

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Half-Measures in Syria

by Jon B. Alterman

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If you rank the inputs and outputs for countries involved in the Syria conflict right now, you end up with some interesting numbers. Turkey and Iran are making major investments of money and lives, and they have a major impact on the course of the conflict. Some Gulf Arab states supporting rebel groups in Syria are making a small investment and believe they get a small benefit from harassing Iran. Most of the 65 U.S. allies who are part of the vaunted U.S.-led coalition (including many of the Gulf Arab states) are also making a small investment, and they derive limited benefit, mostly from supporting the United States. The United States itself has poured billions of dollars into the Syria problem, but it remains on the sidelines of the conflict's resolution. Russia has put far less into the fight, and it has an outsized influence on its outcome.

The disproportion between the U.S. and Russian yields on investment would be bad enough, but there's also this additional problem: what counts as "winning" on the U.S. side doesn't look much like victory at all. In fact, pushing the Islamic State group (ISG) out of Raqqa doesn't do much for the future of Syria, and it is the beginning of more serious problems for U.S. interests, not the end of them. The United States needs to make a choice in Syria: It needs to go big or go home.

The Obama administration decided relatively early on in the Syrian uprising that it would not intervene to shape its outcome. Other than an official declaration that "Assad must go," what the U.S. government would not do soon became clearer than what it would do. Billions of dollars in refugee assistance and expensive but ineffectual support to select rebel groups built little leverage over several years. Now, the United States and its allies are carrying out precision strikes on the ISG, which have the effect of supporting the Assad government without providing much influence on the terms of a Syrian political settlement. U.S. military assistance to Kurdish forces attacking the ISG antagonizes Turkey, an increasingly skeptical NATO ally. Diplomacy is largely being carried out between Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the Syrian government, without U.S. participation. As a former U.S. secretary of defense told a private group in Washington a few weeks ago, "The United States has been on the back bench for so long in Syria, it is hard to imagine how we can get a seat at the table."

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New Paper: Iraq: The View from the GCC

Margo Balboni published a new Gulf Analysis Paper, "Iraq: The View from the GCC." This report analyzes the policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries towards Iraq before and after Iraq's 2014 leadership transition. Conditions in Iraq—particularly Iran's role there—have left most Gulf leaders wary and Kuwait alone has pursued a strategic state-to-state relationship with Baghdad. Today, as after Saddam's fall, GCC states are largely reactive players in the battle for Iraq's future. You can access the full report [HERE](#). ■

Pipe Dreams

When Umm Bassem told her son about her new job, he was so ashamed he threatened to change his name. But the trailblazing 61-year-old divorcee persisted, and has become famous as [Egypt's first female plumber](#).

Elsewhere in the Middle East, women are following Umm Bassem's lead and bursting into the male-dominated profession. In Jordan, 30 female graduates of a plumbing program were surprised by the success of their independent plumbing services and so decided to join together to [form a collective enterprise](#), moving to Amman where there is more business. Recognizing the program's success, the Jordanian Ministry of Water and Irrigation announced plans to [found a government center](#) that will train female plumbers.

Even in Saudi Arabia, 33 graduates from the country's [first electrical and plumbing skills course for women](#) at the Princess Noura University will be employed in various ministries, schools, and hospitals across the country.

Beyond the economic benefits of having more women at work, there are more subtle benefits to having female service providers in conservative societies. When women are at home alone, many feel it would be inappropriate to have a male visitor, but a female plumber raises no eyebrows. And in countries that are seeking to educate on the importance of conserving water, women can effectively teach other women how to save water as they do chores, and to monitor valves for leaks.

Most female plumbers talk about something more mundane: their work allows them to provide for their families. That isn't a cause for shame at all. ■ WT

Russia has become a key player in Syria despite a relatively paltry commitment of resources: Somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 troops, a couple of dozen fixed-wing aircraft, and a few dozen helicopters is all. Analysts estimate that the Russian effort costs a fraction of the U.S. one. With almost no precision-guided munitions and a seeming indifference to civilian casualties, Russia is taking a brute-force approach toward tilting the military balance in Syria in favor of government forces.

Russia's political goals in Syria seem to be quite modest: The government seeks to shore up the Syrian regime. To a large degree, especially after the fall of rebel portions of Aleppo, that mission has been accomplished.

The United States, by contrast, has forsworn efforts to influence Syrian politics, and instead is focused on the seemingly more straightforward goal of defeating the ISG. The problem is that it is hard to imagine what defeating the ISG looks like. In part, the ISG is a conventional army fighting from fixed positions. In part, it is a guerrilla force that melts into civilian populations. In part, it is a global terrorist network that has returned more than 1,000 fighters to the West, some of whom may be waiting to attack targets individually or in groups. It is relatively straightforward to talk about pushing the ISG out of Raqqa, or out of Mosul. "Defeating" the ISG is a different problem, and not just because fighters pushed out of Raqqa are likely to press on to Mosul and Deir ez-Zor, and vice-versa. The ISG as a group is more deadly to Westerners when it is dispersed throughout Syria and into the West than it is when holed up in besieged cities.

What many anticipate a "post-ISG" Syria to be is not post-ISG at all. While the United States will have met its main goal, violence across Syria is likely to be up and not down after the ISG "defeat," the refugee problem will continue unabated, and the Assad government will be carrying out retribution on populations whose loyalty is suspect.

The "safe zone" strategy that some tout is less than meets the eye. It is attractive because it sounds like a limited, defensive military operation that will require only a modest effort. In fact, safe zones would require large numbers of troops to secure, both against rebels who seek sanctuary there and government troops that will pursue them. The composition of troops in the safe zones would likely roil regional rivalries, and some might be sympathetic to the extremists. And it does nothing to shape the future of Syria. On closer examination, then, the middle ground is not a real option. It creates an open-ended commitment without the possibility of achieving many U.S. goals.

In fact, the choice facing the Trump administration is really between two undesirable outcomes. One is abandoning Syria to Assad and his allies, working to cordon off the conflict more completely than has been done before. The human cost will be immense, and some radicals will slip out to attack Western targets, but over time, much of the conflict will burn itself out.

The other option is to find ways to enhance U.S. leverage in Syria, presumably through increasing military activity to threaten not just the ISG, but also those carrying out atrocities against civilian populations. Doing so would take a larger military effort and commit the United States to a more enduring diplomatic role in the country. It would risk greater conflict with Russia, but it would give the United States greater say in Syria's future and enhance U.S. influence in the Middle East.

This is no longer a war the United States can half-fight. Neither option is good, but the United States must choose one. ■ 2/14/17

Gulf Roundtable Summary

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted Mark Katz for a Gulf Roundtable on "Russia's Middle East Strategy and the Trump Administration." Read key highlights of the discussion [HERE](#).

Quotes

"Russia's intervention to save the Assad regime and its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah have eroded Israel's deterrence by raising the costs of military action." Haim Malka argues in a new *Defense One* article, 2/14/17

"Without Hifter, it is difficult to see how a unified government creates and maintains stability in Libya." Haim Malka in the CSIS Energy Program's "Energy and Geopolitics" podcast, 1/30/17

"The Pentagon knows better than anyone that terrorism is a problem of a small number of enemies embedded in a population of people you need to win over. I don't see the part of this [immigration order] that's meant to win over anyone." Jon Alterman in *The New York Times*, 1/28/17

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