

NOVEMBER 2014

How This Ends *A Blueprint for De-Escalation in Syria*

POLICY BRIEF



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As the U.S.-led Coalition continues airstrikes against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, the American public is asking: What does the end game look like?

This brief offers a preliminary response, outlining a process by which the Syrian civil conflict could end, however improbable that may now seem given the bloodshed that has convulsed the country. The Center for a New American Security's recent report, "The Tourniquet: A Strategy for Defeating the Islamic State and Saving Iraq and Syria" by Marc Lynch, offers a comprehensive strategy for the United States to pursue in Iraq and Syria. This brief follows up, detailing how a political "end game" in Syria must be integrated into the current U.S. military strategy to defeat ISIS.

There is no perfect – or possibly even good – outcome for the United States in Syria. Yet it is becoming clear that the perpetuation of the bloody civil conflict is the worst of all possible options – not only for Syrians, but also for the

pursuit of U.S. interests and values in the region. A negotiated transition may be a viable way to begin lessening the violence and humanitarian toll, reducing the number of armed groups operating in Syria, and combatting ISIS more permanently. Three years of regional spillover effects from the Syrian conflict cannot be reversed, but attenuating the violence can begin to slow the flows of terrorists, refugees, and instability from Syria across the region.

As the United States and the Coalition train and assist the moderate Syrian military opposition, they should emphasize a clear end goal: the Syrian armed opposition factions must, ultimately, view themselves not only as warriors that are seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Asad (and the political-security syndicate that his father Hafiz built), but also, and mainly, as the nucleus of a national army that will uphold and protect an inclusive, multi-sect political compact governing Syria after Asad. In the interim, this national army is needed to govern fairly the areas outside of regime control, which comprise nearly 70 percent of Syrian territory as of 2014. Suffusing the fighting forces with the will to coalesce into such an army may depend on whether there is a viable political plan on the table.

The steps below offer an initial blueprint, a starting point for discussion.¹ Today, a negotiated

agreement can best be achieved by mobilizing a robust opposition movement, with a coherent and actionable political platform and a demonstrated ability to provide governance and security at the local level. Such coherence would pose a grave threat to the Asad regime and fence sitters, who tentatively support the status quo only because they fear the jihadi alternatives. This opposition movement must include, and indeed should be shaped, by the units of the Syrian opposition that the United States and its allies are training. These are the “moderates,” that is, those who conceive of a post-Asad Syria that is pluralistic and protects minority rights. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionaries “National Coalition” and other external Syrian oppositionists should participate as part of this opposition, but ultimately any external Syrian opposition groups must be subordinate to local leaders currently involved in the anti-Asad military resistance occurring within Syria. Authority should flow from the forces on the ground.

As discussed below, any negotiated arrangement would begin with a gradual freeze in the current fighting through a series of localized truces. Formal ceasefires have had little previous success on the ground in Syria. Instead, local informal agreements to lessen the violence and protect the civilians are likely to de-escalate the violence more successfully. The negotiated agreement would bring the Syrian opposition together with elements of the regime in order to determine temporary power-sharing arrangements that officialize the territorial splits that have occurred within Syria. Bashar al-Asad may not be ousted formally at the beginning of this process, but any negotiated transition will certainly result in the end of his rule.

Of course, the vast literature on civil wars raises important questions about the endurance and quality of negotiated settlements, especially those

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imposed by outside actors.² Nonetheless, the alternatives are unappealing. Further, the same research indicates that building a functional opposition army could help to bring about conditions more favorable to a negotiated settlement. Whatever the odds of success – and they may be low – seeking a negotiated outcome in Syria should be a top U.S. government priority.

Why Now?

Envisioning a political end game should begin now, concurrent to the consolidation and training of Syria’s opposition fighters. Even if negotiations do not start immediately, and they very well may not, imagining the contours of a political solution is urgent, for two reasons:

First, the allies who are participating in the coalition against ISIS, particularly from the Arab Gulf States, as well as Turkey, will need to be brought in early to discuss political solutions to the Syrian conflict. They are likely to disagree with the U.S. position on how to end the Syrian conflict. However, because they are now working, albeit inconsistently, with the United States and other western allies to counter ISIS, U.S. policymakers have the opportunity to habituate these allies to the compromises that will be necessary to de-escalate the conflict. In fact, some of these allies,



A boy watches as a Free Syrian Army fighter provides security for his neighborhood in the Damascus suburbs.

