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*Form Approved
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

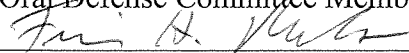
In Pursuit of a New Strategy in Syria

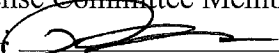
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 16-17

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Executive Summary

Title: In Pursuit of a New Strategy in Syria

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Thesis: Recent developments in Syria require the United States to alter its strategy by expanding cooperation with Moscow and prioritizing the goals of defeating global extremist organizations, easing the suffering of Syrians, and mitigating the refugee crisis over the goal of political transition and removal of Bashar Assad.

Discussion: In 2011, Syrian President Bashar Assad brutally suppressed an uprising in Syria, leading to the bloody civil war that has embroiled that country ever since. The United States slowly waded into the conflict with the intent of fostering a quick regime change, openly calling for Assad to step down and arming moderate rebel groups. As the conflict dragged on events on the ground shifted with the rise of extremist groups among the opposition, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Additionally, Russia deployed troops to the region to prop up their client, conduct counterterror operations, and otherwise secure Russian regional interests. The United States inserted Special Operations Forces and commenced airstrikes to counter Islamic State elements in Syria but remained committed to avoiding a large force deployment to Syria. Due to these developments and considerations, the US strategy in Syria is ineffective. This essay seeks to realign the US ends, ways, and means in Syria to reach a coherent strategy for addressing all aspects of the conflict, including countering terror organizations, limiting Syrian suffering, stemming the refugee crisis, and making progress in the political realm.

Conclusion: The US strategy has become misaligned and untenable due to developments on the ground in Syria. In order to make progress toward US goals in Syria, the US must focus on defeating global extremists, easing Syrian suffering, and stemming the refugee crisis by working with Russia and the international community as well as tempering the goal of removing Assad.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my appreciation to Dr. Francis Marlo and Dr. Paul Gelpi for their assistance, guidance, and mentorship throughout the Masters of Military Studies process. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the Command and Staff College military and civilian faculty advisors who have educated and challenged me throughout the academic year, particularly LtCol Edward Nevgloski, Dr. John Gordon, Dr. Craig Swanson, and Dr. Jonathan Phillips.

Following an escalating crackdown on opposition elements by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2011, the United States waded into the Syrian crisis driven largely by public opinion and the fervor of the Arab Spring. Initially, the US strategy involved training and arming so-called moderate opposition groups with the aim of fostering Assad's ouster. In the early days, the US had hoped for a clean decapitation of the Assad regime, with a quick political transition retaining the existing government apparatus. This course of events would have avoided a weakening of the Syrian state and a protracted conflict. This chain of events did not occur. There were two critical developments in the Syria crisis that have rendered the current US strategy ineffective – the rise of extremists and the Russian deployment. US policymakers have failed to adequately alter course or adapt strategic goals in Syria to address these shifts. Instead, the US has responded incrementally, resulting in a misalignment of ends, ways, and means over time. With the unfavorable progression of events in Syria, the US is faced with selecting a way ahead from a list of poor options and will have to revise its desired ends and rebalance ways and means in order to achieve a solution to the crisis. This essay will examine the current US strategy, analyze the major shifts that have rendered the strategy ineffective, and recommend options to align US ends, ways, and, means. Recent developments in Syria require the US to alter its strategy by expanding cooperation with Moscow and prioritizing the goals of defeating global extremist organizations, easing the suffering of Syrians, and mitigating the refugee crisis over the goal of political transition and removal of Bashar Assad.

Progression of the Conflict and Current US Strategy

In March 2011, protests against the oppressive Assad regime began to spread in Syria. Ignited by outcry against the arrest of a group of school children in southern Syria, these

peaceful protests calling for governmental reforms were violently suppressed by Assad's forces.¹ Deep divisions within Syria across ethno-religious lines combined with discontent with the Alawite-dominated, autocratic Assad regime, giving rise to a quickly spreading, increasingly violent conflict. Several significant opposition stakeholders began to emerge, including the loosely-affiliated Free Syrian Army (FSA) heading up the armed opposition, the Syrian National Council leading the political opposition, and Jabhat al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, as well as other local armed groups and factions.

In his August 2012 remarks to the White House press corps, US President Barack Obama expressed the administration's stance on the Syria conflict. He reiterated the administration's position that Syrian President Assad must step down, citing his loss of legitimacy.² Further, he highlighted the two areas where the US was taking action. First, the US was providing assistance aimed at mitigating the humanitarian crisis stemming from massive displacement of peoples.³ Second, the US was consulting with international partners to provide assistance to the opposition with the aim of a political transition in Syria.⁴ It was during these remarks that President Obama established the so-called "redline." In his remarks, he cautioned the regime against the use of chemical weapons to suppress the opposition saying that "chemical weapons moving around or being utilized" would represent a "red line" for the US and would significantly change his "calculus" on the situation.⁵ He was careful to add that he had not authorized military action in Syria to that point.⁶ By February 2012, the deteriorating security situation pushed the US to close its embassy in Damascus, illustrating the trajectory of the crisis.

