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Strategic Insights: After the Smoke Clears in Syria: Dilemmas for U.S. Strategy Remain

May 18, 2018 | Dr. Christopher J. Bolan

In the wake of recent U.S. and Israeli military strikes, the potential for expanded U.S. military engagement in the Syrian civil war is growing and U.S. policymakers will need to plot a smart strategic course ahead. In doing so, they will need to conduct an honest appraisal of America's interests in Syria and wrestle with the many strategic dilemmas confronting them.

Israel and Iran are clearly testing each other's limits in Syria raising the prospect of a broader regional confrontation. Iran reportedly sent an armed drone into Israeli airspace in mid-April¹ and in early May approved the launching of scores of rockets targeting forward-deployed Israeli forces in the occupied Golan Heights.² Israel responded with overwhelming military force targeting virtually all known Iranian military facilities in Syria.³

Although it now seems ages ago, it is also worth recalling that the United States, Great Britain, and France conducted direct military action in Syria the early morning of April 14, 2018, by launching over 100 missile strikes destroying 3 facilities associated with Syria's chemical weapons production and storage capabilities. These attacks were launched in response to Syria's use of chemical weapons in Douma on April 7th outside the capital of Damascus in which over 40 Syrians were killed.

At that time, U.S. President Donald Trump made it clear that the strategic purpose of U.S. missile strikes was to deter the future use of such weapons vowing, "We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents."⁴ Secretary of Defense James Mattis made it equally clear that these strikes represented the beginning of neither a broader U.S. military campaign nor a larger shift in U.S. strategy or objectives in Syria. Secretary Mattis specifically noted, "We confined it [the missile strikes] to the chemical weapons-type targets. . . . We were not out to expand this; we were very precise and proportionate."⁵

Nonetheless, neither these limited U.S. military strikes nor the tit-for-tat Israeli military exchanges with Iran are likely to significantly impact the basic contours of Syria's civil war. As the smoke clears from these attacks, U.S. policymakers and actions will continue to be constrained by several grim strategic realities of the conflict in Syria.

First, the Syrian crisis will need to be managed within the broader context of many other global security challenges that are of greater consequence to the United States. These include addressing the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, managing the longer-term competition with an increasingly assertive China in Asia, confronting a resurgent Russia in Eastern Europe, and preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability.

American military engagement in Syria has been primarily motivated by one central concern: the immediate terrorist threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). At its peak in early 2015, ISIS dominated a taxable population of some 11 million people spread over 100,000 square kilometers, which is slightly larger than the territory of South Korea.⁶ That threat, however, has been significantly degraded through an aggressive U.S. coalition air campaign backed on the

ground by a combination of Syrian Kurdish militia and Arab partners. The so-called ISIS “Caliphate” is now in tatters with its territorial holdings reduced by more than 98 percent according to Pentagon estimates.⁷ With ISIS a much-diminished threat, Syria will only temporarily and periodically resurface to compete for the attention of U.S. policymakers and the expenditures of U.S. resources.

Furthermore, President Trump’s basic instinct in Syria remains to declare victory over ISIS and withdraw U.S. forces as soon as practical. In early April, the President openly declared his intent to bring U.S. troops back home within months: “I want to get out, I want to bring the troops back home, I want to start rebuilding our nation.”⁸ In his White House address making a case for the most recent round of missile strikes, the President reiterated the temporary nature of the U.S. commitment in Syria noting that “America does not seek an indefinite presence in Syria . . . [and] we look forward to the day when we can bring our warriors home.”⁹ His subsequent declaration of “mission accomplished” suggests that a U.S. withdrawal from Syria could come sooner rather than later. Additionally, Israel’s expansive air strikes against Iranian military facilities suggest that Prime Minister Netanyahu is both intent on and capable of unilaterally imposing limits on Iranian activities in Syria, thereby easing pressure on the United States to do so.