(Freedom House, Syria Freedom)

most notably Turkey, are publicly asking the United States to provide a comprehensive strategy – political as well as military – before fully committing to a Syria campaign.³ Turkey will likely reject any U.S. political strategy that does not fully depose Assad as a first order priority. Even if differences among the allies exist, it is far preferable to surface them now.

Second, discussing the contours of a political solution is critical as the United States and the Coalition allies reinvigorate the training program for the moderate Syrian armed opposition fighters. While reports suggest that previous U.S.-supported training programs for Syrian rebels produced only a limited network of U.S.-trained fighters, the current program, run by the Departments of Defense and State, plans to operate over a period of years and on a larger scale.⁴ Therefore the current

moment may offer the United States and its allies more leverage than they have had in the past in pressuring the Syrian opposition. As the United States begins its training efforts, the Free Syrian Army and other associated moderate Syrian oppositionists are in a weak position militarily vis-a-vis both the regime and ISIS.⁵

Timing is everything. The United States may be in a better position today to pressure the FSA and other oppositionist fighters, as well as Syria's neighbors, to accept interim transitional arrangements that they might have rejected two years ago. However, much of the leverage that the United States now holds over these parties to the negotiations may diminish over time, particularly given the unpredictability inherent in any military intervention. Conditioning current U.S. training and assistance

on the armed opposition's acceptance of a compromise political situation – one that must include the eventual removal from power of Bashar al-Asad – may be a deal that is only viable now.

There are inextricable links between a political end game in Syria and current U.S. military strategy to counter ISIS. Indeed, the current U.S. military engagement presents a number of unknowns that may, in and of themselves, challenge the viability of an eventual political settlement and call into question the feasibility of the below steps. Most significantly, Coalition airpower and limited training efforts of select Syrian armed opposition factions may be insufficient to remove ISIS, while controversial U.S. bombing targets may alienate key partner factions. There is also no guarantee that the United States and the Coalition allies can successfully train and assist the disparate opposition fighters, or influence their political platforms and positions. Finally, it is possible that the Asad regime will seize the territory or exploit the void left by ISIS as it is weakened, quashing other opposition forces. However, in spite of these and other risks regarding the current Coalition military strategy, it still remains the best policy option available. There are few alternatives.

Toward a Negotiated Transition: The Principles and the Practice

As the Coalition seeks to mobilize and unify a coherent political-military Syrian opposition, a litmus test for actors willing to participate in the negotiated solution should rest on five principles: (1) de-escalation among the conflicting parties with a freeze in the current fighting; (2) de-centralization of power away from the regime through a protracted transition process; (3) diffusion of the sectarianism fueling the fighting; (4) differentiation between the ending of Asad family rule and the dismantlement of existing national government structures based in Damascus; and (5) embrace of a pluralistic vision of a post-Asad

Syria that protects minority groups.

Pushing for these principles as the basis for negotiations in part represents a compromise. They are far less ambitious than earlier U.S., Turkish, Saudi or other policies that envisioned the complete, immediate replacement of the Syrian dictatorship with a unified, strong, representative state. These principles would allow for Asad himself to stay in place as the titular president of Syria for some time. Yet they are practical and may be feasible as a point of departure. A freeze of the current fighting and the decentralization of power through a transitional arrangement will require a number of prior steps, listed below in an order that approximates their sequence. The Syrian people must lead this phased political process with support from the international community, including the United Nations.

REHABILITATING THE SYRIAN POLITICAL OPPOSITION

The United States, with its Arab, Turkish and other allies, should increase efforts to improve the legitimacy, capability and diversity of the Syrian political opposition at the same time that it is training and assisting the moderate military opposition. That political effort has stalled since 2013, largely because of factionalism and infighting among oppositionists, the flailing credibility of the external opposition among Syrians within Syria, and internal disagreements regarding how much to compromise with the regime.

The formal political opposition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, must now work together with the armed Syrian opposition. The U.S. military strategy in Syria seems to lean heavily on the expectation that other non-jihadist (but ideologically Islamist) armed opposition militias – along with the FSA and a number of Kurdish Syrian militias with strong ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – can fill in as the primary governing authorities behind

ISIS as it is defeated, ruling the territory now controlled by ISIS. This is a big assumption, but critical to the success of both the Coalition military strategy in Syria and any enduring political solution. Opposition fighters who liberate areas from ISIS will need support to ensure that they have a credible governance plan, including authority to keep the peace while protecting minorities.

