Both presidents regularly refer to the lessons from what they see as the ill-fated wars in Iraq and Libya. Yet it remains the case that there is nowhere else in the world with as deep and widespread a deficit in political legitimacy as the Middle East. In an interdependent world where conflicts metastasize and spread, despots of the region are not guarantors of stability, but saboteurs. Governments built upon fear, coercion, and brutality can end as violently as they often start, especially in a more informed and mobilized Middle East. When opportunities to change them arise with strong local support, is it truly in US national interest to ignore them?

The lesson from the Iraq War is not that the United States cannot and should not play a substantive role in shaping the region, including in situations like Syria's. Instead, the lesson is that it must remain active and engaged in learning about these places, evaluating policy options clearly and on their own merits, and recognizing that indigenous uprisings and foreign invasion are not analogous. Whenever possible US policy should reflect the link between political legitimacy in Middle East countries and US security. In that sense, Syria was a lost opportunity.

The competition with Iran and Russia in particular revealed that the United States is suffering from a deeper malaise as a superpower. What does the United States actually stand for in the Middle East? The answer is not clear. By contrast, Iran has allies that it seeks to protect at all costs. Russia insists it supports states as complete sovereigns over their domains, regardless of the path the rulers of those states take to acquire and keep power. Meanwhile, the United States called for Assad to step down but did little encourage this outcome. Its small-scale support for certain insurgent groups helped keep the war going, but this prolonged Syria's hardship rather than demonstrate America's commitment to a clear course of action. Russia's and Iran's goals are not noble, but they appear to know what they want without making apologies for it. What kind of power does the United States want to be? What compelling story can it tell to counter Iran's and Russia's?

The United States' most reliable and established ideological compass is the belief that political stability and prosperity emerge from the consent of the governed—that is, when people's rights are protected, and human

> "The United States' most reliable and established ideological compass is the belief that political stability and prosperity emerge from the consent of the governed." But "with little direction or efficacy in policy, the United States cedes influence to other parties with greater confidence and clarity of purpose."

security is assured—whereas illegitimate government leads to eventual collapse. Of course, a superpower will always have broad interests that conflict and often trump its ideals. But without action in pursuit of the latter, there is little direction or efficacy in policy, and the United States cedes influence to other parties with greater confidence and clarity of purpose.

Lessons for US Policy

1. **Guard against policy prejudices.** All administrations and leaders bring their own baggage and filters through which they assess policy options. The Obama administration was staffed by intelligent people who valued evidence-based analysis, but leadership often clung tenaciously to prior beliefs about US policy in the Middle East, which compromised decision-making in the early stages of Syria's uprising.

2. **Adapt.** The administrations that struggle most in the Middle East are those that cling dogmatically to positions regardless of conditions. George W. Bush believed the United States should overthrow dictators and install democracies, even as it became clear it could not. The Obama administration believed the United States should avoid complex involvement in the Middle East, even as the cost of nonintervention in Syria became increasingly clear. Rather than dogmatism, it is preferable to have a set of principles about the region and identify opportunities to advance them when those opportunities arise and be willing to identify when changes to those approaches must be made.

3. **Manage expectations.** The Obama administration continued to claim it was committed to the ouster of Bashar al-Assad as part of a political transition in Syria. Yet it was clear that, after the rise of ISIS and the compartmentalization of the fight against Sunni jihadists in Syria, the United States was not interested in supporting efforts to bring about meaningful political change. This gap between actions and aspirations confused or alienated Syrians and discredited the United States among allies while it empowered US adversaries.

4. **Expand the breadth of data collection and analysis.** The Syrian conflict made clear that there are vast deficiencies in the way the US government collects and analyzes data in the Middle East. There are myriad new tools to analyze complex conflicts. Small research teams have demonstrated an ability to identify Syrian opposition groups and track their activities in high detail and at low cost. Leaders cannot hide behind the excuse of not knowing enough about an issue. Such tools for understanding complex conflicts should be considered as part of a broader investment in learning about the region throughout the US government.

5. **When you pick a side, back it.** The United States held out for a political transition in Syria, but rather than give the opposition the means to force one, it exerted most of its energy on keeping the diplomatic process alive. This compromised the United States' position in negotiations by signaling to rivals that, in the absence of a hopeful outcome, it would settle for process. It also overcomplicated the US relationship with the opposition, which never trusted the United States to go beyond limited support and rhetoric. The United States should either pick a side and back it or prioritize reaching a deal. By trying to do both, it failed at each. Iran and Russia faced no such problem.

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