

# Squaring the Circle: Connecting Current Operations to Policy Ambition in Syria

Melissa G. Dalton

2017 marked a significant shift in the two wars in Syria. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Coalition forces drove ISIS from its self-proclaimed caliphate capital in Raqqa, across northern Syria, and down the Euphrates River Valley. Meanwhile, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, backed by Russia and Iran, secured key population areas and strategic locations in the center and coast, and stretched to the eastern border to facilitate logistics and communications for Iranian-backed militias. In both wars, Syrian civilians have lost profoundly. They also have shown incredible resilience.

Still, the outcome of both wars is inconclusive. Although major areas have been cleared of ISIS, SDF and Coalition forces are fighting the bitter remnants of ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Enduring security in ISIS-cleared areas now depends on governance and restoration of services. Turkey's intervention into Syrian Kurdish-controlled Afrin risks pulling the sympathetic Kurdish components of the SDF away from the counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in Syria's east in order to fight Turkey, a U.S. ally. With a rumbling Sunni insurgency in pockets of Syria's heartland, Assad and his supporters continue to pummel Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus and threaten Idlib. They are unleashing both conventional and chemical weapons on the remnants of Syrian opposition fighters and indiscriminately targeting civilians.



**Raqqa, Syria, January 2018**

Photo credit: Melissa Dalton. CSIS.

The Trump administration now is attempting to connect the outcome of these two wars. The Obama administration tried similarly but ultimately prioritized the counter-ISIS mission. The drivers of the Syrian civil war and the ISIS war are rooted in the same problem: bad governance. Thus, a sensible resolution of both wars must address Syria's governance. However, squaring U.S. policy goals with current operations and resources the United States has employed in Syria will require a degree of calibration, stitching together several lines of effort, and committing additional U.S. and international resources. Orchestrating this level of U.S. effort has proven elusive over the last six years.

## The Challenge in Raqqa

Intense Coalition airstrikes and SDF ground operations drove ISIS from Raqqa. However, arguably, the harder part now begins: consolidating gains from clearing operations through stabilization. When ISIS left Raqqa, it clearly wanted to prevent any future local governance from succeeding. It implanted mines in homes so that civilians returning to their houses, or security forces clearing the areas, would be blown up. It dug tunnels under the city to facilitate its escape, skewering Raqqa's water pipes in the process. Demining the city, clearing rubble, and restoring access to water, schools, and health services are first-order priorities. All of this depends upon empowering local, credible, and representative governance and security to receive, coordinate, and implement international assistance with NGOs.

This is not nation-building, nor is it the United States' task alone. The people of Raqqa are industriously clearing their own homes, opening shops, and rebuilding their lives. They are leading these efforts but need sustained U.S. and more international funding and technical assistance. There is a palpable, fleeting window to consolidate security gains and support these stabilization efforts. The risks are high that absent stabilization support, local councils will fail to deliver, leaving the area susceptible to more pernicious forms of authority—and the possible return of ISIS.

Working by, with, and through the SDF operating on the ground, the United States drove ISIS from Raqqa. The complexity of the urban terrain and ISIS's deliberate embedding among civilian homes, the major hospital, schools, and bakeries resulted in considerable damage to the city and civilian casualties through the bombing campaign. The United States thus has an obligation to support stabilization for civilians and its local partners in Raqqa; but it cannot, nor should it, be the sole provider of stabilization assistance—all members of the international community benefit from the eradication of ISIS's territorial control. Currently, the United States is the only state-based supporter of stabilization in Raqqa. However, European allies may have strong reservations about becoming engaged in a sub-national stabilization effort rejected by the Assad regime and seemingly untethered to a broader policy approach.

## Implications for U.S. Strategy

Activities in Raqqa must nest in a broader strategy that accounts for competition with Iran and Russia and tensions with Turkey. On January 17, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [outlined](#) the parameters of a U.S. Syria policy: defeating ISIS and al-Qaida and preventing terrorist safe havens in Syria; resolving the civil war through the UN-backed Geneva process; deterring Iranian influence in Syria and threats to Syria's neighbors; setting conditions for stabilization so that refugees and internally displaced people can return to their homes; and freeing Syria of weapons of mass destruction.

Broadly, these policy goals provide much-needed clarity to American military, diplomatic corps, and development experts working in and around Syria. However, the Geneva process is an ineffectual negotiating framework until the United States and its partners have more leverage to bring to the

table with other parties to the civil war: Russia, Iran, Assad, and Turkey. Moreover, the connective tissue between current operations in northern and eastern Syria and achieving the administration's policy aims remains unclear.

Four key areas must be further clarified by U.S. policymakers:

- Vision for Northern and Eastern Syria.* The United States must articulate its vision for northern and eastern Syria, having committed to retaining U.S. forces there until the Geneva process brokers a political settlement. If the U.S. goal is to support a decentralized, semiautonomous region in northern and eastern Syria, as a hedge against Assad's control of Syria's center, then it will have to determine in which sectors and to what degree of governance, economy, services, and security can be restored and invested. Stabilization is a politically charged activity that will prompt action and reaction by other players in Syria, because it empowers and resources local actors. If instead the U.S. goal is simply to do what it can to support local partners in the aftermath of battle, then the level of resourcing and length of commitment may be more modest.