In 2013, the conflict continued to escalate. The town of Raqqa fell to anti-regime forces, as the opposition made significant gains in northeastern Syria. Additionally, foreign support for both sides of the escalating Syrian civil war increased, with Iran, Hezbollah and Russia backing

Assad while “the United States, Turkey, and some European and Arab Gulf States increased their support to the Syrian opposition.”⁷ Additionally, widespread allegations of the Syrian regime employing chemical weapons led to remarks from President Obama in September in which he telegraphed a “limited” military action aimed at Syria to “degrade Assad’s capabilities.”⁸ Further, in the remarks, he alluded to a broader strategy to bolster the Syrian opposition to effect political transition in the country.⁹ The US avoided military action in 2013, as Moscow negotiated an agreement with Damascus to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons apparatus.

The first major shift in Syria that led the crisis to where it stands today occurred in 2014, as extremist elements emerged from among opposition groups. The Islamic State (ISIL) formally split from Al Qaeda and made significant gains across Syria and Iraq, ultimately declaring the Islamic Caliphate. The US initiated airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria in August and September, respectively. Additionally, the US began providing support to the Kurds and the government of Iraq to counter ISIL. In October, US Central Command, together with its coalition partners, christened the operation to defeat ISIL - Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR).¹⁰

In 2015, the second major shift occurred in Syria. Amidst opposition gains and increasing US influence, Russian forces deployed to Syria and began conducting airstrikes in September, turning the tide in favor of pro-Assad forces. Adding to the complexity on the ground, the US initiated its train and equip program. “The program was designed to build a local force capable of fighting the Islamic State, protecting opposition-held areas, and ‘promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.’”¹¹ These objectives seem to indicate that the US-backed forces would need to protect areas from pro-Assad elements or radical opposition groups in addition to ISIL. It was also in this year that another major player in the conflict, the

Syrian Defense Force (SDF), emerged and began receiving aid from the US. This group was formed primarily around the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) with other Arab opposition elements. The SDF would prove to be a key US partner in the counter-ISIL operations in the northeast.

The US Strategy

The current US strategy in Syria relies on all instruments of national power to achieve the goals the Obama administration identified. It has incorporated diplomatic negotiations, as well as conventional and unconventional military operations complemented by measures in the economic and information realms. Over time, the Obama administration incrementally shifted its strategy in reaction to the dynamic situation on the ground.

Whereas initially the US government expressed two strategic goals in Syria, mitigating the humanitarian and refugee crisis and seeking political transition away from Assad, the list of stated goals has expanded to reflect the threat posed by the rise of ISIL. The current US goals in Syria include: “(1) defeat ISIL militarily in both Syria and Iraq; (2) develop a political transition that gives Syria a future without Bashar al-Asad; (3) ease the suffering of the Syrian people; and, (4) stabilize our regional allies and help European partners as they cope with a massive refugee crisis.”¹² Although the administration added a goal to the US strategy, it attested that the “strategy regarding the Syrian conflict remain[ed] fundamentally the same.”¹³ This statement reflects that the Obama administration did not alter its approach to the conflict in Syria to address the Russian deployment propping up Assad and the rise of Al Qaeda among the opposition. The administration still sought to achieve political transition away from a newly empowered Assad and to rely on aiding opposition elements of increasingly radical character. The Obama

administration continued to pursue a flawed strategy primarily due to the dogmatic view that removing Assad was a pre-requisite to defeating ISIL. This belief has stymied US progress on its other stated goals in Syria.

The US has employed a variety of ways and means in pursuit of its desired ends in Syria. Currently, in the military realm, the US leads a broad coalition of countries conducting a range of operations.¹⁴ Generally, the US military plan is three-fold, focusing on building up moderate opposition elements, conducting air strikes against extremist targets, and providing military aid to Syria's neighbors. To build up moderate opposition elements, the Pentagon administers an overt, non-lethal train and equip campaign designed to counter extremists as well as pro-Assad forces, provide local stability, and facilitate humanitarian aid. To facilitate this program, in 2016, the US deployed an initial tranche of up to 50 special operations forces personnel to Syria. This number was subsequently expanded to allow up to 300 special operators to deploy. These US efforts have been focused heavily on the northeast, where the SDF (largely Kurds with some Sunni Arabs) has experienced significant gains against ISIL. US Defense Secretary Ash Carter indicated in April 2016 that he had expanded the train and equip program to include local Syrian forces in the south as well.¹⁵ This train and equip program focuses on arming fighters through vetted existing rebel group leaders and has moved away from the original design of the failed 2014-2015 program that involved training fighters from the ground up. This programmatic change made it difficult for the US to vet the individual fighters receiving support. Additionally, per Secretary Carter, the US continues "to train and equip other vetted Syrian forces outside of Syria."¹⁶ Also of note, analysts widely speculate and report that the US government administers a covert arming program, initiated in 2013 in support of the opposition, as a significant pillar of the US approach.¹⁷ US officials have not confirmed this program.

Also in the military realm, the US continues its extensive air campaign targeting extremist elements in Syria. The air campaign includes US strike aircraft operating from locations such as Incirlick Airbase in Turkey. The campaign has focused primarily on IS but has also targeted Al Qaeda elements.¹⁸ Finally, to bolster regional partners, the US provides military assistance to Jordan and Lebanon. This aid is critical to enabling those countries in their counter ISIL efforts.