The political opposition will also need the legitimacy conferred by association with the armed opposition. The National Coalition, like the Syrian National Council (SNC) before it, has been daunted by credibility deficits inside Syria among the armed opposition and the activist Local Coordinating Councils (LCCs), groups that have weathered the civil war from the front lines. As the National Coalition works with the local revolutionary councils, it must coordinate with and, in some cases, report to opposition militias under the FSA.⁶

In order to encourage the political opposition to work effectively with the FSA on the ground, including securing materiel for the FSA from anti-Asad international donors, the international community might need to consider positive carrots. Such help could also include buttressing the National Coalition's ability to reach out effectively to Syria's minority communities (Alawi, Christians, and Druze, and others). The State Department should be the central actor in coordinating the efforts to unify the Syrian opposition platform for the post-Asad transition. Members of the National Coalition currently abroad should be encouraged to relocate to opposition-controlled territory.⁷

Meanwhile, the armed Syrian opposition must be coaxed into supporting politically moderate platforms for a post-Asad Syria. There is some recent evidence that this is possible: In February 2014, the "Southern Front" agreed to a political platform envisioning a democratic and secular post-Asad Syria. This loose alliance represents

a broad coalition of armed opposition groups, including many constituent militias of the FSA that are located in southern Syria and who claim to have an aggregate total of over 30,000 fighters. The Southern Front's political platform included respect for sectarian and ethnic minority rights, the rejection of religious extremism, and protection of all Syrians' rights to determine their country's representative government.⁸

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The urgent challenge for the United States is to translate statements of commitment, such as those made by the Southern Front militias, into an actionable national plan for a post-Asad Syria. It is critical to tie the military actions of U.S. and ally-trained Syrian opposition groups to a coherent political movement if they are to be successful.⁹ Moreover, in some cases the moderate Syrian opposition fighters may need to be pressured to break ties with other non-moderate militias, such as *Jaysh- al-Islam* (Army of Islam), one of the strongest factions within the Islamic Front, the umbrella set of oppositionists that seek a Sharia state in Syria.¹⁰ There will likely be many points of contention when discussions of a future Syria emerge among the military opposition, including the extent to which the post-Asad Syria will be governed by Islamic law, as many opposition groups expect it to be, and whether religious minorities will have equal rights in law to serve in all positions of government.¹¹

In short, part of building a strong, cohesive and legitimate political opposition will require “turning” the allegiance of those FSA factions that the U.S. and its allies are training, ensuring that they cease any tactical alliances with Islamist fighters. In the past, the moderate FSA factions engaged in joint operations with Islamist militias such as Harkat Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and the al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, all of which are seeking a Sharia state after the fall of Asad.¹² Today, the United States has the tools to push for greater moderation among these groups. It should condition U.S. training and assistance to moderate factions on their willingness to move away from Islamist militias and publicly support a unified political plan for a secular, multi-ethnic Syria. Ensuring that recipients of U.S. training espouse a more moderate vision of Syria’s future will also reassure the United States’ nervous regional allies, particularly Jordan and Israel.¹³

Finally, to unify the armed Syrian opposition factions around a moderate political platform and to ensure that these fighters are coordinating with the National Coalition and local leaders, will require an honest reckoning between the United States and the Coalition allies, particularly Syria’s neighbors. The factionalism and dysfunction rife among the many Syrian armed and political opposition groups derives in large part from the competitive environment created by haphazard funding streams from the Gulf.¹⁴ Over the past three years, foreign support has worked at cross-purposes, creating a fractured Syrian political opposition. The United States must pressure its Gulf allies to coordinate their funding, both toward the armed oppositionists and in support of one streamlined Syrian political opposition.