**General Joseph L. Votel (USA) in Raqqa, Syria**

Photo credit: Dana D. Flamer, TSgt, USAF, Command Photographer, USCENTCOM Protocol.

Sustaining a U.S. force presence will likely deter military action by the Assad government and its supporters in the east, but these areas are still technically Syrian territory, and U.S. forces are operating there without an invitation from the Assad government (as illegitimate as it may be). Assad and his supporters may well seek to curtail access, stifle economic activity, and disrupt security in this region. In addition, the U.S. [announcement](#) of creating a 30,000-strong force of local partners to provide civilian protection and internal security has already prompted Turkey to intervene militarily. Even if the United States negotiates with Turkey to allow for this force to grow and function, a bigger test will be securing access through Turkey to support stabilization efforts in northern and eastern Syria, which Ankara will bitterly oppose.

Looking beyond stabilization for this region, reconstruction is even more politicized. Some members of Congress have [introduced](#) legislation that would prevent reconstruction funding for regime-controlled areas of Syria until Assad makes progress on political goals. Secretary Tillerson outlined a similar stance in his speech last week. The success of conditioning assistance depends upon the balance of leverage in the relationship. In this instance, Assad has other options via Iran, Russia, and China. As an articulation of policy, this congressional and administration position is more one of principle than of leverage.

Even considering reconstruction efforts in the northern and eastern regions under SDF and American control, a host of factors must be considered, including who is empowered by and benefits from reconstruction. On balance in Syria, an asymmetry of power exists. Assad will use reconstruction to his advantage to strangle his hold on remaining pockets of resistance, with Russian, Iranian, and Chinese assistance. Local U.S. partners will have to seek to mitigate predatory and corrupt behavior to sustain trust and credibility with the local population and amid inevitable competitors.

- *Commitment to the Kurds.* The United States has funded, trained, advised, and operated alongside Kurdish components of the SDF in direct opposition to its NATO ally Turkey. Turkey views the strengthened role of the Kurds in northern Syria as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) power and influence—an existential threat to Turkey. Yet the Syrian Kurds have played a vitally important role in eliminating ISIS's territorial control, losing thousands of fighters. How far will the United States be willing to go to press Turkey and the Kurds to a compromise position?

The relative balance that the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq has found with Turkey provides some hope but also a warning, insofar as the United States backed away from supporting the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum last September, when the move ran afoul of alliances and policy objectives the United States valued more. U.S. security cooperation with Turkey to bolster Turkish intelligence and border defenses and a border buffer zone in northern Syria may help alleviate the risk of routine cross-border military interventions. But Syria shares a 511-mile border with Turkey, connecting it to the mountains of Qandil where the PKK is headquartered. Northern Syria will likely remain a flashpoint for the next several years absent the resumption of peace negotiations between Turkey and the PKK.

Moreover, Turkey's employment of Free Syrian Army (Sunni Arab) units to fight Syrian Kurds in Afrin will likely fan ethnic tensions at a critical moment when the United States is working through the SDF and local civilian partners to stabilize cleared areas. The SDF has evolved into a more representative force, once overwhelming Kurdish, and now includes more Arabs and Turkmen. However, the leadership of the SDF is still dominated by Kurds.

- *Calibrating with Iran Strategy.* Syria is central to Iran's regional strategy, historically serving as the hub for its support to Lebanese Hezbollah, and now as a node of power projection via its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-backed militias within Syria. The United States must [determine](#) how directly it wants to counter Iran in Syria, while mitigating potential risks to U.S. personnel in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan where IRGC-backed agents operate. Deterring and constricting IRGC-backed forces in Syria will require calibration to avoid escalation but also indirect pressure, information operations, and arms and financial interdiction. The goals in Syria vis-à-vis Iran should be to prevent another beachhead in the Levant for attacks on Israel and to limit the maneuverability and capability of IRGC-backed groups in Syria.

- *Connecting to Russia Strategy.* Following Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, U.S. forces have had to adapt to sharing ground, air, electronic, and cyberspace with Russian forces operating in close quarters with Assad-backed forces, managing operational risk and escalation concerns. Russia plans to remain in Syria, to buttress Assad's regime and improve its warm-water Mediterranean port at Tartus and Hmeimim airbase. Broadly, Russia has not been willing to truly pressure Assad, instead capitalizing on its influence to constrain U.S. activities and pursue other regional relationships. The United States will have to decide what measure of pressure and cooperation to pursue vis-à-vis Russia in Syria, weighted against its broader Russia competition agenda. It should not bet on Russia alone delivering Assad, as Moscow has too much to gain from the status quo.
- *Reconciling with the "America First" Elements of the Administration.* To the degree that the administration upholds a vision of putting "America First" through its policy choices and resourcing, it will have to ask itself at what point are engagement and stabilization in Syria no longer in U.S. interests. A "by, with, and through" approach of following the lead of local partners in stabilization may alleviate these concerns. Yet, the United States still needs to be engaged and providing resources for its activities until it achieves its stated, ambitious policy goals—or it will need to revisit them. Sharing the financial burden for stabilization with other allies will also help.