It should be noted that some experts view US military operations against ISIL in the northeast as “a mostly separate theater” and “largely unlinked to the central civil war between the Assad regime and the opposition in Syria’s west.”¹⁹ So whereas the US has experienced broad success against ISIL through air power and cooperation with the Kurds and moderate Sunni Arabs in the hinterlands, these gains have not necessarily translated into progress in Syria proper, where both pro-Assad forces and Sunni extremists have eroded the moderate opposition and targeting from the air has proven more difficult. It seems that as pro-Assad forces push north and Kurdish forces make progress south the conflict could merge to a greater extent - as seen in Aleppo prior to its fall to pro-Assad forces.

In the diplomatic realm, the State Department has worked tirelessly with regional stakeholders in pursuit of a solution in Syria consistent with US strategic goals. The US has operated largely through the United Nations and the multi-lateral Geneva and Vienna frameworks. In 2012, US Secretary of State John Kerry participated in an Action Group meeting in Geneva composed of a broad group of Foreign Ministers chaired by United Nations and Arab League leaders. The resulting Geneva Communique expressed the members’ deep concern over the Syria conflict and codified a set of common objectives for Syria, including working toward a lasting Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) and a Syrian-led political transition process.²⁰ Of note, the

Communique did not explicitly address the removal of Assad. In the fall of 2015, following Russia's deployment to Syria, a group of 19 stakeholder nations at a meeting in Vienna established the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) with the US and Russia as the group's co-chairs.²¹ This arrangement reflects Moscow's outsized influence in Syria. The ISSG has agreed to work toward political transition and elections in Syria, again with no specific plan for Assad. Additionally, the group has worked to achieve CoH arrangements.

For the US, the diplomatic route to a solution in Syria has been troubled. Failed implementation of CoH due to widespread violations, disagreements with Moscow on a way-ahead for political transition and future of President Assad, and an overall lack of leverage have largely stymied diplomatic efforts. Further, the rise of extremists has complicated the diplomatic process, as the various stakeholder nations have different views on which groups can be included in a solution. Finally, Moscow's veto power has hindered efforts to achieve traction on Syria through the UN Security Council.

The US has pursued a two-fold approach to the Syria crisis in the economic realm. The first pillar of the economic approach includes punitive economic measures against Assad and his supporters. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, the US had already imposed broad economic sanctions against the Assad government in Syria due to its sponsorship of terrorism.²² The US expanded these sanctions in a series of Executive Orders following the commencement of hostilities in 2011. In 2013, the US Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) described the Syrian Sanctions Program as "one of the most comprehensive sanctions programs currently implemented by OFAC."²³ Most recently, in October 2016, Secretary Kerry signaled yet another potential expansion of sanctions against Assad and his supporters.²⁴ As of this writing, the US Congress is working to pass a bill imposing new economic sanctions on

Assad and any who provide him with “financial, material or technological support — a category that includes Russia and Iran.”²⁵

The second pillar of the US economic approach includes economic aid to Syrian rebels and regional partners. As of July 2015, the US has invested a half-billion dollars in the Syrian opposition to “support local and provincial governance institutions, civil society activists, emergency first responders, and others to meet the increased needs of communities.”²⁶

Additionally, the US provides the governments of Jordan, Lebanon, and others with economic support to aid them in addressing the refugee crisis attendant to the Syrian conflict.²⁷ USAID reports a total commitment of over \$5.9 billion as of September 2016.²⁸

The Major Shifts in Syria

Currently, the US strategy in Syria is inherently flawed due to the progression of the conflict and incremental US response. Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, two major shifts have significantly altered the nature of the conflict. These shifts include the rise of extremist elements among the opposition and the deployment of Russian troops to Syria in support of Assad. The US has made incremental alterations to its strategy in response to these shifts. Despite these alterations, the current US strategy in Syria - supporting moderate opposition to oust Assad and counter ISIL combined with precision air strikes – is inappropriate and inadequate. First, supporting the so-called “moderate” opposition has empowered global extremist organizations, most notably Al Qaeda. Further, it has failed to produce a militarily or politically viable alternative faction to either the Assad regime or extremist groups. Additionally, the strategy has placed the US at odds with Ankara due to US reliance on Kurdish groups. The precision air strike portion of the strategy is unsustainable as fighting becomes concentrated in

population centers making targeting more difficult. Finally, the strategy limits US influence in core Syria compared to Russia, which has troops on the ground.