CREATING INITIAL FREE SYRIAN TERRITORY

Establishing a contiguous “Free Syrian Territory” can contribute to the momentum of

the political-military opposition as it coalesces. Currently, FSA forces principally control territory in southern Syria (particularly in Dara’a governorate on the Syrian-Jordanian border and al-Quneitra governorate near the Golan Heights), but they also hold territory in the northwestern governorate of Idlib near the Syrian-Turkish border. In particular, they hold territory in the area of Jabal al-Zawiya in the central region of Idlib, north of Aleppo, inside Aleppo city, in northern Latakia governorate near the Mediterranean Sea, near the Syrian-Turkish border; in the Damascus suburbs; and in the territory held by Kurdish groups in eastern Syria, mostly in al-Hasakah governorate centered on the city of Qamishli.¹⁵

Turkey’s desire for a “buffer zone” along its border inside Syria may have a practical application beyond serving Turkey’s security interests: it could allow a territorial space to serve as an “assembly and training zone” for Syrian rebels vetted by the United States and its allies.¹⁶ Aleppo governorate, which borders Turkey, would be an appropriate point of insertion for U.S.-trained rebels because it is a strategic region of Syria where the armed opposition is fighting both the Asad regime and ISIS, and its liberation would carry great symbolic value. It is also a diverse governorate from an ethnic and sectarian perspective, and it is here where the inclusive and democratic ideals of the Syrian revolution can be practically applied and then tested against the pull of Islamist militias.

As the armed opposition receives training and assistance and is reinserted back into Syria, these groups will have to consider how to tie these geographically disparate territories together. The likelihood of a negotiated arrangement is higher if there is contiguous area forming the foundation of a “Free Syria” state, whether in northern Syria contiguous with the Turkish border or in southern Syria contiguous with Jordan.¹⁷

PRESSURING THE REGIME TO AGREE TO FREEZE THE CONFLICT AND RESUME NEGOTIATIONS

As the United States and its allies work to bolster and unify the oppositionists, they should also identify and support the moderates in the regime who may be willing to negotiate. In the short term, this may mean that the political opposition will need to offer an opening gambit of confidence-building measures to entice regime factions to push for a freeze to the conflict. Ironically, the Asad regime has its own model for this conflict freezing process: in 2012, it established the Ministry of National Reconciliation and a National Reconciliation Committee attached to the Syrian Parliament. The regime has been aggressively promoting “Popular Reconciliation Committees” to achieve the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of rebel groups in strategic areas of western Syria around Homs and Damascus.¹⁸ The international community may be able to appropriate and co-opt these mechanisms, which currently serve regime propaganda purposes, in order to encourage a series of local truces.¹⁹

The emergence of regime representatives interested in negotiations will depend on the developing power dynamics of the war. The Asad regime may alternately be chastened or emboldened by the Coalition campaign against ISIS. While current U.S. military strategy, as articulated by President Obama, has signaled that the United States is not trying to support the regime, the United States and its allies should increase their coercive diplomacy to reinforce this point. The U.S. military, for example, should continue to signal an unpredictability and ambiguity about U.S. intentions vis-à-vis government forces in the Syrian campaign.

However, the most important factor that will bring the regime to the negotiating table is the success of U.S. and Coalition training for the opposition. The Asad regime may agree to a short-term freeze of fighting when it believes that the current

momentum has begun to pivot away from its own forces and toward an opposition backed by almost every regional neighbor. Of course, as described above, the development of a robust opposition movement, with a coherent and actionable political platform and a demonstrated ability to provide governance and security at the local level, will signal a shift in momentum. Such coherence would pose a grave threat to the Asad regime. In addition, as the U.S.-led Coalition more actively trains and assists the armed opposition, it has an opportunity to signal a shift in military momentum, to make it clear that it is training the moderate opposition fighters to endure a regime onslaught.²⁰ The Asad regime knows that the coherence of the moderate fighters poses the gravest threat to its existence, including its current efforts to hold down an Asad-led statelet in western Syria to hedge against international pressure for a political transition. This fear of moderate opposition success is why the regime has targeted its firepower on western governorates such as Homs, Hama, Idlib, Rif Damascus and Aleppo.²¹

Therefore, efforts to bolster the capabilities of the moderate armed opposition and efforts to bring the regime to negotiations are intricately linked. The regime is most likely to agree to a freeze in fighting first in those places where a localized truce is already in place and the regime finds itself in a weakened position. The fighting is too decentralized at this point for any individual regime or opposition leader to enforce a freeze at a national level.

