Syria: When and How Does This War End?

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In early 2003, when he was still commander of the 101st Airborne Division and still preparing for the invasion of Iraq, General David Petraeus asked a key question: “How does this war end?” Some fifteen years later, we are no closer to an answer than we were then in Iraq, and we seem to be no closer in Syria. The purpose of war is never to win military victories. The purpose is to shape a peace that serves the lasting strategic objectives of the nation that fights it. We have not been able to focus on this goal in any of our “wars”. Not only Iraq and Syria, but Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and the other much smaller fights against terrorism and extremism in west and east Africa.

A Debate Over Leaving that Has No Strategic Goals and Objectives

The current debate over leaving Syria illustrates this critical failure in U.S. strategy all too clearly. Unless President Trump does far more than simply punish the Assad regime for yet another use of chemical weapons, it will still be a debate over the wrong objectives. It will not address the core strategic objectives for either the war in Syria and Iraq or fighting terrorism. It will do nothing to shape a stable peace that serves U.S. strategic interests, the interests of our Arab strategic partners and Israel, or the critical needs of the Syrian people. It is not ever a debate over when the war ends, simply a debate over when the U.S. should leave.

It is a debate over how soon the U.S. will leave Syria, and one based almost exclusively on how soon the U.S. can claim to have defeated ISIS in Syria. On one side, the President has argued for an “immediate-to-soon” departure based on his view that we have defeated ISIS and have no other strategic goals in the region.

On the other side, the Secretary of Defense and senior U.S. military commanders seem to be arguing for an undefined “later” – which the media speculates is tied to either some point this year or an undefined but more complete defeat of ISIS. More quietly, they see critical strategic reasons to stay in the region: The threats posed by Iran, the continuing threat of extremism and terrorism, the need to provide security for our Arab partners and Israel, and the critical impact of the secure flow of petroleum exports out of the region for the health of the global and U.S. economy.

Assad Rule Over Most or All of Syria, and a People Who have Every Reason to Hate Him?

Neither the President nor the Secretary and senior U.S. military commanders, however, have tied the debate over leaving Syria to what will happen to the Kurds and Arabs who supported the U.S. in fighting ISIS once the U.S. are gone. Neither have publicly addressed any of the key strategic issues that will actually shape the outcome of the war, to any concept of what happens once U.S. forces leave, or any effort to bring a lasting and meaningful peace.

Both sides have focused almost exclusively on the defeat of ISIS in Syria, and the debate has become decoupled from every meaningful strategic goal in the process. Worse, neither this President nor the current Secretary and senior U.S. military commanders have ever publicly attempted to answer Petraeus’s question as to “How does this war end?”. Like President Bush,
President Obama, and every previous Secretary of Defense and senior commander since 2003, they have never attempted to describe how the U.S. fight in Syria – or any other current war – can end in a stable peace and one that serves U.S. strategic interests.

**Ongoing War or a “Negotiation to End All Peace”**

The end result is a war in Syria that may well become even worse if the U.S. does leave, and if negotiations create a partial pause in the fighting without addressing any of its underlying causes. Such negotiations could easily have an even worse outcome in Syria and the region that than the kind of negotiations that ended World War One. If World War One was settled by a “peace to end all peace,” the Syrian war increasingly seems likely to lead to some form of negotiation that leaves most of Syria under Assad, the Russians, Iran, and Hezbollah. It will end with most of Syria’s territory and population under the control of an unstable regime led by a small minority that will have try to repress the people of a country that is 75% Sunni.

The are no precise figures on just how much the Syrian people have suffered. It seems likely that at least 400,000 have died as a result of the fighting since 2011 – most Arab Sunni, and most outside the areas safely controlled by Assad and his supporters. Some estimates pit the dead well over 500,000, and none of these estimates include the wounded and disabled – usually a total well over the number of dead.

The vast majority of those casualties, however, had nothing to do with ISIS or Islamic extremism and terrorism. Most of Syria’s population – probably well over 70% – is in the West and outside the area that ISIS controlled even at its peak. It was the Assad forces use of chemical weapons, barrel bombs, artillery and other forms of combat that created most of the deaths, injured, and displaced. It is Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah that added to the total, plus a much lower level of civilians affected by the attacks of a deeply divided and changing mix of “free” Syrian forces – ones that ranged from moderates to extremists linked to Al Qaeda.