Second, other countries have vital interests at stake in Syria that they will not readily abandon, regardless of U.S. actions or aspirations. For Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the outcome of the civil war is quite literally a matter of life and death. He and his father, former President Hafez al-Assad, have ruled Syria at the head of a minority Alawite community that has fostered a bow wave of opposition in many corners of the majority Sunni community inside and outside of Syria. In 1982, then-President Hafez al-Assad violently crushed uprisings in Hama, slaughtering tens of thousands and leveling the city. President Bashar al-Assad reverted to his father’s playbook by responding to what were, by all accounts, civil protests in 2011, with a brutal campaign leading to today’s disastrous civil war, which left over 400,000 dead, displaced over 11 million Syrians, and left some 13 million in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ He, along with members of the Alawite community and other ethno-religious Syrian minorities including Orthodox Christians, fear a bloodbath of retaliation if President Assad is defeated and radical Salafi-Jihadist groups seize power.

Outside players including Russia, Iran, and Turkey also have vital interests at stake in Syria that they will strongly defend. For Moscow, Syria is its sole remaining Cold War ally, and it provides Russia’s only direct access to the Mediterranean Sea through its naval base at Tartus. Since 2015, Russia has provided crucial political and vital military support to President Assad in the form of airstrikes targeting a wide range of Syrian opposition groups that threaten his grip on power. This support has solidified Moscow’s influence in Damascus as was reflected by a recent agreement to expand and make permanent Russia’s naval and airbase presence in Syria.¹¹ President Putin will view any U.S. effort to rollback Russian influence in Syria as a blow to Moscow’s international and regional prestige, as well as a dangerous attempt to severely limit its military access to the Middle East.

Similarly for Iran, maintaining its influence with Syria is a vital national security interest. Syria is Iran’s only state ally in the region, and it facilitates the flow of military and financial support to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Europe, and many Arab states, Hezbollah is also a dominant Shia political, social, and economic force in Lebanon that serves as a critical vehicle for extending the Iranian influence in a region otherwise dominated by Sunni Arab countries. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps has trained and facilitated the flow of tens of thousands of Shia militia forces to bolster President Assad’s

flagging ground forces that have enabled him to recapture large chunks of territory held by rebel forces. While these actions have cost Iran billions, leaders in Tehran view this investment as critical to securing Iranian security interests in the region. Moreover, as the recent rocket attacks into Israeli-occupied Golan suggest, Tehran is willing to pay a fairly heavy price in order to demonstrate its capability to at least indirectly confront Israel and the United States in the aftermath of President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action).

Meanwhile, the number one security issue for Turkey has long been the threat posed by Kurdish politicians, militias, and terrorist groups advocating the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Turkish leaders have frequently resorted to the use of military force inside both Iraq and Syria in order to prevent such an eventuality. U.S. military backing to Kurdish militias in northern Syria is perceived as a direct threat to this vital interest, and Turkey's President Recep Erdogan has publicly threatened to confront U.S. military forces backing Kurdish militias in northern Syria.¹²

The upshot of this reality is that other powerful actors—whether in Damascus, Moscow, Tehran, or Ankara—have powerful incentives to counter the moves made by others that are viewed as threatening to their vital interests. Consequently, any moves by the United States that jeopardize these vital interests are likely to be met with strong responses, designed to escalate the situation to the point that exceeds American willingness to take further action.