DESIGNING ASSURANCES

As an initial part of a negotiated transition, the political opposition, with the armed opposition, must offer two types of assurances. The political opposition and its backers must convince the international community and Syria’s neighbors that they are committed to pluralism in a post-Asad state, and that armed opposition forces have agreed to



Free Syrian Army fighters, defected from the Syrian military, celebrate with local children during an opposition rally.

(Freedom House, Syria Freedom)

this vision. Likewise, the armed opposition with the political opposition must begin articulating how they will guarantee the safety of the current loyalist communities. Alawi, Sunni and other minority leaders and their communities who have previously supported Assad must be reassured that joining a transition process will protect them from ISIS and other vehemently anti-minority fighters.

Meanwhile, in order to freeze the fighting in local areas, the opposition must be reasonably assured that Assad will agree – or be forced to agree – to a transitional arrangement that will eventually remove from power him, his family and the coterie that have ruled for decades. The removal of Assad from power may be gradual. Assurances could come in many forms, including credible signals of splits within the regime. One plausible split could

emerge if the current “foot soldiers” serving in the Syria army, intelligence services and militias, including from the minority Alawi and Christian communities, showed weakening support for the regime. This would then signal the impermanence, or fluidity, of what is currently a broad regime coalition.²²

Here, locally driven security assurances for minority communities may convince some of these current regime supporters not to send their sons to serve as cannon fodder for the Assad clan. This broader base of regime supporters is not at the center of regime decision-making, but constitutes an important source of its power and has remained loyal largely out of fear of alternatives. Local leaders may be convinced of power-sharing if they can be reassured of protection against

opposition revenge massacres, preferably in coordination with a transitional justice program overseen by the international community.²³ Further, the international community should not waste its efforts on Damascus inner circles, as this tightknit clique will aim to preserve Asad family rule above all else. They are unlikely to consider power-sharing as part of an agreement.²⁴

The goal of a negotiated agreement should be the establishment of a de facto power sharing arrangement, dividing Syria between regime-held and opposition-held territory until a fully brokered agreement can codify these divisions formally.

Such assurances may seem impossible at the moment, but there is increasing evidence that certain communities that have steadfastly supported the regime for three years may be exhausted by the enduring civil war. They may begin to break with the Asad inner circle that continues to preach the viability and necessity of a “military solution” only.²⁵ The opposition and the international community must probe every back channel to gauge the appetite for compromise among the Asad regime’s Alawi base, the Sunni business community, and the pro-regime spiritual and militia leaders. Here, it is critical to reach out to Alawi communal leaders as well as other minorities and Sunni tribal and business personalities who are currently aligned with the regime. Flipping these individuals against the regime would be a major turning point in the conflict.

OVERCOMING THE INITIAL STICKING POINTS

The goal of a negotiated agreement should be the establishment of a *de facto* power sharing arrangement, dividing Syria between regime-held and opposition-held territory until a fully brokered agreement can codify these divisions formally. This power sharing will likely be murky and tenuous at first, but may over time begin to take hold as the fighting de-escalates. It will be critical to consolidate lines of military and civilian control in liberated “Free Syrian Territory;” local level elections could play a role in establishing such legitimacy, in the space created by informal fighting freezes.²⁶ As part of the de-escalation, both sides must reign in their most egregious fighting tactics. The regime must end its barbaric use of barrel bombs against opposition-controlled areas and other mass atrocities, for example, while the opposition must demonstrate that it can control potential spoilers. The process of a brokered agreement, hypothetically, would also allow the Syrian political opposition time to refine its vision of a transitional Syria that could appeal to various sectarian communities. It would also give time to work on a plan to address the Syrian Kurdish demands for autonomous rule.²⁷

Over time, as a more unified opposition coalesces to negotiate a transition, it will need to agree on increasingly more detailed elements of the transitional plan, including the transfer of executive authority away from Bashar al-Asad himself. In the short term, compromises can be reached, using nuanced diplomatic language, to name other members of Bashar’s regime as transitional presidents and to delegate executive authorities away from Bashar before elections are held, so he remains president in name only. These types of solutions are similar to the ideas offered in the June 2012 Geneva I communiqué, which called for the formation of a Syrian transitional government from the opposition and regime officials without

Asad. While the Syrian opposition rejected these compromises in 2012, there is reason to suspect that they may be willing to accept some version of this formulation today, especially if they are pressured by outside powers willing to back, train and assist them.²⁸