Almost all of these attacks targeted Iraq’s Sunni population, which the CIA estimates is 75% of the total population. The remaining 13% that are at least nominally Muslim include a small number of Assad’s Alewites plus Shiites and Ismailis. Christians make up 10%, Druze 3%, and there are a small number of Jews and other minorities. These minorities are largely located in the west and areas that stayed under Assad’s control.¹

**The Human Cost of the Fighting to Date**

The full human cost of the fighting to date is highly uncertain, and there are estimates that fully include the impact of the fighting since the end of 2017. The UN High Commission on Refugees is careful to qualify the uncertainties in its estimate of how many other Syrians – again largely Arab Sunni – have suffered. The UN estimates that as of December 2017 – and major fighting is still going on – 13.1 million Syrians in Syria are in need out of a population that the CIA estimates is roughly 18 million.²

A total of 6.1 million are internally displaced persons or IDPs – most without jobs, homes, or secure access to food, water, education, medicine and other services. A total of 2.98 million are still in hard to reach of besieged areas – many lacking food and almost all having good reason to hate Assad. Another 5.6 million are refugees outside Syria, most of whom now have little or nothing to come “home” to.³
Far more is involved, however, in creating a stable peace, and the challenge goes far beyond dealing with the direct damage caused by the fighting. The World Bank warned that as of early 2017 – well before some of the grimmest Assad attacks on civilians in the West,4 “The conflict has inflicted significant damage to the Syrian Arab Republic’s physical capital stock (7 percent housing stock destroyed and 20 percent partially damaged), led to large numbers of casualties and forced displacement (between 400,000 and 470,000 estimated deaths and more than half of Syria’s 2010 population forcibly displaced), while depressing and disrupting economic activity. From 2011 until the end of 2016, the cumulative losses in gross domestic product (GDP) have been estimated at $226 billion, about four times the Syrian GDP in 2010.”

These are all good reasons for the majority of Syrians to hate a regime led by Assad and a cadre of Alewites and outsiders. As a result, it does not take much by way of prophecy to predict that any negotiation that ends with Assad in control of most of Syria – tied to Alewite and Shi’ite minorities and continuing ties to Iran and the Hezbollah – will only last through ruthless authoritarian repression, playing factions off against the other, provoking hatred, anger, resistance, and some form of ongoing low-level civil war and/or eventual violent uprising.

At best, a population of “ex” (or not “ex”) fighters that has kept many of its weapons, has large numbers of experienced fighters (some ex-ISIS and Al Qaeda extremists) will not accept such a result. It is also a young population. The CIA estimates that the median age in Syria is only 24, and that 32% of the population is 0 to 14 years of age, while, another 20% is 15 to 24 years. These are massive numbers relative to some seven years of steadily growing suffering, and most of the Syrian refugees outside Syria have similar reason to hate an Assad-controlled regime and provide arms and money.5

**The Lasting Cost and Challenge of Any Peace**

The best of bad outcomes is likely to be a negotiated “pause” in the fighting that changes the nature of the current war – leaving a pattern of constant violence and instability that will spill over into the region and threaten Iraq, America’s Arab strategic partners, Israel, and the entire U.S. strategic position in the Middle East in the process.

The problems in creating a stable peace in Syria, however, go far deeper and will be equally hard to deal with. The World Bank gave the following warning about the more lasting human costs of the war as of early 2017 – and again, it is important to stress that it did so well before another 15 months of brutal additional fighting made these costs far worse.6

“The war in Syria is tearing apart the social and economic fabric of the country,” said Hafez Ghanem, World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa. “The number of casualties is devastating, but the war is also destroying the institutions and systems that societies need to function, and repairing them will be a greater challenge than rebuilding infrastructure – a challenge that will only grow as the war continues.”

The report finds that on average about 538,000 jobs were destroyed annually during the first four years of the conflict, and that young people now facing an unemployment rate of 78 percent have few options for survival. The specific targeting of health facilities has significantly disrupted the health system, with communicable diseases such as polio reemerging and an estimate that more Syrians are dying from lack of access to healthcare than as a direct result of the fighting. The education system has similarly been disrupted by damage to facilities and the use of schools as military installations, while fuel shortages have reduced the supply of electricity to major cities to around two hours per day, affecting a range of basic services.

“The fact that 9 million Syrians are not working will have consequences long after the fighting has stopped,” said Saroj Kumar Jha, World Bank Director for the Mashreq. “The departure of nearly 5 million refugees,
combined with inadequate schooling and malnutrition leading to stunting, will cause long-term deterioration of the county’s most valuable asset, its human capital. In the future, when Syria needs it most, there will be a collective shortage of vital skills.”

By comparing current circumstances with a projection of how Syria would have developed in the absence of conflict, the report calculates that the war has caused a loss in Gross Domestic Product of US$226 billion, or four times the GDP in 2010. Economic models were also used to disentangle the multiple effects of the war and measure their separate impacts, and to determine the consequences of prolonged conflict. While the rate of economic deterioration slows down over time, its effects are more persistent making recovery harder.