Rise of Extremists

The first major shift that has significantly challenged the US strategy in Syria is the rise of Sunni extremist elements, including the Islamic State and the Al Qaeda affiliate Nusra Front (now called Jabhat Fatah al Sham [JFS]). As the US government began pursuing a program to assist rebels to counter Assad in the early days of the conflict, regional experts warned of the possibility of jihadist influence and presence amongst the opposition. By the time Al Qaeda and ISIL officially split in 2014, the extremist problem was becoming clear to the administration. Both groups had made significant gains across Syria – Nusra in the northwest and ISIL in central and northeastern Syria.²⁹ The administration sought to address the expanding territorial gains of extremists in Syria by incrementally altering its strategy. The US expanded the goal of its existing rebel support program beyond countering Assad to include attempting to counter ISIL.³⁰ Additionally, the administration expanded its Iraqi bombing campaign into Syria against ISIL – mostly in support of Kurds in the northeast. Whereas the US has experienced significant success against ISIL in the northeast, the strategy has not been effective in addressing the rise of extremists, most notably Al Qaeda, elsewhere in the country. In fact, the stated goals for Syria do not even mention countering Al Qaeda or any other global extremist group beyond ISIL. Further, moderate groups have not shown significant military capacity or political influence. Finally, heavy reliance on Kurdish groups and air power – key pillars of the counter ISIL approach - are unlikely to be viable or adequate over the long term. With this rise of extremists, particularly Al Qaeda in the west, the current US strategy is flawed, as it empowers Sunni extremists in Syria's

heartland, fails to produce effective moderate opposition elements, and relies too heavily on airpower and Kurdish opposition groups.

The US strategy has directly and indirectly empowered Sunni extremist groups by weakening Syrian governmental control and by funneling funds and resources into the resulting contested environment. This dynamic exposes a tension in the ends, ways, and means of the US strategy. Sunni extremist groups, which thrive in a fragile state with a disenfranchised Sunni majority, have benefited significantly from the erosion of government control in Syria. Al Qaeda, a terrorist organization with proven international ambitions and reach, has capitalized on the civil war chaos and US attempts to counter Assad to reconstitute itself. In fact, one expert suggests that “Syria now hosts a thriving de facto al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham — formerly the Nusra Front — the most capable, politically savvy, and militarily powerful Al-Qaeda movement in history. Al-Qaeda’s central leadership has also revitalized itself inside Syria, with the international terrorist organization’s newly named deputy leader almost certainly residing in the country.”³¹ Al Qaeda, seeking to exploit ungoverned spaces and porous borders for safehaven, freedom of movement, financing, and recruitment, benefits from opposition gains that diminish the Syrian regime’s influence and legitimacy. Indeed, the threat of a resurgent Al Qaeda in Syria serves as a warning of the unintended consequences of the US strategy.

This problem is compounded by the fact that moderate opposition groups, other than the SDF in the northeast, are largely ineffective. This fact has benefitted extremist elements directly by providing manpower and resources as they co-opt or eliminate moderate groups. In areas heavily contested by pro-Assad forces, moderate groups have cooperated with or joined radical groups, such as Al Qaeda, for survival.³² Ambassador Patterson highlighted this trend in a recent report to Congress saying that Al Nusra has been “successful on the battlefield in the north” and

that the group has “absorbed some...non-extremist fighters because their own groups have been affected and because they, essentially, have nowhere else to go.”³³ In other areas, where opposition elements compete for territory, radical elements have been successful in extinguishing moderate opposition groups.³⁴ Under the current approach, pro-Assad forces and extremist elements erode the anemic US-backed opposition from both sides. Beyond usurping moderate fighters, radical groups have also commandeered US-provided equipment and weapons intended for moderate groups.³⁵

Other aspects of the US military approach, including the air campaign and supporting Kurds, will also face increasing challenges. First, whereas the air campaign has been effective against ISIL outside of major population centers, this approach will be difficult to adapt to population centers where extremists become embedded with civilians. Reports from Syria indicate that this issue has already arisen in places like Idlib.³⁶ Further, as pro-Assad forces continue to make gains against the opposition, moderates and extremists will be pushed together, making it more difficult to distinguish between moderate opposition elements and extremist ones without troops on the ground. This fact exposes an overreliance on air power under the current US strategy.

Second, the largely successful US approach to the counter-ISIL fight in northeastern Syria may soon be in jeopardy. Washington is headed toward an impasse with Ankara as the US has relied heavily on supporting the YPG as the largest and most effective component of the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) in northern Syria. The Turkish government classifies the YPG as the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – a group designated by the US and Turkey as a terrorist organization.³⁷ Indeed, recent reporting from northern Syria confirmed significant evidence of the YPG-PKK link.³⁸ David Sanger highlights the overt tensions on the

Kurd issue that appear to be coming to a head typified recently by Turkish President Erdogan's public and strongly worded denunciation of the US actions in support of the Kurds.³⁹ Sanger sums up the issue saying that "[a]n open breach [has] erupted with the Turks, who charge that the United States is empowering the Kurds, with whom Turkey believes it is in an existential struggle."⁴⁰ In fact, the Kurdish movement is of such concern to Ankara that in 2016 the Turkish military carried out operations against the YPG inside Syria.⁴¹ Further, some analysts assess that the Kurdish issue drove Ankara's recent decision to work with Moscow on a ceasefire deal for Syria.⁴² If it is not addressed, this dangerous divergence of interests between the US and Turkey will ultimately undermine the US approach. This fact highlights the US overreliance on dubious partnerships under the current strategy.