This basket of “executive authority” compromises seems to be the only formula that gets beyond the central sticking point that impeded previous negotiations, including Geneva I and II. The opposition has typically demanded Asad’s departure as a starting point for negotiations and the regime has typically rejected any compromise that changes Asad’s status. However, given that important factions of Iran and the Asad regime are newly preoccupied with fighting ISIS as a chief priority, they too may find the Geneva I type of executive authority compromises more palatable than they did in 2012.²⁹

DEVISING A FEDERALIST STRUCTURE AND A LONGER-TERM JUSTICE SYSTEM

Although the SNC may be discredited, the group’s comprehensive 2013 Syrian Transition Roadmap offers a useful blueprint for an interim Syrian government. According to this vision, the structures of the transition government will be based initially on the country’s 1950 constitution, to be followed by the writing of a new constitution and, after that, parliamentary elections.³⁰ The oppositionists working via the SNC Roadmap should come from a combination of groups: armed forces trained by the Coalition; rebels associated with the Islamic Front; and local LCC leaders. The National Coalition should serve a coordinating role, but should not be included on this list. Its inability to unify the Syrian opposition into a cohesive movement around a clear vision for a post-Asad Syria and the hesitance of rebels inside Syria to accept its political authority calls into question its effectiveness in overseeing the transitional period.³¹

Rebels affiliated with the Islamic Front in particular are reluctant to accept the National Coalition. For the transition to be effective, then, groups on the ground must be empowered to design the new federalist structure.

These groups will also need to provide governance and security until the new government is set up. Syrians will understandably be wary of a foreign-backed, ready-made Parliament consisting of exiles unelected by the population to succeed the Asad regime. In order to overcome this perception, the local militias, including U.S.-backed and trained ones, will need to establish an interim governing council on Syrian territory that could remain in place until the end of the conflict and throughout the transition period.³²

Thus, at the same time that forces are agreeing on a localized power sharing arrangement and helping to freeze the fighting, they should also be working to determine a longer term governance framework that formalizes Syria’s federalist structure. Given the thin record of power-sharing successes in the Arab world, it is clear that this process of decentralization will be precarious. Many of Syria’s regional neighbors, such as Lebanon, Libya, Yemen and Iraq, offer less than positive examples of the potential for decentralized political structures to provide enduring solutions to ethnic and local conflict. Accordingly, a new federalist structure that manages decentralization will be a requirement, particularly a structure that provides the Syrian Kurdish population with “soft autonomy” protecting their cultural rights, similar to the autonomy enjoyed by Iraqi Kurds. The Syria Transition Roadmap acknowledges that the Kurds (and other ethnic minorities) will seek their cultural rights in a post-Asad Syria and that there is an inherent tension between their demands and the Arab identity of a majority of Syrians that will need to be resolved.³³

In addition to updating the Syrian constitution to allow for a flexible, soft autonomy system, the interim governing structure will also need to devise a transitional legal framework and oversee an equitable reconstruction for all of Syria's communities and regions. Because the transitional justice arrangement would be contested during the early negotiations, it may be necessary to outline up front the types of accountability and security compromises the opposition is willing to accept in a post-Asad Syria. The opposition is likely to resist any such compromises, but they may be necessary to induce communities currently supporting Asad to engage in the process. The United States can assist in developing appropriate transitional justice mechanisms, but should not be the lead actor. Given the degree of regional mistrust regarding U.S. intentions, the United States should support and potentially fund transitional justice mechanisms, while empowering international – perhaps European – partners to lead the effort.

One potential security guarantee would be to implement the process of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of sectarian minority communities that supported Asad over the course of several stages, allowing certain minority communities to retain their self-defense forces in exchange for their cooperation with the new transitional government process, their acceptance of transitional justice programs, and their participation in a reorganized Syrian military program.³⁴ This could be carried out under the protection of an international force charged with safeguarding areas of Syria, particularly in the west, where these minority communities are most heavily concentrated.