Third, the risk of escalation and greater military confrontation with Russia will continue to constrain U.S. options—particularly those regarding the use of military force. The once-feared prospect of chaos in Syria's destructive civil war serving as a flashpoint for a direct military confrontation between nuclear-armed Russia and the United States has already been realized and must be carefully managed. In mid-February of this year, U.S. retaliatory strikes killed scores of Russian-contracted soldiers after a failed attack on U.S. and Kurdish positions in the oil-rich Deir al-Zour region in eastern Syria.¹³ The head of Russia's General Staff responded by pledging "retaliatory measures" against any future "threat to the lives of our servicemen [or] Russia's armed forces."¹⁴ The latest U.S.-led coalition military strikes against Syria were painstakingly designed to minimize this risk of a direct confrontation with Russia. The President and senior U.S. officials had publicly announced military strikes days in advance, giving Syria and Russia plenty of time to withdraw personnel and equipment from the sites that would serve as likely targets. Moreover, the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow expressly noted that the United States "communicated with the Russian Federation to reduce the danger of any Russian or civilian casualties."¹⁵ U.S. options going forward will need to be carefully calibrated in a similar manner if a broader military conflict with Russia is to be avoided.

Fourth, Syrian President Assad is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future. With the assistance of his allies in Moscow and Tehran, President Assad has effectively consolidated his control over major population and economic centers in what the regime itself refers to as "useful Syria."¹⁶ Even with the strong backing of Russia and Iran, however, President Assad does not possess the military capacity to pacify every corner of Syria completely. His brutal repression has left him with little domestic political legitimacy outside of his Alawite minority community. Meanwhile, the civil war has left the country destitute requiring hundreds of billions of dollars in reconstruction costs that few, if any, seem willing or capable of bearing. Syria will remain a broken, devastated, poor, and weak country for the foreseeable future.

These strategic realities will impose severe constraints on U.S. policies and actions. As a result, U.S. policymakers will need to clearly prioritize U.S. interests and make smart use of the limited leverage that remains with Washington.

For all of the criticisms of U.S. strategy in Syria, it is essential to recognize that important progress has been made in advancing two of America's top interests in Syria. As discussed previously, the collapse of ISIS's self-proclaimed Caliphate has significantly degraded the capacity of this terrorist group to plan or conduct attacks against the United States. Second, the ability of President Assad to conduct chemical weapons attacks against his own people has been significantly reduced, although certainly not eliminated. In 2014, U.S. and Russian diplomatic pressure convinced President Assad to hand over more than 600 metric tons of Syria's extensive chemical weapons stocks for destruction.¹⁷ Since coming to office, President Trump has now twice conducted focused military strikes designed to both destroy Syria's remaining chemical facilities and deter further use of these horrific weapons. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has pledged that further attacks will be forthcoming if necessary.¹⁸

Former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and other senior officials have also expressed a desire to reduce the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria. Given the vital interests of Moscow and Tehran at stake in Syria, this could prove to be one of the most frustrating challenges confronting U.S. leaders. However, smart U.S. diplomacy could engage the international community to leverage the promise of a phased and conditional U.S. withdrawal from Syria in exchange for the removal or reduction of foreign forces from Syria, to include Russia, Iran, and their paramilitary proxies (e.g., Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps). The scale and timing of the U.S. withdrawal could be explicitly tied to the departure of these other foreign forces, as well as to the continued progress in defeating the remnants of ISIS. Such an offer may be considered favorably in both Moscow and Tehran as a means of avoiding a larger and much more costly regional confrontation.

The prospect of an imminent U.S. military withdrawal could also be exploited to increase pressure on Syrian Kurdish elements to come to a workable compromise with both Damascus and Ankara and, thereby, bolster prospects for an eventual political resolution in Syria that ultimately enhances regional stability. Finally, the potential of U.S. financial assistance to the massive international reconstruction effort, which will be required in post-civil war Syria, should be leveraged to ensure aid is delivered by competent nongovernmental organizations directly to the Syrian people, and with the aim of strengthening effective and representative local governance.

Prime Minister of Prussia Otto von Bismarck is often quoted as having famously characterized politics as "the art of the possible."¹⁹ In grappling to develop a coherent strategy in Syria, President Trump's national security team will need to confront the existing strategic realities of the conflict, prioritize the American national interests at stake, and establish attainable and realistic strategic objectives commensurate with Washington's limited leverage in this tragic conflict.

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