Overall, in light of the rise of extremists, a fundamental shift in US strategy in Syria is required. The incremental US response to this issue has resulted in a disconnect in ends, ways, and means and a blurring of national interests in Syria. As one analyst articulates, "[o]n the one hand, we're targeting senior members in Jabhat Fateh al-Sham who are legacy al-Qaida members and current al-Qaida figures. And by the same token, we have supported groups that fight alongside them as allies. It doesn't make any sense."⁴³ The US has placed itself in the middle of the difficult Syrian balance and is left supporting a thin, ill-defined moderate segment that has shown little cohesion, traction, or viability as an alternative to the regime or Sunni extremists. The US strategy is ultimately self-defeating, as Al Qaeda in Syria grows in power and the lines between extremists and moderates continue to blur. As Assad makes gains, it will be increasingly difficult to define, vet, and support moderate opposition groups, to ensure proper end-users of resources, and to carry out airstrikes against extremists within acceptable levels of collateral damage in populated areas. Additionally, the support to Kurdish forces, particularly elements of

PKK, is unsustainable as it is ultimately incompatible with Turkish interests.

The Russian Deployment

The second major shift that significantly challenged the US strategy in Syria was the Russian deployment and air campaign in Syria beginning in 2015. Russia inserted forces due to increasing US influence and opposition gains against Syrian President Bashar Assad, who welcomed the Russian deployment.⁴⁴ Under the veneer of counterterror operations, the Russians intervened to bolster the Assad regime, counter opposition elements, and secure Russian regional interests. The international community viewed this development as catching the US unprepared. Whereas the Russian deployment outside of former Soviet borders was truly historic, it was not altogether inexplicable in light of Russian regional interests and goals. As a result of the Russian deployment, the US lost much of its leverage in negotiations on the way ahead in Syria. Most critically, the arrival of Russian troops in Syria fundamentally challenged the US strategy by bolstering Assad and limiting US conventional options.

The Russian deployment assured Assad's survival by tipping the balance of combat power heavily in favor of the Syrian military against the surging opposition elements. Russian backing allowed pro-Assad forces to shift from defense to offense and to begin rolling back opposition gains.⁴⁵ The Russian commitment to put troops in Syria trumped US influence in the Syrian civil war, as the US remained restricted to influencing the situation from the air or through proxies as part of the anemic rebel support program. The Russian intervention in Syria further hindered the US strategy as the Russians freely targeted all opposition elements – considering all to be illegitimate terrorist groups. There are even reports of Russian targeting of known US-backed elements.⁴⁶ For the US strategy in Syria, this development rendered the ways

and means (arming and aiding rebels) inadequate to achieve the desired end of political transition away from Assad.

Additionally, the arrival of Russian troops and weapons in Syria severely limited US options to increase leverage over Assad to force his removal through direct conventional military action – options that the US would have been able to apply more easily prior to the Russian’s arrival.⁴⁷ Secretary Kerry underscored this issue in his admonition of Russia’s intervention, saying that Russia has put “its missiles in place in order to threaten people against military action” which “raises the stakes of confrontation.”⁴⁸ The US would now risk a major escalation or direct confrontation with the Russians embedded with the Syrian military in attempting to establish a no fly zone⁴⁹ or in conducting strikes against Syrian military or government elements.

The US response to the Russian deployment has been measured. Whereas the US broadly condemned the Russian intervention as a reckless escalation, US policymakers have been careful to avoid miscalculations and inadvertent clashes. Due to Moscow’s support for the Assad regime and broad definition of terror groups, Russia and the US have found themselves at odds in the military realm. Although there have been attempts at broader military coordination between the two countries, thus far it has been limited to basic deconfliction with the signing a safety-of-flight memorandum of understanding in October 2015.⁵⁰ In the diplomatic realm, the US has engaged more extensively with Russia, attempting to broker agreements through the Geneva and Vienna frameworks, albeit with limited success. The disagreement over the removal or retention of Assad appears to be the most significant impediment between Moscow and Washington – who otherwise share some areas of common interest in Syria.

Balancing Ends, Ways, and Means

The two major developments outlined above, combined with the US reluctance to commit significant ground forces to Syria, require a rebalancing of the strategy in Syria. To this point, the US failure to adapt its strategy and truly align ends, ways, and means has hindered progress toward the goals of driving political transition, defeating ISIL, limiting human suffering and addressing the refugee crisis. The inadequate incremental US strategy requires a reset to ensure the US is applying appropriate means in pursuit of achievable ends in a coherent way.

The US must assess and prioritize ends in Syria in light of the developments on the ground, deciding which goals best serve US interests and are achievable under the current conditions. Due to the threat to the US homeland, combatting ISIL, Al Qaeda and other global extremists in Syria must be the first priority. The second priority must be stemming the refugee crisis, due to its broad destabilizing effect on the region and European partners. Generally, approaches to stem the refugee crisis will address the third priority of limiting Syrian suffering. The lowest US priority for Syria should be political transition away from Assad. The US should shift its strategy in the following ways: pursue political progress instead of transition, cooperate with Russia to counter terror, divest from the train and equip program, establish safe zones using multinational forces, and continue to pressure Assad through hard and soft power.