ESTABLISHING A SYRIA STABILIZATION FORCE

None of the above will work without the presence of an external force to provide security, throughout both the short term fighting freeze and the longer

term de-escalation, de-centralization and power sharing processes. A Syria Stabilization Force will need to conduct stability operations in those areas of Syria liberated from ISIS but not re-conquered by the Asad regime. The United States and its Coalition allies should not lead any such force, but rather should help the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to establish an expeditionary force to stabilize liberated areas and help secure the peace. Nations within the Arab League, such as Egypt, may possess the capability and desire for regional leadership and influence and seek to contribute forces to a Syria Stabilization Force.³⁵

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Russia, Turkey and other supportive neighbors may be able to broker Iranian acceptance of this force, although this will require a careful balance of interests. To start, Iran's blessing could be controversial in the predominately Sunni Arab and tribal areas where the force would have to operate. In addition, from an Iranian perspective, Saudi leadership of the force could be a non-starter. However, if devised and authorized correctly, with the appropriate international support, the Syria Stabilization Force could be of use to the Iranians, including the powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps, since it and its allies have limited capacity to confront

ISIS in eastern Syria and western Iraq.³⁶ To strike this balance, it will be critical that the force not directly support – or appear to support – the activities of the Sunni armed opposition in western Iraq. Rather, it must serve under the authority of a UN Security Council mandate, giving Russia the opportunity to negotiate on behalf of Iran.

The Arab League/GCC-led stabilization force could begin with a very narrow and time-bound mandate to oversee either border areas or local truces that have taken root in central and eastern Syria.³⁷ To be effective, the Stabilization Force would need a broader functional mandate than those undergirding the existing UN peacekeeping forces in the region, such as UNIFIL. At the same time, the temporal mandate should be more limited, to include a built-in transition to a national army within a certain time frame.

Conclusion

There is no ideal, or even potentially good, political solution that can guarantee an end to the Syrian conflict. But now that the United States has shifted course, pursuing a military strategy to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq, it is critical to negotiate, debate and imagine the contours of an acceptable outcome. The steps outlined above toward a negotiated agreement may fail given the endemic communal hatred born of the violence of the past three years, the economic collapse of the Syrian state and the semi-permanence of the terrorist safe havens that now exist across Syria. However, given the stakes, the United States and its allies cannot afford to step back. The Syrian civil war could deteriorate further still, posing an even greater risk to both its neighbors and to countries far removed from the conflict. Changing circumstances on the ground have opened for the United States a limited window of maximal influence with opposition parties and regional allies. It should use this opportunity to move toward a negotiated agreement.

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Acknowledgments: The authors thank Shawn Brimley, Marc Lynch, Andrew Tabler and Katie Paul for their feedback and Amanda Claypool for her research assistance.

ENDNOTES

1. Some of this blueprint draws from the ideas in the 248-page report "Syria Transition Roadmap" (Syrian National Council, August 2013), http://syrianexperthouse.org/reports/Syria_Transition_Roadmap__Full_en.pdf.
2. One clear finding emerges from this research: the fewer the number of combatants in the civil war, the easier it is to de-escalate the fighting and begin political negotiations. Barbara F. Walter, "The Four Things We Know About How Civil Wars End (and What This Tells Us About Syria)," (*Political Violence @ a Glance*), October 18, 2013, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2013/10/18/the-four-things-we-know-about-how-civil-wars-end-and-what-this-tells-us-about-syria/>; Katie Paul, "Why Wars No Longer End With Winners and Losers," *Newsweek*, January 11, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/why-wars-no-longer-end-winners-and-losers-70865>; Monica Duffy Toft, *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
3. Lefteris Pitarakis and Bassem Mroue, "ISIS Poised to Capture Syrian Town of Kobani, Turkish President Says," *Associated Press*, October 7, 2014.
4. Mark Landler and Eric Schmidt, "As Islamic State Nears Conquest of Syrian Town, U.S. Presses Turks," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2014; "Syria: Arming the Rebels," *PBS Frontline*, May 27, 2014; Greg Miller, "CIA Ramping Up Covert Training Program for Moderate Syrian Rebels," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013.
5. Of course, critics are fair to question whether there exists a moderate military opposition given the sectarianism and violence among the regime opponents. See Aron Lund, "The Free Syrian Army Doesn't Exist," *Syria Comment*, March 16, 2013, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/>.
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This rally organized by the Local Coordinating Councils in February 2012 demonstrates the early collaborative spirit of local political activists and the armed opposition fighters from their communities that identified with the Free Syrian Army.

(Freedom House, LCC Syria)