“Our results show that if the war were to end this year, the economy would recover 41 percent of the gap with its pre-conflict level over the following four years, and the losses from conflict would amount to 7.6 times the pre-conflict GDP over two decades” said Harun Onder, World Bank Senior Economist and lead author of the report. “But if the war goes on to a tenth year, less than one third of this gap would be recovered in four years after its end, and total losses would amount to thirteen times the 2010 GDP over two decades. We also estimate that the number of Syrians fleeing across the border in search of safety would double between the sixth and twentieth year of the conflict.”

The CIA has made similar estimates in the latest section on Syria in its World Factbook. It also estimated unemployment at a conservative 50%, and that 82.5% of the population already lived below the poverty line as early as 2014.

Syria’s economy has deeply deteriorated amidst the ongoing conflict that began in 2011, declining by more than 70% from 2010 to 2017. The government has struggled to fully address the effects of international sanctions, widespread infrastructure damage, diminished domestic consumption and production, reduced subsidies, and high inflation, which have caused dwindling foreign exchange reserves, rising budget and trade deficits, a decreasing value of the Syrian pound, and falling household purchasing power. In 2017, some economic indicators began to stabilize, including the exchange rate and inflation, but economic activity remains depressed and GDP almost certainly fell.

During 2017, the ongoing conflict and continued unrest and economic decline worsened the humanitarian crisis, necessitating high levels of international assistance, as more than 13 million people remain in need inside Syria, and the number of registered Syrian refugees increased from 4.8 million to more than 5.4 million.

Prior to the turmoil, Damascus had begun liberalizing economic policies, including cutting lending interest rates, opening private banks, consolidating multiple exchange rates, raising prices on some subsidized items, and establishing the Damascus Stock Exchange, but the economy remains highly regulated. Long-run economic constraints include foreign trade barriers, declining oil production, high unemployment, rising budget deficits, increasing pressure on water supplies caused by heavy use in agriculture, rapid population growth, industrial expansion, water pollution, and widespread infrastructure damage.

Quite aside from the legacy of anger and hatred that will come out of the current fighting, No one aside from Russia, Iran and possibly Turkey will have an incentive to pay the massive costs of rebuilding Syria and help it overcome its “lost decade” of development – particularly since the Assad regime is an extraordinarily corrupt regime that serves its own interests and those of its supporters.

In 2017, Transparency International ranked Assad as the 18th most corrupt of the 200 countries it ranked. Even in the unlikely event that an Assad “victory” does not lead to some form of new civil war, any “peace” will involve ongoing, massive human suffering that could help trigger a major rebirth of extremism and terrorism.
The Key Issues for U.S. Strategy that Should Shape to Decision to Stay or Leave

It is far from clear that any of the current U.S. plans for Syria do anything to address these issues. Like the debate over staying in Syria, they focus almost exclusively on “defeating” ISIS in eastern Syria, and ignoring the outcome in the rest of Syria, in the region, and in the battle against other and future extremist and terrorist forces.

The key questions the U.S. really needs to address do include a debate over how long the U.S. needs to stay to defeat ISIS, but this is only a relatively short-term consideration. The most important questions are what options exist for staying in Syria, how will they stabilize Syria or give the U.S. continuing leverage in achieving a lasting peace, and how do they compare with various kinds of withdrawal?

Related questions include what kind of security enclave mixing Arab and Kurds could the U.S. create and what would the consequences. They include critical questions about how staying or leaving will affect U.S. success in Iraq, our relations with other Arab security partners, the security of Israel, the threats the U.S. and its allies faces from Iran, and the already poor U.S. relations with Turkey and Russia. One of the great absurdities of the current debate over is acting like Syria is an island where U.S. actions have no impact on its neighbors and the rest of the world.

The cost and size of the U.S. commitment are also an issue, but the President has sharply exaggerated this by talking about $7 trillion in past war costs between 2001 and today. These figures are grossly exaggerated, and they are also largely irrelevant. Barring a fundamental change in the current mix of threats and forces, the need for major air support is nearly over. The U.S. no longer deploys major combat units, and relies on limited numbers of several thousand U.S. military to train and assist allied forces – some 2,000 in Syria and a total of 5,765 in both Syria and in Iraq in FY2019.

To put these changes in perspective, the number of U.S. troops fighting in Iraq peaked at 224,286 in April 2008, and the cost peaked at an annual cost $144 billion.9 The FY2019 budget request for the cost of training and equipping the Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) will drop from $500 million in FY2018 to $300 million in FY2019. The budget request for Iraq calls for a cut from $1.27 billion in FY2018 to $850 million in FY2019.10

The total cost of overseas contingency outlays for Operation Inherent resolve in both Iraq and Syria is driven by the cost of the U.S. presence in Iraq and includes some baseline expenditures. However, it was $13.0 billion in FY2018, and will rise to $15.3 billion in FY2019 almost solely because of the expanding effort to create more effective forces in Iraq.11 This is a long, long way from $144 billion and more than 224,000 troop, not to mention a mythical $17 trillion. It is also worth mentioning when it comes to burden sharing that Iraq is spending 11% of its GNI/GNP on security while most NATO countries spend well under 2%, and the OSD comptroller estimates the U.S. will spend 3.1%.12
Dealing with the Non-Victory Over ISIS Terrorism