From “Political Transition” to “Political Progress”

Unwillingness to back down from the empty “remove Assad” rhetoric has largely stymied US efforts in Syria and hindered US-Russia negotiations. The official line from US officials is that the removal of Assad is “linked” to the defeat of ISIL because Assad’s presence foments Sunni extremism.⁵¹ This outlook has hardened the US position on Assad and preempted

the possibility of using the US goal of “political transition away from Assad” as a bargaining chip to make progress on other more critical and achievable goals. One regional expert highlights the difficulty in this position saying “[i]t doesn’t make sense to work backwards from the need to defeat jihadism in Syria and conclude that America therefore needs Assad’s removal and an inclusive political settlement.”⁵² He warns that the administration should not make its objectives in Syria contingent on achieving political transition.⁵³ Indeed, President Obama’s former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Derek Chollet, reports that there was disagreement amongst the President’s top advisors on the question of Assad early on in the conflict, with some arguing that the administration moved too quickly in calling for his removal.⁵⁴

At this point, of the US stated goals, pursuing political transition and removing Assad in Syria least serves US national interest, at least in the near term. Although it is true that Assad’s regime caused the current crisis in Syria and that he has proven to be an abhorrent war criminal as well as a magnet for radicals, his ouster may create broader instability and bolster extremists. If the US were to achieve the removal of Assad, Syria would be severely weakened and even more susceptible to becoming a failed state ripe for extremist basing and operations. Indeed, Henry Kissinger highlights that the US has failed to “put forward an alternative political structure to replace Mr. Assad should his departure somehow be realized.”⁵⁵ One regional expert bluntly summarizes the issue saying “a sudden collapse of Assad's regime would likely result in more terrain for al-Nusra and ISIS to play around with.”⁵⁶ In short, a weakened or failed Syrian state with vast swaths of ungoverned space may be more dangerous to US interests than a brutal autocratic regime. Although not an exact analog, the situation in Libya vividly illustrates this dynamic, as the ouster of an autocrat there has resulted in escalating instability. The removal of

Gadhafi resulted in a destabilization of the country, leading to the rise of extremist factions and ultimately demanding a significant international and US response. Whereas some argue that Syria would be less susceptible to this kind of destabilization due to its stronger governmental structures, the parallels certainly cannot be ignored.⁵⁷ More generally, with the current trajectory of the Syrian conflict, even a successful removal of Assad may not lead to a significant reduction in violence, as the conflict has become largely sectarian in nature and extremists are unlikely to abandon their struggle.⁵⁸

With the emergence of extremist groups among the opposition, the pursuit of Assad's removal has created an incompatibility in strategy for the US, specifically by pitting the US focus on counterterrorism against the drive for political transition. To wit, aiding or arming the opposition to foster Assad's ouster actually empowers extremist groups. Al Qaeda's resurgence illustrates the self-defeating nature of the US strategy. To deconflict this incompatibility, Henry Kissinger advises prioritizing counter terrorism over political transition stating that "the destruction of ISIS is more urgent than the overthrow of Bashar Assad."⁵⁹ As core Al Qaeda takes up residence inside Syria, the destruction of ISIL *and* Al Qaeda now appears more critical than Assad's ouster.

With the arrival of Russian troops on the ground, the survival of Assad (or at least some form of Alawite autocracy) is all but assured in Syria. Further, while many argue that there is no room for Assad in a solution to the Syria crisis, there is certainly no guarantee that his successor would offer any better prospects for US interests.⁶⁰ Certainly, for Russia, a likely prerequisite for an Assad replacement would be that he upholds the current Moscow-Damascus relationship, including guaranteeing access to the Mediterranean, providing Russian forward basing, and otherwise facilitating Russian influence in the Middle East. The removal of Assad has become

such an insoluble point of contention between Moscow and Washington that it has caused a stagnation on achieving progress on the other stated US goals, empowered extremists, increased Syrian suffering, and accelerated the refugee crisis. For the US, the Russian deployment renders the goal of credible political transition in Syria in the near term virtually unachievable.

In light of these realities, the US should overtly renounce the goal of “political transition away from Assad,” conceding that Assad (or his Alawite cronies) will likely remain in power - a point that is already obvious to much of the international community. This goal should be revised to “achieve political progress” aimed at making incremental improvements in the Syrian political system to address grievances. This reversal would help to align US ends, ways, and means. Additionally, this reversal would remove a major source of credibility for Assad and his supporters who argue that Assad is fighting US-backed terrorists. Further, this shift could be used as a bargaining chip with Moscow. Removing the US-backed threat to Russia’s vital interests in Syria would open the door for negotiations and broad concessions focused on advancing progress on other US goals and seeking a near term resolution to the conflict. Former President Jimmy Carter has expressed this view, saying that in Syria “the primary focus should be stopping the killing. Discussions about the core questions of governance — when President Bashar al-Assad should step down, or what mechanisms might be used to replace him, for example — should be deferred.”⁶¹ Importantly, while a reversal on Assad represented a politically untenable move for President Obama, Donald Trump’s inauguration in January allows a natural opportunity for this major shift that is admittedly sure to damage US credibility.⁶²

Even with this overt reversal, the US should work toward the revised goal of “achieve political progress” in various ways – short of demanding Assad’s ouster. The US can still put pressure on the Assad regime across the elements of national power and work with Russia to

make progress in the political realm to create a more inclusive, plural, and transparent Syrian political system which would be instrumental in any long-term lasting solution. Importantly, under this new strategy, the US would not actively support the Assad regime but instead work through Moscow to control its client.