## Recommendations for U.S. Strategy

To advance its goals in Syria, the United States will have to stitch together several key threads and weave new ones from its current operations, using foreign policy tools beyond the military instrument. Even then, the complexity of Syria's civil war, the overlay of competition with Russia and Iran, and tensions with Turkey will pose significant challenges. The level of orchestration needed to lead and implement this multifaceted strategy would be difficult for any administration, but particularly for this one, which has deliberately deprioritized the diplomatic instrument through lack of senior official and ambassadorial appointments and looming budget cuts. However, the United States and international community have strong strategic and moral reasons to support its partners in Syria in the aftermath of the civil war and the operation to defeat ISIS. It comes down to a question of whether they have the political will and leadership capacity to commit to it.

The United States should continue its humanitarian and stabilization efforts in Syria, in support of the diplomatic approach outlined by Secretary Tillerson. The following additional components will be critical to bolster an American strategy in Syria:

- *Create Diplomatic Leverage.* Diplomatic leverage has been hard to come by—the Obama administration tried to engage and failed to change Russia's position in Syria. Persuading Iran and Russia to convince Assad to join political negotiations aimed at reducing his power will take time, suasion, and incentives. The current balance of leverage favors Assad and his supporters. The United States will have to determine how much leverage it is willing to exert these actors who

have invested more in the future of Syria's trajectory. It will also have to necessarily calibrate to the demands of meeting its strategic competitor Russia, and to a lesser extent, Iran in other areas. It will have to evaluate how Syria will be prioritized compared to other areas where Russia and the United States, and Iran and the United States, compete. If Syria ranks high on the priority list, the United States will have to determine what it is willing to negotiate in return with Russia and Iran.

- *Technical Discussions on Stabilization.* Using existing negotiating frameworks, the United States should engage Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Assad government, Syrian opposition groups, and the European Union on how to connect stabilization efforts to broader political resolution through common criteria and guidelines for stabilization to protect civilians and restore services. In the near to medium term, these discussions will have to tackle how to secure passage of people, goods, and services to and from regime-controlled and decentralized areas and from friendly and non-friendly perimeter countries.
- *Develop a Comprehensive Approach with Allies and Partners.* The United States should engage with European and Asian allies and Middle East partners to frame a common approach for conducting and financing stabilization in Syria. This starts with an articulation of shared vision and interests and an identification of how each nation can leverage its comparative advantages to assist. For those allies and partners with existing leverage with Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the United States should work with them to develop a common approach to pressure and induce Russia, Iran, the Assad regime, and Turkey to agree to a common technical framework for stabilization in Syria.
- *Clarify Roles and Missions of U.S. and Partner Forces.* The enduring mission of U.S. forces in Syria and how they will interact with competitors in the region remains unclear. In addition, the scope of how the SDF will engage with Turkey and Assad and its supporters is similarly muddy. While specific rules of engagement remain sensitive, the United States should state its intentions publicly for signaling and deterrence. With Assad-backed forces, Russia, and Iran, it plans to deter and deescalate. With terrorist cells and monitoring insurgents, it plans to work by, with, and through local community, police, intelligence, and security forces, creating a network of indicators and warnings to prevent the regrowth of ISIS. This will require sustaining trust and credibility with the local population. Finally, the United States should clearly state its redlines to the SDF: offensive measures directed at Turkey will result in a recalibration of U.S. support. In reality, the United States needs both its difficult ally Turkey and its dedicated Kurdish partners in the SDF to accomplish its objectives in Syria; it will have to continue to walk a tightrope between them.
- *Shape Credible Local Governance and Security.* Local Syrian civilian and security leaders are rightfully leading counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in northern and eastern Syria, with U.S. support. As the primary international partner in these efforts, the United States should advise local councils and security leaders to pursue policies and structures that will promote resilience to the regrowth of extremism and penetration by competitors. This starts with placing protection of civilians at the center of the stabilization strategy. It hinges on building governance and security

structures that reflect the demographics of, and are trusted by, the local population. While temporary governance and security may include elements of the clearing force in newly liberated areas (i.e., Kurdish leaders of the SDF), local communities should freely decide who will represent them, as was recently done in Raqqa. The United States should strongly discourage the imposition of Kurdish educational curriculum and culture on Arab communities and instead encourage leaders and educators to emphasize inclusivity and counter-extremism programming.

- *Bolster Perimeter Countries' Resilience.* The United States should work with Syria's neighbors, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to contain spillover effects and build resilience to the regrowth of extremism. It should then provide economic, security, health, and countering violent extremism assistance to address any gaps. It should deepen intelligence and information sharing at the government, law enforcement, and community levels.
- *Seek Congressional Authorization.* The administration should seek congressional support for operations and policy in Syria. It should offer briefings and support hearings to make the case to the American people and ensure legal and financial support for continued operations in Syria.

## About the Author

Melissa G. Dalton is a senior fellow and deputy director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

---

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2018 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.