More broadly, it is absurd to talk linking any level of defeat of ISIS to the defeat of terrorism even in Syria, much less the region and the world. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that some 1,000-3,000 ISIS fighters remain in eastern Syria and western Iraq. Nothing the U.S. can do will eliminate all of the threat from ISIS, important as it is to fully destroy the remnants of its “caliphate,” and defeat as many of these fighters as possible.

The U.S. – and particularly the administration – needs to be far more honest about the threat. Important as ISIS in Syria and has been and to some extent still is, the START database on terrorism – which the State Department uses in its annual report on terrorism – indicates that all the elements of ISIS using the highest-level estimate – accounted for only about 36% of the total incidents in Syria and a similar figure in Iraq in 2016 – the last year currently reported. If one looks at the totals for the Middle East and North Africa, all the elements of ISIS account for 1,451 incidents out of 6,088 major incidents – a total of 24%. Even if one throws in Al Qaeda, it only adds another 93 such incidents.\(^\text{13}\)

If one looks at the statistical annex to the annual State Department country reports on terrorism, which also uses the START database, ISIS emerges as all too effective – although it is clear that it is primarily a threat to fellow Sunni Muslims in the Middle East. ISIS was the most dangerous single perpetrator. ISIS and all of its affiliates worldwide accounted for 1,133 attacks in 2016, and these led to 9,114 deaths, and 7,671 injuries. It was, however, responsible, however, of only 19% of those attacks that could be tied to a given perpetrator and that was only 52% of the total attacks.\(^\text{14}\)

While no one can know how many attacks individual members of ISIS committed that never identified their organization, the world totals for terrorism were 11,072 attacks in 2016, 25,621 deaths, death, and 33,814. Using these numbers, ISIS accounted for 10.2% of the attacks, 3.6% of the deaths, and 2.3% of the injuries.\(^\text{15}\)

Moreover, if one looks at country totals regardless of perpetrator, Syria and Iraq come into a very different perspective. As noted above, there were a total of 11,072 attacks in 2016, 25,621 deaths, death, and 33,814 in 2016. If one looks at the totals for Syria alone, there were 363 attacks, (3.2% of the world total), 2,088 deaths (0.8%), and 2,656 (0.8%) injuries. Iraq was a far greater source of terrorist activity, but still only accounted for a limited part of the global terrorist threat from all perpetrators and causes: 2,965 attacks (26%), 9,764 deaths (38.1%), death, and 13,314 (39.4%) injuries.\(^\text{16}\)

Put bluntly, it is fundamentally dishonest to pretend that defeating ISIS alone can bring an end to terrorism or secure the U.S. from outside attack, and that ISIS will be defeated in anything but name in the near future. Many of its fighters will survive and it will exist as a covert structure. The vast majority of terrorist activity is non-ISIS, Syria is far less important as a center of terrorism than Iraq, but both together are only part of the problem. A meaningful U.S. strategy for fighting terrorism on an enduring basis must take fully account of these realities in Syria, Iraq, and the World.
Setting Honest Conditions for a U.S. debate of the Strategy Needed to Fight Terrorism

Looking beyond Syria, the U.S. needs to come to grips with the reality that terrorism and extremism are symptoms of deep underlying causes of instability in all too many countries in the Middle East and the developing world, and not the disease. The U.S. cannot rebuild the world any more than it can police it. It must, however, do what it can to help (and often push) countries to address the causes of terrorism and extremism – both by organized perpetrators and the large number of lone wolves or purely local cases.

This means addressing politics, governance, corruption, development, employment, and income distribution – as well as the rule of law. They must not try to remake the world in our image, but we must act to help nations and peoples remake their world in theirs. It also means using limited amounts of aid money as a catalyst when this can help lead to much broad progress in host countries and strategic partners. Freezing the $200 million in such aid planned for Syria is exactly the wrong approach. Targeting such aid more wisely, making it conditional on an effective in-country effort, using the World Bank to help develop effective in-country plans and measures of effectiveness is a very different story.

The full message of the previous quotes from the World Bank and CIA on the civil impact of the fighting in Syria should be all too clear. It is just as important to have a sound civil-military strategy in fighting terrorism – and to focus on stability and peace – as it is in counterinsurgency. As the Syrian example shows all too clearly, focusing on the fighting and terrorism alone can never be enough. Even if one wins some form of tactical victory, one still must live with the reality that follows, and purely military solutions will always account to the equivalent of cut and run.”

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