Cooperate with Russia against Extremists

The tempering of the “political transition” goal will clear the way for major changes to the US approach in Syria. The removal of this point of contention with Moscow will allow broader cooperation on areas of common interest. Indeed, as long as the US is unwilling to commit a large force to Syria (and risk open hostilities with Russian elements backing Assad), US policymakers will need to work with Russia on the framework for a resolution to the Syria crisis. In particular, the US could increase cooperation with Russia on counterterrorism operations in the near term.

The US government should expand the goal of “defeat ISIL” to a broader goal of “defeat international extremist organizations,” reflecting the rise of Al Qaeda in Syria and allowing for operations against any follow-on splinter terror organizations with global aspirations. With the acquiescence on Assad as a bargaining chip, the US may be able to apply some leverage on Moscow to scope its criteria for categorizing opposition elements so as to restrict targeting to only the most radical extremists, namely Al Qaeda and ISIL. Up to this point in the conflict, the US has not cooperated with Russia in any meaningful way on counterterror operations. In part, it is the absence of this cooperation that has left Russian forces free to target any opposition element - labelling all opposition groups as extremists. Whereas differences of opinion on targeting would likely still arise, cooperative targeting is more desirable than the alternative of

indiscriminate targeting which has run counter to US goals, increasing the suffering of the Syrian people, exacerbating the refugee crisis, empowering Assad, pushing radical and moderate elements together and further fomenting Sunni extremism. Cooperation would create synergy in the counterterror realm by spreading the cost and risk of these operations with Russia. As one analyst suggests, “Russian participation in ISIS's destruction should not be unwelcome, even though policy and politics require American officials to insist that the United States and Russia are not cooperating.”⁶³ Here again, a change in US administration is a convenient opportunity to reverse course while mitigating the injury to US credibility. The cooperation on counterterror operations and scoping of Russian targeting would further US progress toward three of four US goals - defeating extremists, limiting Syrian suffering and mitigating the refugee crisis.

Divest from Train and Equip

The reversal on removing Assad and cooperation with Russia on countering extremists would also make possible a gradual US divestment from its rebel support program. The US program has been largely ineffective to this point and may even be counterproductive, as it bolsters extremist groups directly and indirectly. One expert characterizes the idea of effective moderate Syrian forces as a “myth” and underscores the trouble of extremists within the opposition, saying “the vast majority of effective Arab rebel fighters against Assad are Islamist extremists with ties to al Qaeda.”⁶⁴ US proxies’ presence on the battlefield as well as their proximity to extremist elements such as Al Qaeda has hampered negotiations between Washington and Moscow, undermined cease fire agreements, and lent credibility to Assad’s rhetoric that he is fighting US-backed terrorists. Indeed, when a September 2016 CoH agreement broke down, Russian and Syrian officials blamed American-backed opposition groups for

breaking the cease fire, alleging that these groups were teaming with extremists – a claim that may indeed have had merit.⁶⁵ The US rebel support program’s outcomes are growing increasingly dubious as the program now relies on vetted rebel group leaders. This approach does not allow US vetting of individual fighters. This change makes tracing and controlling end users of US equipment more difficult, especially without significant US presence on the ground.⁶⁶ Finally, the gradual cessation of the train and equip program in the north will defuse rising tensions between Washington and Ankara over the Kurds. In divesting from the train and equip program, policymakers will need to seek what some have described as a “soft landing” for groups that the US has committed to support.⁶⁷ A “soft landing” would be an arrangement to incorporate moderate opposition groups into a post-conflict system without oppression or retribution. The next two steps, designed to limit suffering and stem the refugee crisis, would create the conditions for a “soft landing.”

Limit Syrian Suffering and Stem Refugee Crisis

Using enhanced cooperation with Russia on counterterror operations and the commitment to gradually divest from supporting opposition groups as bargaining chips, the US could work to limit or terminate Syrian offensive operations. The change in US strategy would reduce tensions with the Assad regime while further delegitimizing his offensive operations against the moderate opposition as he and his backers could no longer credibly claim that the US is arming insurgents in pursuit of his ouster.

First, the US would work with Russia to limit Syrian air strikes over opposition held areas in Syria’s core. Indeed, in September 2016, Washington and Moscow were very close to implementing a variation of this cooperative counterterror arrangement tied to a nationwide

CoH. According to the Department of State, the agreement “was designed to lead to a halt in Syrian air combat operations over designated areas where the Syrian opposition is present. In exchange, the United States and Russia would work together to develop targets for the United States or Russia to strike against al-Qa’ida in Syria and ISIL. This arrangement would be contingent on no bombing by the Syrian regime in designated areas and no indiscriminate Russian bombing.”⁶⁸ The agreement broke down in seven days. The cessation of Syrian airstrikes could be the first step in developing local ceasefires in the core of Syria and in the major cities.

Second, the US would work with partners to create semi-autonomous “safe zones” on Syria’s periphery. The coalition must establish these zones to protect civilians and stem the refugee crisis. Whereas it appears that the Assad regime will likely maintain control of the core of Syria – including Damascus, Idlib, Homs, and (now) Aleppo – buffer zones around the periphery could be established as safe areas for displaced persons within Syrian borders.⁶⁹ These zones could be administered either by local opposition or by neighboring states – Turkey in the north and Jordan in the south.⁷⁰ The zones could be guarded by coalition peacekeepers (perhaps under the auspices of the United Nations) and underwritten by US air power. Russia would likely be more amenable to a solution brokered through and leveraging the United Nations compared to one leveraging the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Moscow would view NATO enforced zones as attempts by the West to exclude Russia from the solution in Syria and block its influence in the region. “Safe zones” would protect the Syrian populace from regime reprisal and sectarian violence and have the additional side effect of stemming the refugee outflow as Syrians find safety within their own borders. UN observers, removed from Syria in 2012 amidst a deteriorating security situation, could be reinserted into these areas. Former President Jimmy

Carter, who supports a similar solution centered on freezing the current battle lines, has argued that this strategy may also stem the growth of terrorist organizations as well. He argues “if the killing is stopped in parts of the country not under the control of [terrorist] groups, fighters in their ranks are likely to be tempted to abandon them and move to areas that offer better living conditions.”⁷¹ Indeed, creating internationally protected “safe zones” would be an effective way to quickly make progress on limiting the level of violence in Syria.

The US has considered establishing such zones in the past but views them as too complex and costly to maintain, asserting that US forces would need to be diverted from counterterrorism operations against ISIL to preserve “safe zones.” One analyst estimates that the US would need up to 30,000 troops to secure a safe-zone.⁷² The new strategy would mitigate these issues in the following ways. First, the US would experience a cost savings by terminating its train and equip program and partnering with Russia on counterterrorism operations. Second, the US could spread the resource and manpower burden for maintaining no fly zones through cooperation with Russia and existing coalition partners. Third, the use of a multinational coalition or a UN peacekeeping force would defray the costs in men and materiel for “safe zones.” Further, the enforcement mechanisms below also include low cost alternatives for insuring the “safe zones.”

Enforce Through Credible Leverage Using Hard and Soft Power

The above concessions or ‘carrots’ must be accompanied by credible punitive threats or ‘sticks’ using a mix of hard and soft power. The US should continue to employ economic sanctions against Syria and its supporters, such as Congress is currently considering as part of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. The US could tighten or relax these sanctions according to the behavior of relevant actors. Further, the US government should publicly and consistently

condemn Assad's behavior. As for hard power, militarily there are two suitable ways to apply credible pressure on the Assad regime. These options are in keeping with the US need to avoid broad conventional military intervention on the ground and to avoid the destabilizing destruction of the Syrian military. Whereas these options do have considerable limitations and would not be decisive operations to defeat Assad or drive fundamental changes within his regime, they would apply pressure on Assad to conform to negotiated agreements, ceasefires, and international norms. Additionally, they can be focused enough to mitigate risks of targeting Russian personnel or equipment. First, Chollet identifies the concept of "discreet" or "tit-for-tat" targeting of a highly valued Assad asset as an option, e.g. the presidential helicopter fleet.⁷³ This tailored and personalized targeting approach would allow for a minimal escalation while sending a powerful message to Assad that he cannot continue to act with impunity.

A second construct, offered by Michael O'Hanlon of Brookings, involves the establishment of a modified no-fly zone. Under this plan the US would target regime aircraft that have violated restrictions or targeted civilian or coalition areas "at a subsequent time and place of US choosing."⁷⁴ He argues that this construct would mitigate some of the difficulties and risks associated with a traditional no-fly zone.⁷⁵ This proportional targeting construct would go far in providing a credible deterrent to enforce agreements and restrictions. Under one of these constructs or a hybridization of the two, the US could use overt long-range, standoff, precision weapons or covert action to strike regime equipment or facilities responsible for unacceptable offensive operations or to strike high-profile, prestige targets.⁷⁶

While perhaps not a permanent solution to the Syria crisis, the major overhaul of the US strategy outlined in this essay would work towards achieving three of the four US stated goals in the near term. The new strategy would enable the US to more effectively target extremists while

creating a framework to limit Syrian suffering and stem the refugee crisis. Additionally, the new strategy would enable stakeholders to make progress in the political realm in Syria. This overhaul rebalances ends, ways, and means to address the major shifts on the ground including the rise of Al Qaeda and ISIL as well as the Russian deployment to Syria. The strategy shift removes inherent incompatibilities in the US strategy that have hindered progress in Syria thus far. The change in administration in the US presents a perfect opportunity to revise the US strategy while mitigating the damage to US credibility that would accompany a change of course. A fundamental shift to US strategy is essential for the US to make progress on its goals in Syria.

¹ Unless otherwise noted the chronology of the conflict in section 1 is derived from: Carla E. Humud, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin: *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, CRS Report for Congress RL33487, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 28, 2016, <http://congressional.proquest.com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/congressional/docview/t21.d22.crs-2016-fdt-0641?accountid=14746>

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